Afghan Diaspora: Relationship with ‘Homeland’

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In this paper, I will be applying Professor William Safran’s definition of diaspora to make the case that Afghans in America influence Afghan society at the macro-level, whereas Afghans in Iran aid Afghan society along ethnic/familial lines.
I. What is diaspora?
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What is Diaspora?

The word ‘diaspora’ derives from the Greek for being scattered or dispersed (Van Her; 1998 pg 5). This term has developed a particular social meaning associated with the traumatic dispersal of people.

William Safran’s 6 concepts of expatriate communities

1. They or their ancestors have been dispersed from their original region
2. They retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland
3. They believe they are not fully accepted by their host society
4. They regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home.
5. They believe they should be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their homeland
6. They continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland.
Transnational Identity Networks

Thomas Faist, professor on social space and migration:

“Diaspora has been often used to denote religious or national groups living outside homeland, whereas transnationalism is often used more narrowly – to refer to migrants’ durable ties across countries – and, more widely, to capture not only communities, but all sorts of social formations, such as transnationally active networks, groups, and organizations.”

Transnational ethnic group defined by a common identity and attachment to a real or imagined homeland.

Could be applied to any transnational ethnic group that results from boundary-crossing processes.
History of the Afghan Diaspora: Iran

Waves of emigration:

The first wave of migration was a massive and forced exile of mostly rural Afghans to neighboring countries of Pakistan and Iran. This emigration was related to the Soviet intervention of 1979 and the occupation of the 1980s.

The second wave came during the second half of the nineties brought an extreme drought that forced thousands of Afghans to flee to Iran in search of food and water.
The **first wave** occurred in the first three years, in the wake of the Marxist coup and Soviet invasion.

The **second wave** took place between 1992 and 1996. Many Afghan university students moved to Western countries, especially once the Berlin Wall fell. Many Afghan employees of international NGO’s escaped to the West as well.

A **third wave** of refugees to Western countries arose when the Taliban captured Kabul in 1996. Afghans that fled to the West during the period were middle-class urban educated Afghans that felt forced to flee because of the repressive Taliban measures. A number of them had been employed by NGO’s. In addition, ethnic and religious minorities, particularly Shiite Hazara and Ismailis, persecuted by the Taliban, sought their way out.
The Dari dictionary of the Center for Afghanistan Studies (1993) translates *watan* as home country, fatherland, homeland and as

*Watan* not merely refers to a piece of land, but also to the people who inhabit, or inhibited, it. It suggests the relationship among people from a particular place (Canfield 1988: 186). These people are each other’s *watandār* or *hamwatan* or *hewadwal* in Pashto.

I am a stranger in this world, and in my exile there is a severe solitude and painful lonesomeness. I am alone, but in my aloneness I contemplate about an unknown and magical homeland, and these reflections fill my dreams with phantoms of a great and remote land that my eyes have never seen. (Khalil Gibran’s *The Storm* [1993];
What does it mean to be Afghan in Iran

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Identification Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amayesh identification (pink)</td>
<td>The majority of Afghans in Iran hold this identification.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amayesh identification (gold)</td>
<td>These cards accord additional rights such as the right to have a bank account in Iran, and are issued to high ranking figures, such as the Afghan clergy, and those with government positions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational passport</td>
<td>Issued by universities and religious schools to Afghan students to indicate full-time enrollment as students.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iranian identification (shenasnameh)</td>
<td>Issued by BAFIA to children aged 18 years and above, born of mixed marriages whose Afghan parents has a passport from Afghanistan.</td>
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Identity is defined as “ways in which people conceive themselves and are characterized by others.”

Characteristics of “tolerance, pain, hardship, endurance, resignation to their situation”

“Being Afghan means being a laborer”

“An Afghan is a backward person, a simple person. An Afghan man is one who wakes up early to go to work and comes back home late at night. . . . He manages to cover basic living expenses of his family. His concerns are returning to Afghanistan and problems regarding living in Iran.”

(Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit)
What does it mean to be Afghan-American

According to Amir Marvasti, author of ‘Middle Eastern Lives in America’ Middle Eastern-Americans post 9/11 face the hurdles of the notion that living in America is a constant battle between ‘us versus them.’ The majority of Afghan-Americans are Muslim. Being Muslim in a Christian society, especially hyper-sensitized after 9/11, many Afghan-Americans had to defend their religious motives.
Our roots lie in Afghanistan. We have had the Afghan culture injected into our blood. Here we are so-so. We aren’t real Afghans but neither are we Europeans.
-Mahbuba, a women in her forties

Me as an Afghan in the US army, isn’t it ridiculous. . . I was the only one with black hair. But you are not an Afghan, are you? I am an Afghan and will always be one. An Afghan cannot be bought, only rented. Kandahari blood is flowing inside me.”

You can’t escape your roots, even if you try desperately. You will always stay what you were in the beginning. As you get older, you unconsciously return to how you were in reality. . . That is, back to your asl wa nasab.”
Feelings of Obligation

“[Homeland] is a deep feeling from within which I have not experienced yet. Whether Afghanistan is my country or Iran [I cannot say] because we have been living in Iran since childhood and were even born here and have never seen Afghanistan and never understood it. Although we have been told that we are Afghan, I only have a very superficial feeling that Afghanistan is my country but have never had a deep feeling for Afghanistan.” (Mm04)

“In one respect we are strangers [gharibeh] in Afghanistan, because there have been people who returned to Afghanistan and have been told ‘You are Iranian’. When I go there I'm a stranger [gharibeh] because I cannot talk like them, behave like them, and I become a stranger to them, unless I get used to them. I am more comfortable here [in Iran].” (Tm07)
Organizational Responses to Homeland: Afghans in Iran

From 2002 to the end of June 2006, approximately 1.5 million Afghans voluntarily repatriated from Iran to Afghanistan. Of these 58% were assisted by UNHCR (Afghan Repatriation Analysis).

Because Afghans in the near diaspora are more likely to have family remaining in Afghanistan, and so may be more likely to go back and forth regularly across national borders.

However, households in Iran appear to expend most of their income on daily household expenses, and infrequently, if at all, remit money back to relatives or other household members in Afghanistan. The few respondent households which disclosed that they were remitting money regularly to Afghanistan said it was to provide for other relatives who had returned but been unable to find work.
Feeling of guilt:

Afghan-American, Beltun, tells the story of the time he went to Afghanistan and was forced to stop by a bearded Mujahed, who allegedly said: “I fought for twenty years, and you have escaped. You have shaved your beard and took your wife to the sauna.” It made the man shed tears: “I am not allowed to live in Afghanistan because I don’t have a beard.”

“The air travel costs are 750 euro, but you need to take at least 3000 euro with you.” He tells me that all relatives, even distant ones, expect the returnee to pay them a visit and bring money, because he or she lives in a rich country.”

-Omar Sahbizada

“What should I say to the poor Afghans over there? How comfortable my life is over here? With my microwave and my central heating…”

-Maryam Mandina
Charities founded by Afghan-Americans

Data from the National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCCS) show how the combined Afghan crises appeared to spur on the development of new Afghan-supported US nonprofits, revitalize old organizations, dramatically increase philanthropic giving, promote new collaborations, and help diversify types of funding.

Such national-level organizing appeared to be of profound importance for the ability of the US Afghan community to bring together and coordinate people.

Examples include the Afghan Elderly Association, the Afghan Community Islamic Center, the Afghanistan American Foundation, Afghanistan Relief, and the Afghan Academy.
Afghans in Iran and Afghans in the United States both hold emotional bonds to Afghanistan. Their ways of dealing with these bonds to the ‘homeland’ differ.

Afghans in Iran contribute back to the ‘homeland’ on familial ties partly because of feelings of obligation.

Afghan-Americans contribute back to the ‘homeland’ on a macro level partly because of feelings of guilt.