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The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA
College of International Studies
Department of International and Area Studies

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From the Faculty Advisors

Since its founding in 2016, *DĀNESH* has sought to provide a forum to showcase the original research produced by undergraduate students at the University of Oklahoma's Iranian Studies program. This third volume of the journal was produced through the able editorial leadership of **Corey Standley** (BA, 2019) and **Kayleigh Kuyon** (BA, 2019). As co-editors-in-chief, Corey and Kayleigh have ensured that *DĀNESH* has continued to thrive as a forum for the study of all aspects of the history, culture, society, and politics of Iran and the Persianate world.

The name of the journal, *DĀNESH*, comes from the Persian word meaning *knowledge, learning, and wisdom*. We believe this is a fitting name for a journal that seeks to foster deep and compassionate understanding of one of the world's most culturally rich and historically complex civilizations. It is with this in mind that we present this volume of *DĀNESH*.

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Ideology and Reality: Afghans in Iran

Daniel McAbee *

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The Islamic Republic of Iran is a revolutionary state which derives its legitimacy on the basis of revolutionary pan-Islamism. Despite this, as the memory of the revolution recedes into the past, Iranian nationalism and commitment to the revolutionary pan-Islamic ideal is fading. As time elapsed, the foundations of the government shifted from those core pan-Islamic beliefs to a more centralized protectorate state, illustrating how the government moved away from the idealism and more towards the traditional roles of the state. Despite the generally repressive nature of the state, some Iranians, especially directors, are able to use film to critique state actions and ideology for goals. An excellent example of cinematography as a social and political critique is Majid Majidi's *Baran* (2001), a film which highlights the discrepancy between theory and praxis by Iran and the Iranian people, and calls on Iran to act on the idea of Islamic charity and solidarity.

The Islamic Revolution, according to official state ideology, is not Iranian nor Shiite, but a pan-Islamic revolution.¹ The revolutionary goal is to Islamize all aspects of life, from politics to society, and even the individual.² Ostensibly, then, the position of an individual in the society of the Revolution is dependent not on their ethnic or sectarian identity, but on their individual commitment to the Revolution.³ The ultimate ideological goal of the Revolution is the destruction of the Westphalian nation-state

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¹ Ludwig Paul, "Iranian Nation and Iranian-Islamic Revolutionary Ideology," *Die Welt Des Islams*, New Series 39, no. 2 (1999): 189.

² *Ibid.*, 190.

³ *Ibid.*, 216.

and the reunion of all of Islam in one political entity.⁴ One Iranian official went as far as to say that at the time of Islamic reunification, the government would support making Arabic the central language of the polity given the special status of Arabic within Islam.⁵ In fact, official state policy immediately after the Islamic Revolution was to make Arabic compulsory in primary and secondary education.⁶

Officially, the Iranian state's ideological focus is more on religious differences than ethnic ones. While recognition is given to the distinctiveness of Sunnis and Shia', Sunnis are not afforded a similar minority religious status as Zoroastrians, Christians, and Jews.⁷ This is done in part due to the ideological position of the Revolution as a pan-Islamic movement rather than a distinctly Shia' movement – if the state gave Sunnis a minority religious status this could be seen as a tacit statement of the Revolution being specifically Shia', instead of simply having a Shia' background, a fact which the state does grudgingly admit.⁸ With this in mind, the state's discussion of ethnic minorities is more understandable as in order for this Revolution to be an Islamic one, it ought to overlook ethnicity. However, regardless of the lofty goals of the Revolution's most idealistic supporters, the modern reality of ethnic nationalism prevents the state from overlooking ethnicity entirely. To deal with this reality, the state discussion of ethnic minorities takes on a religious flavor, as many of the non-Iranian Muslim minorities are Sunni, which allows the state to shift discussion to questions of Sunni versus Shia', rather than Iranian versus non-Iranian.⁹

Despite the government's pretenses, ethnicity does matter in the Islamic Republic. Most starkly, the president must be an Iranian citizen of Iranian descent.¹⁰ While nationalism in Iran predates the Islamic Republic, it is possible to understand the development of nationalism within the revolutionary state as being in some ways responsive to events and conditions experienced by the revolutionary state. Three factors are readily identifiable as contributing to this development: The Iraqi invasion of Iran, the rebellion of a variety of ethnic minorities during the turbulent period

⁴ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 196-197.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 196.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 184.

after the deposition of the Shah, and the failure of the Revolution to effectively spread beyond Iran. The Islamic Republic couched the war against Iraq as being one not against the Iraqi people, who are themselves oppressed, but against an “unbeliever,” Saddam Hussein.¹¹ The appeal was neither Iranian nor Shiite, but one of struggle against the West and those who could be considered lackeys of the West.¹² Nevertheless, an outside attack then required a national response to this which served as a unifier. At the same time, it was used to clearly indicate who sufficiently supported the Revolution to help it against outside invasion, and who was not, which is to say that it underscored that the Revolution would be limited to Iran. The rebelliousness of independence-minded minorities encouraged their later repression, and the fact that the Revolution did not spread forced the state to accept the limits of the Revolution and the need to begin to act in its national interest.¹³

It is in this ideological context that the Afghan presence, and the varied responses of the Iranian state and society, makes sense. However, before understanding the position of Afghans in the Iranian context, it is necessary to understand the Afghan perspective. The Afghan presence in Iran is not a recent phenomenon and it represents a continuation of the mobility which characterizes so much of life in this region, not only in the modern world, but for much of the past.¹⁴ This region receives relatively little rainfall, preventing large-scale agriculture and promoting pastoralism, which in turn encourages demographic mobility.¹⁵ People in this region always have, and continue to, migrate seasonally for pastoral purposes or seasonal jobs.¹⁶ Additionally, as an important cultural cross-roads, political boundaries historically shifted rather frequently, further encouraging disparate social groupings. With these factors in mind, as well as the fact that boundaries of modern states were more derivative of 19th century power struggles than organic national movements, modern political boundaries do not reflect

¹¹ Ibid., 201-202.

¹² Ibid., 202.

¹³ Ibid., 184.

¹⁴ Fariba Adelkhah and Zuzanna Olszewska, "The Iranian Afghans," *Iranian Studies* 40, no. 2 (2007): 139.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Alessandro Monsutti, "Migration as a Rite of Passage: Young Afghans Building Masculinity and Adulthood in Iran," *Iranian Studies* 40, no. 2 (2007): 167.

ethnic, linguistic, or religious boundaries.¹⁷ All of this is to say that movement between the states of Iran and Afghanistan do not represent an aberration, but rather, a continuity of historic patterns.

Revolutionary Roots

Though the movement of Afghans between Afghanistan and Iran in the late 20th and early 21st centuries is a modern iteration of a historical trend of regional mobility, it does occur in its own set of circumstances which makes it distinct and unique. In the context of habitual movement, there were three noticeable bumps that largely coincided with political events in Afghanistan, which also affected the policy of Iran towards the Afghans.¹⁸ The first began in 1979 with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; the second followed the Soviet withdrawal; and the last occurred with the ascendancy of the Taliban and then the US invasion in the late 1990's.¹⁹ While it would be disingenuous to exclusively tie the policy of Iran towards Afghans to these events, they do provide useful, convenient points to delineate general shifts in Iranian responses to Afghans.

The first bump, caused in large part by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, coincided with the 1979 Revolution in Iran and the subsequent creation of the Islamic Republic of Iran.²⁰ The Islamic Republic rhetorically adopted the second Islamic Declaration of Human Rights and gave the Afghans the title of *mohajerin*, which essentially means "involuntary religious migrants."²¹ This designation gave Afghans the best possible refugee status, as it is based on the Prophet's fleeing of Makkah for Medina, due to religious persecution.²² This period is best summarized through a statement by the Supreme Leader of the time, Grand Ayatollah

¹⁷ Diane Tober, "My Body Is Broken like My Country: Identity, Nation, and Repatriation among Afghan Refugees in Iran," *Iranian Studies* 40, no. 2 (2007): 284.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 266.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 266-267.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 266.

²¹ Michelle Langford, "Negotiating the Sacred Body in Iranian Cinema(s): National, Physical and Cinematic Embodiment in Majid Majidi's *Baran* (2002)," In *Negotiating the Sacred II: Blasphemy and Sacrilege in the Arts*, ed. Coleman Elizabeth Burns and Fernandes-Dias Maria Suzette (ANU Press, 2008): 163; Ashraf Zahedi, "Transnational Marriages, Gendered Citizenship, and the Dilemma of Iranian Women Married to Afghan Men," *Iranian Studies* 40, no. 2 (2007): 231.

²² Adelkhan, "The Iranian Afghans," 151.

Khomeini: “Islam has no borders.”²³ Afghans were welcomed in, fleeing the invasion of an atheist state, and were afforded much support and respect.²⁴

The Soviets withdrew in 1989 and the Communist regime in Afghanistan collapsed in 1992.²⁵ A civil war followed, with militias drawn up largely along ethnic lines.²⁶ The Iranian sentiment towards Afghans in this period was marked by increasing animosity as the withdrawal of Soviet forces made the struggle an intra-*Ummah* conflict, which significantly decreased the appeal of supporting Afghans. Additionally, following the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988, the Iranian state’s focus shifted towards reconstruction and discouraged spending on refugees.²⁷ It is at this time that Afghans lost their status of *mohajerin*, and are instead given the status of *panahandegan*.²⁸ While they are still classified as refugees, this new term is somewhat pejorative and connotes impoverishment, and during this period repatriations begin.²⁹ Though the repatriation program at this time is officially voluntary, Iran’s means are largely coercive as many Afghans living in Iran did not wish to return to Afghanistan.³⁰

Alienated Afghans

The final increase in refugees occurred in the late 1990’s during the ascendancy of the Taliban and during the aftermath of the US invasion. While many Dari-speakers fled to Iran as a result of ethnic issues, this influx was further exacerbated as the predominately Pashtun Taliban began to gain power and oppress other groups, especially the Hazara.³¹ By 2002, Afghans were no longer considered *panahandegan*, but simply migrants.³² This finally stripped away the majority of their access to certain Iranian

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Zahedi, “Transnational Marriages,” 231.

²⁵ Monsutti, “Migration as Rite of Passage,” 170.

²⁶ Tober, “My Body is Broken,” 267.

²⁷ Zahedi, “Transnational Marriages,” 231.

²⁸ Langford, “Negotiating the Sacred Body,” 164.

²⁹ Adelkhan, “The Iranian Afghans,” 141.

³⁰ Tober, “My Body is Broken,” 275 & 279.

³¹ Alireza Nader, Ali G. Scotten, Ahmad Idrees Rahmani, Robert Stewart, & Leila Mahnad, “Iran and Afghans: A Complicated Relationship,” *Iran’s Influence in Afghanistan: Implications for the U.S. Drawdown*, RAND Corporation (2014): 9.

³² Tober, “My Body is Broken,” 274.

social services and eased the deportation process.³³ Deportations were already significantly on the rise before then, with Iran deporting 100,000 undocumented Afghans in 1999 alone.³⁴

Afghan presence in Iran, as mentioned before, is a historical phenomenon which has much to do with the nature of the region, rather than being the result of popular responses to recent events. The reasons for individual Afghans coming to Iran are equally grey, complex, and varied. Many of the Afghans in Iran were fleeing oppression, the exact nature of which depends on the time in which they fled, be it during the Soviet invasion, during the civil war following the withdrawal of Soviet forces, or in the ascendancy and then collapse of the Taliban regime.³⁵ Some Afghans came to Iran for specifically economic purposes. As previously mentioned, labor-inspired migration, which often takes the form of habitual, seasonal movements, is a notable feature of the region as a whole. Given the developmental and economic disparity between Iran and Afghanistan, it is unsurprising that some Afghans, particularly young men, would travel to Iran to earn wages to repatriate home.³⁶ In some communities, particularly the Hazara, this has become something of a rite of passage as it gives young men autonomy and freedom away from family life.³⁷ Pilgrimage to shrines and other religiously significant sites in Iran also encourages Afghans, both Sunni and Shia', to travel to Iran, sometimes for extended periods of time.³⁸ This habitual border crossing, as well as frequent intermarriage, has created a gray-zone around the border in which the identity of many residents is neither distinctly Iranian nor Afghan.³⁹

The Iranian state's response to Afghan nationals at times contrasts rather sharply with their professed ideological position of uniting all of Islam and supporting the oppressed. While for a period of time Iran was willing to take in Afghans, after the end of Taliban rule the Iranian state began to sharply move against Afghans in Iran. The state reclassified Afghans in Iran from refugees to migrants, eliminating much of their access to health services, social services, free vaccination, family planning,

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Adelnkhan, "The Iranian Afghans," 142.

³⁵ Tober, "My Body is Broken," 274.

³⁶ Monsutti, "Migration as Rite of Passage," 168.

³⁷ Ibid., 167.

³⁸ Adelnkhan, "The Iranian Afghans," 151.

³⁹ Ibid., 154.

and education.⁴⁰ While initially Afghans were not significantly coerced into deportation, this eventually began to change in the first decades of the 21st century.⁴¹ While the political and economic events previously discussed certainly influenced and inspired the state backlash to the Afghan presence, public opinion also affected policy towards Afghans. Popular feelings towards Afghans in Iran were equally complex; however, some general trends can be noted. Following Revolution, as can be expected, the majority of the Iranian population were somewhat influenced by the fervor of the Revolution and were largely willing to allow in Afghans.⁴² As time continued on, public opinion of Afghans began to deteriorate. In general, working class Iranians, who felt that their job prospects and wages were threatened by Afghans who were generally willing to work more for less pay, began to disapprove of Afghans, while opinion among more affluent Iranians, who believe they benefit by having access to larger cheap labor pool, has not deteriorated as much.⁴³ This is not to say that the whole of the Iranian working class hates Afghans, as opinion varies greatly depending on location, and even those Iranians who do not like Afghans agree that Afghans do have a hard life and have things more difficult in Iran than Iranian nationals themselves.⁴⁴

Film as a Medium of Exchange

In response to this backlash, there have been attempts to reorient the Iranian state and people back to a more compassionate disposition towards Afghans in Iran. One film in particular, *Baran*, provides an interesting insight into this attempt. In the film, the director, Majid Majidi, provides an embodiment of the Islamic values of love and charity for one's fellow Muslim in the form of Lateef.⁴⁵ Lateef is an adolescent who works at a construction site running errands and performing various tasks for the employees and site manager and he can be understood as representing the common Iranian. While he is by no means affluent, his job is comparatively comfortable. After one of the Afghan employees is no-

⁴⁰ Tober, "My Body is Broken," 274.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Zahedi, "Transnational Marriages," 231.

⁴³ Zahra Moughari, "The Effects of Afghan Immigrants on the Iranian Labour Market," *Iranian Economic Review* 13, no. 20 (2007), 58.; Tober, "My Body is Broken," 275.

⁴⁴ Tober, "My Body is Broken," 274-275.

⁴⁵ Langford, "Negotiating the Sacred Body," 264.

longer able to work due to a workplace injury, his “son,” introduced as Rahmat, is brought in to work in his stead to provide for their family. After Rahmat is found unsuited for the physically demanding task assigned, Rahmat is given Lateef’s job and Lateef is given Rahmat’s job. The initial hate that Lateef feels towards Rahmat is replaced by romance as Lateef discretely learns that Rahmat is actually a girl named Baran. Lateef follows Baran around and sees the condition of the Afghans. Due to his love for Baran, he collects his wages and gives them all to a friend of Baran’s family, who keeps the money for himself. Next, Lateef purchases a pair of crutches for Baran’s father and leaves them at the door of the house after he hears that Baran’s uncle is dead and his family is now homeless. Finally, Lateef sells his identity card on the black market for funds to give to Baran’s family, stating that it is the back wages owed to her father. The family then leaves the next day for Afghanistan, and while Baran and Lateef come into close proximity of each other, they never touch and she leaves with her family.⁴⁶

When approaching *Baran* as not merely a love story, but as a political film, it becomes a powerful film that is a testament to the creative spirit of Iranian filmmakers who operate in an environment where an artistic misstep may result in criminal punishment. Lateef, who frequently fights with the other construction workers, initially meets Baran as “Rahmat,” a male rival who steals his job and thus injures his livelihood. This tale of male being revealed as female can be understood as an allegory of coming to know a person. Initially, the Afghan is viewed as a male: the public face of a rival who can steal your livelihood. However, through time and interaction, one might view the Afghan as woman: one who is not deserving of fear or enmity and is representative of the private, “true” face of someone. This individual is acting on circumstances out of their control and should not be admonished for doing what they must to survive, even if it harms you.

After the site manager is forced to let go of all of his Afghan employees following state pressure, Lateef begins to follow Baran around, to learn about her. In doing so, Lateef sees the conditions of the Afghans, but he does not interact with them. While the lack of interaction between Baran and Lateef could very well be done to avoid morality issues with censors, it can also be understood as Majidi suggesting that after one comes to see Afghans not as rivals, but as humans, one should seek to understand the

⁴⁶ *Baran*. Directed by Majid Majidi. Montreal: Alliance Atlantis, 2001. Digital.

Afghans through observation and on their own terms. In doing so, one will see that their condition is pitiable and will be further inspired to acts of charity, compassion, and understanding.

Lateef's charitable actions can also be understood as analogies for state and societal responses to Afghans. Lateef humiliates himself by begging to his boss, simply so that he can get the money which the site manager has been keeping for him. By then giving all of his money to Sultan, a friend of Baran's father, Lateef has totally impoverished himself, and when Sultan runs away with the money Lateef's reaction is telling. Rather than wash his hands of the whole affair and of Baran, Lateef is largely unfazed, and continues to help the family. This can be understood in the context of the Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights' statement of the inalienable right of Islam, which is itself based on the Qur'anic principle that the people of Medina were good because when they took in the Prophet, they "prefer[ed] the fugitives above themselves though poverty become their lot."⁴⁷ Lateef's selling of his identity card furthers not only the idea that those who can act charitably should, but hints at the topic of identity. What Majidi is condemning is the growing sense of nationalism and preference for one's own nation over one's fellow Muslim. What *Baran* shows, though, is that this loss of earthly identity will not result in a void, a sort of ultimate sacrifice given for the other, but that it will be replaced. While Majidi does not fully articulate with what will replace it, he hints that it is a fresh perspective on life with Lateef's gaze at Baran's footprint and the falling rain. Majidi shows through Lateef that even if an individual, or a nation, impoverishes itself materially through assistance to their fellow Muslim, they will come out spiritually enriched.

Afghan presence in Iran is a historic phenomenon, and the sharp distinction between inhabitants of the territory of modern-day Iran and modern-day Afghanistan are relatively recent. In the wake of the Islamic Revolution, the Iranian state and society were open to assisting the people of Afghanistan, whose country was and still is being torn apart by war and internal conflict. As Afghanistan continued to hemorrhage people, and as events transpired in Iran, state and social commitment to the lofty, pan-Islamic ideals of the Revolution faded, especially in the face of growing Iranian nationalism. Despite this, and in the face of repression and censorship, Iranian filmmakers make use of state rhetoric to condemn state repression of Afghans. By providing his message in the personable story of

⁴⁷ Langford, "Negotiating the Sacred Body," 163.

a lover chasing his beloved, Majid Majidi conjures up not only the ideals of the 1979 Revolution, but the multitudes of cultural and historical connections that they share. This appeal to their shared history brings to mind the broader reach which Iranian culture used to have in the region, and even serves to bring to mind that Afghans existed under Iranian imperial auspices. By utilizing the prevailing motifs of early 21st century Iran, Majid Majidi creates a compelling call to Iran and Iranians to rise above the conflict and assist their Afghan brothers and sisters.