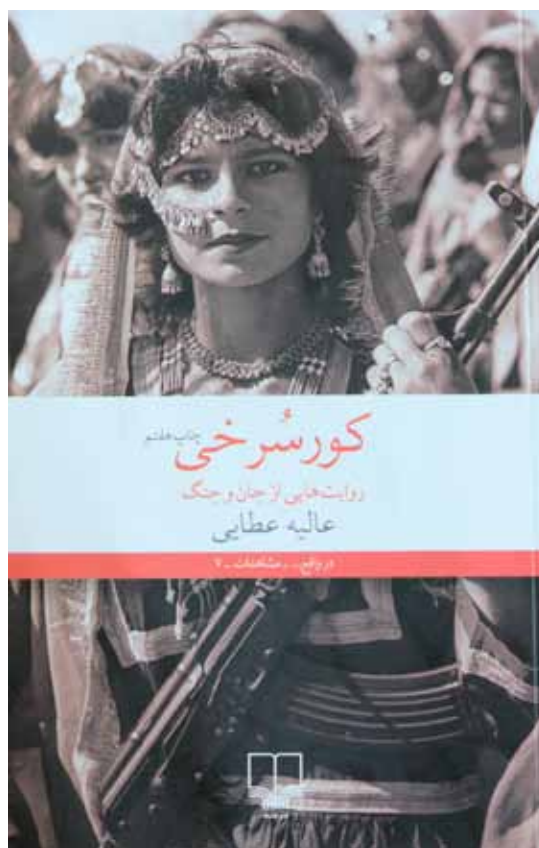


IRAN

A NEW HUB FOR AFGHAN ARTISTS

Iran hosts one of the largest populations of Afghan migrants and refugees in the world. Though the two countries have always been linked through music, art and culture, Iranian society has for a long time looked upon Afghan migrants as “simple blue-collar workers”. But the rise of new generations of Afghans living and working in Iran is changing Iranians’ views – and shining a spotlight on Afghan poets, writers, cinematographers, and actresses.

Shirin Naef



The cover of the novel “Blood Blindness: Stories of Soul and War” by the Afghan writer Alie Ataee exiled in Tehran. The photograph by Viktor Khabarov shows a female Afghan warrior in Kabul in 1980 during a parade celebrating the anniversary of the Saur revolution, also known as the April 1978 Coup staged by the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan.

“

We are wounded by the tribal battles. Our tribe is the one that beats more, kills more and loots more. Are outsiders to blame for this? No. We are the heirs of our tribes. It makes no difference if we live in cities or in rural areas when we rip each other's throats so mercilessly.”

While Afghanistan remains marked by instability and engulfed in violence, Afghan literature provides a ray of hope. The above lines, written by Alie Ataei in her book *Blood Blindness: Stories of Soul and War* are sparkles of it as they mirror the way the Afghan-Iranian writer views the world. Alie Ataei offers a feminine narrative on the pains and sufferings of Afghans living under Soviet occupation, on ethnic conflicts, the impact of communist ideology and on the rise and fall of the Taliban. And she sheds her light on issues of migration, life in border areas – and in Iran:

“We battle each other and the outsider conquers our home. It is easy that we eat each other up and the others swallow us. We keep praying and [yet] behead one another, and [while] others (outsiders) cross their heart and drop bombs on us. [...].”

Alie Ataei, born in Afghanistan's third-largest city Herat in 1981, migrated to Iran with her parents, lived in a region at the border of Afghanistan, and later earned her master's degree in Performing Arts from Tehran University. She has written plays and screenplays and published four novels and several short stories in Farsi that focus on migration, several of which have earned her important literary awards in Iran.

It is no coincidence, that a notable Afghan artist like Alie Ataei has spent most of her professional career in Iran. In recent years the Islamic Republic has become a thriving hub for Afghan art, literature, and cultural activities. Despite the obstacles and difficulties, the government generally puts in the way of artists and writers – be they Iranians or Afghans – many Afghans have started or pursued their careers in Iran. The mere fact that Alie Ataei has been awarded literary prizes is a sign that this new generation of Afghan artists have managed to gain ground in Iran's cultural scene.

Afghan refugees in Iran

After Pakistan, Iran hosts the largest population of Afghan refugees in the world – a result of over 50 years of Afghan migration to the Islamic Republic that had started with the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. According to current statistics of the UN Refugee Agency UNHCR, of the 800,000 refugees in Iran 780,000 are from Afghanistan. In addition, there are around two million undocumented Afghan refugees and around 600,000 Afghans who hold a *Tazkera*, the Afghan-passport.

The lives of Afghan refugees in Iran have long been filled with bitter experiences – with discrimination and deprivations in employment, education, and residence. In the early years of Afghan migration to Iran, not much was written about these new immigrants; and when they did make it into the news, the Iranian press usually focused on the negative impact of immigration and thus contributed to stirring up xenophobia.

Although Iranian government policies still neglect many of the rights of immigrants (as well as those of Iranian citizens), in recent years there has been a transformation in the public discourse that has led to a better acceptance of Afghan immigrants. Whereas many Iranians looked down on Afghan immigrants and were quick to label them as “simple blue-collar workers”, the rise of second- and third-generation Afghan immigrants has changed attitudes. Especially among academics and elites, the discourse about Afghan immigration has been recast: The support of Iranian civil society of as well as its attention to Afghan refugees and their rights have increased, and news about discrimination against migrants is no longer ignored. These developments have also raised awareness of the literary and artistic works of Afghan writers, poets, and artists, and facilitated the way for the creation of new works.

Iran – Afghanistan. A complex history

Afghanistan shares a long history with Iran. Afghanistan was ruled by Persian dynasties prior to the British and Russian struggle for influence in Central Asia in the 19th century. Two years after Afghanistan gained political independence from Great Britain, a new relation formed between Iran and Afghanistan based on

a friendship treaty signed by the two governments in 1921. During the 20th century, the relationship of the two countries has gone through ups and downs and has repeatedly led the two countries to the brink of war.

The relationship between Iran and the Taliban has been particularly difficult. During the Taliban's first rise in the 1990s Iran supported the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan led by Ahmad Shah Massoud, the legendary leader of Afghanistan's anti-Soviet resistance in the 1980s and the anti-Taliban opposition until his assassination in 2001, and various Shia parties. Tehran even supported the US military attacks that overthrew the former Taliban government in 2001. After the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Iran's relationship with the Taliban went through several phases, mutual distrust being the only consistency: At times Iran was against the Afghan government's efforts to negotiate with the Taliban, at other times it supported the peace talks. Nonetheless Iran's opposition to the United States and its military presence in Afghanistan has remained a constant in Tehran's international policy.

Bukhara Nights

Outside of the political arena however, Iran and Afghanistan are connected through many cultural similarities. The shared Farsi language has preserved the bond between poets, writers, artists, and elites across borders and despite political tensions.

The Bukhara Nights meetings are a telling example of this: The literature festival, which is held mainly in Tehran a few times a year, is one of the key cultural events in Iran. It is co-organized by *Bukhara Magazine*, an independent bimonthly journal that has published scholarly articles on the Persian language, literature, history, and culture since 1998. The festival commemorates prominent figures in Iran's history far from political events and affiliations. Moreover, it aims at promoting cultural and literary dialogues and thus connects with various centers and departments of Iranian Studies and Persian language around the globe. Afghan poets and writers are regularly featured on its contributors list.



Poster advertising *The Bukhara Nights* for Afghan poets and writers in Teheran in 2016.



Bukhara Nights take place in different cities. This poster advertises *The Bukhara Night* in Kabul, Afghanistan, in 2016.

The 621st night of Bukhara Nights in February 2022 for instance, was dedicated to Mohammad Asif Fekrat Heravi (1946 – 2022), a prominent contemporary Farsi-speaking Afghan author and poet. Upon the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan, Fekrat migrated to Iran in 1982 and resided in Mashhad, the capital of Khorosan province bordering Afghanistan. There he started his career as a researcher, translator and cataloger and published over a hundred scientific articles and many books.

Mohammad Heravi died in his late home Canada a few weeks after the event dedicated to him. And only a short time later the highly popular Iranian lawyer, literary critic, and poet Mohammad Ali Eslami Nodooshan passed away as well in Canada. Thus, Iranian and Afghan academics and authors organized a memorial ceremony for both of them at Ferdowsi University in Mashhad, one of the top universities in Iran and a scientific hub in the north-eastern part of the country, where many Afghan students have reached a stellar status in scientific and educational fields as well as in sports.

The ceremony for Heravi and Nodooshan was held under the title “Commemoration of Two Newly Deceased Persian Language Friends”. This not only shows the respect the Afghan writers had among a wide Iranian audience, but also how Afghan writers in Iran generally are perceived and accepted as part of a shared literature scene.

Afghan successes in the Iranian film industry

The perception of Afghan artists in Iran has not only changed in literary and academic circles, the media has also begun to portray them in a more positive light. They are now regularly introduced to Iranian readers for what they are: poets, cinematographers, actors and actresses, or as writers. The Mahmoudi brothers are a prominent example of such mediatization.

Jamshid and Navid Mahmoudi migrated from Afghanistan to Iran in the 1980s as children. They grew up in Iran, went to film school and established themselves in the Iranian film industry as screenwriters, directors and producers with their own distinctive style: “A Few Cubic Meters of Love” (2014) received multiple awards from international film festivals,

including the nomination for various categories at the 17th Iranian Fajr Film Festival. “Parting” (2016), which was shot in Iran, was selected as Afghan entry at the 2017 Academy Awards; “Rona, Azim’s Mother/ Breaking Simultaneously Twenty Bones” (2018), which won Best Feature Film at the Busan International Film Festival in 2018, was simultaneously screened in Tehran and Kabul. “Deldar (Sweetheart, 2019)”, a TV series directed by the Mahmoudi brothers, is a romantic social drama about the challenges of marriage and professional life of several middle-class girls and boys. This romance series, which aired on Iranian TV during the month of Ramadan in 2019, was well received by Iranian audiences.

Another Afghan success in Iranian film is Fereshteh Hosseini. The actress of “Parting” (2016) and “Rona, Azim’s Mother” (2018) was born in Iran in 1997 to Afghan parents. She defied the odds of Afghan immigrants in Iran and started her acting career in Tehran at the age of nine. Today she is one of the most prominent actresses in the Iranian film industry. At the Iranian Fajr Film Festival in February 2022 she was recognized best supporting actress for her role in the film “The Girls Group” (2021) that portrays the resistance of Iranian women in the early days of the Iran-Iraq war.

During the press conference at the festival, an Afghan reporter asked her about patriotism and how she felt about acting in a film about the war in Iran: “When it comes to my feelings, I don’t make a difference between Iran and Afghanistan, especially since I was born in Iran. I read comments on social media that challenged me to explain why I have played in an Iranian war movie. I think anybody can understand that when you grow up somewhere you can’t separate yourself from there. I consider myself Iranian because I was raised here, I went to school here and all my friends are here.”

Turbulent past and uncertain future

While Afghan arts and culture have carved out a space in Iranian media, this has not always translated into public scrutiny of Iran’s politics towards Afghanistan. After the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan in August 2021 a variety of discussions and narratives formed in the Iranian public, in academic discourses

and above all on social media channels, which in Iran are important platforms for conversations among the public, elites, journalists and intellectuals. The main question raised was: Where did the Islamic Republic of Iran stand in relation to the recent changes in Afghanistan? Would it support the Islamic Emirate of the Taliban or the leader of the resistance forces in Panjshir valley, Ahmad Massoud, the son of Ahmad Shah Massoud?

The first reaction of the Iranian political regime to the power-sharing of the Taliban in Afghanistan was hasty and positive because it considered the withdrawal of the US troops an opportunity to “restore lasting security and peace” in Afghanistan. The Iranian people however, criticized this change in stance and acceptance of the Taliban, both in public as well as on social media. Many commentators demanded the government to support Ahmad Massoud and the Panjshir resistance, which are culturally and historically closer to Iran. According to many, the Afghan government should not be dominated entirely by the Taliban, although the Taliban are understood as a reality in Afghan society that cannot be eliminated completely. But most Iranians see the Taliban as a backward terrorist group that advocates for suppression of women’s rights, terror, violence, and opposition to modern values. The result of their complete control of Afghanistan – so Iranians fear - would give way to the growth of terrorism and extremism in Afghanistan and the region.

Needless to say, the Taliban and the government of Iran are in conflict with each other when it comes to legitimacy and sovereignty. And the military occupation of Kabul, the way the Taliban have treated the Shia of Afghanistan, their ethnic and tribal structure, their inner division into moderate and hardline factions as well as disputes and clashes in Panjshir have cast an even darker shadow over the relationship of the two countries. Still, for now their dealings remain based on pragmatism and realism, and their shared financial and security interests.

Individual responsibility and moral unity

Without any doubt, the Panjshir resistance against the Taliban, the demonstrations of the Afghan peo-

ple, especially women, and the surge of migration from Afghanistan reflect one goal: the resistance of a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual society against an increasingly discriminatory and one-dimensional Taliban regime. What is happening in Afghanistan today can be understood as a variation of a global trend: the rise of authoritarianism. Global civil society must stand with the people and intellectuals of Afghanistan and support them in creating a democratic, lawful, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic system of their own.

However, the path to a democratic and multi-faceted society is long and complex. An incident that happened at this year’s Cannes Film Festival can be read as a highly symbolic example of exactly this: Navid Mohammadzadeh, a famous Iranian actor, was present for the screening of the film “Leila’s Brothers” (2022), in which he stars. He was on the red carpet with his wife Fereshteh Hosseini, the Iranian-born Afghan actress mentioned above, and then it happened: They kissed each other. That was the highlight of the ceremony – at least for the Iranian audience.

In Iran, the kiss led to many public statements and different reactions. Some considered the kiss to be a sign of love and a nice gesture. Others insisted that the kiss was an inappropriate act during the time when Iran was mourning the collapse of the Metropol building in Abadan. Some saw it as a violation of the values of Iranian culture. The press, which is aligned with the policies of the current government, viewed this kiss as part of the Western culture that is contrary to the public culture and decency in Iran. At the press conference, Navid Mohammadzadeh described this kiss as an act of appreciation for his wife and respect for their love.

The consequences of the Afghan-Iranian kiss are unpredictable in the Iranian political space. It may entail barring the couple from appearing on television shows for a limited amount of time or – if they are unlucky - even indefinitely, and it might enforce a probation period on them before they can be cast in a new movie. The kiss-scene shows how unexpected actions can create a new condition where morality, virtues, politics, tradition, and freedom come into conflict.

But – however the debate will play out, individuals like Alie Ataee and Fereshteh Hosseini are on the rise in Iran and beyond: individuals who do not spread hatred, violence, xenophobia, and ethnocentricity, but who promote a thinking that seeks to

understand human values and citizen rights; that addresses and explores their concerns and sees itself as a moral responsibility in Hannah Arendt's definition: In *The Human Condition*, first published in 1958, we are reminded that in the face of all the unexpected obstacles and problems that stand in the way of human freedom, it is the power of thinking as well as the potential for initiative and action in the public realm, which creates a new beginning for our moral togetherness. This might also answer the question: How will the Afghan art scene evolve when most of it is located outside the country? Since the Taliban take-over in August 2021, most remaining intellectuals, artists, and filmmakers – especially women – have fled Afghanistan to countries in the region, but also to Europe, the US or Australia. And for sure, the void they leave in their home-country is enormous. But the perseverance of Alie Ataee and Fereshteh Hosseini shows that the Afghan art scene will blossom wherever artists decide to find new roots. Because the flow of music, art and culture between countries is never interrupted.

University of Zurich, and from August 2022, she gives a lecture on the subject of legal and economic anthropology at the University of Fribourg. Her current research deals with the question of property law, endowments, kinship, and state formation in the Samanid Empire period (819–999 CE). She has more than ten years of experience of working as a translator for Dari-Farsi-speaking Afghan Refugees in Switzerland. Prior to that she had studied Theatre in Tehran.

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BIO



Shirin Naef received her Ph.D. in Social Anthropology from the University of Zurich and completed her postgraduate training in Bioethics at the International Centre for Ethics in the Sciences and Humanities (IZEW) at the University of Tübingen. She studied Social Anthropology, Islamic Studies, and General Linguistics at the University of Bern. From 2018 to 2019 she was fellow at the Käte Hamburger Center for Advanced Study "Law as Culture" at the University of Bonn, where she started to work on her habilitation project on the relationship between economy, law and religion according to the studies of culture in the context of Iranian history and politics. She is associate researcher at the