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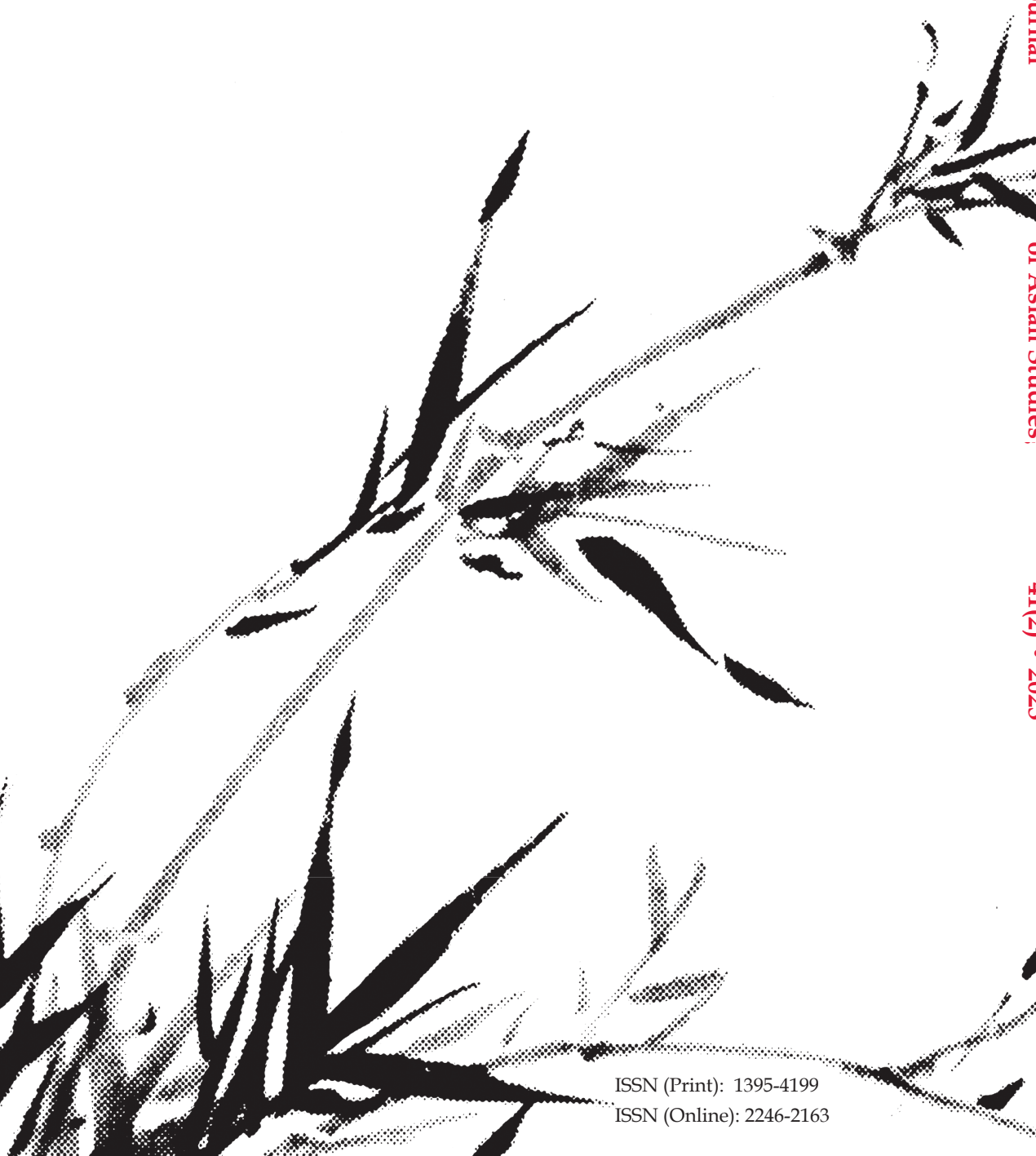

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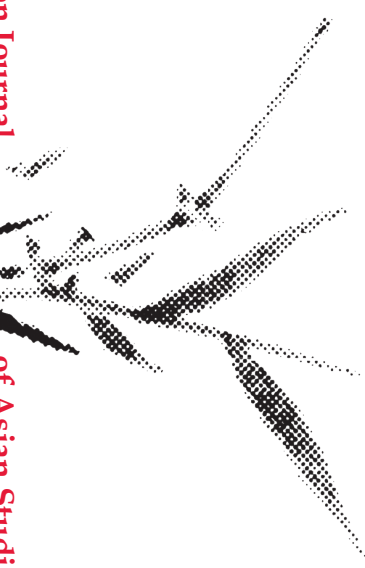

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SPECIAL ISSUE: MINORITY MIGRATION FROM MUSLIM ASIA

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Contents

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The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies invites articles from both emerging and established scholars engaging in critical analyses of modern Asia. The CJAS deploys a broad definition of Asia, including East Asia, Inner Asia, West Asia, Central Asia, South Asia, South-East Asia and Asian cultural spheres globally. The CJAS promotes three key areas of research:
Its focus on **culture and historical legacies** for understanding diverse forms of cultural coexistence and exchange, including international and local perspectives on culture, education and heritage in Asia. Its engagement with society, politics and sustainability for elucidating new social, cultural and political values, as well as to discuss pertinent environmental concerns. Its interdisciplinary platform for the development of **innovative theoretical approaches** based on contemporary and historical issues in Asia.

Foreword

The articles in this Special Issue, *Minority Migration from Muslim Asia*, are all concerned with the migratory experiences of different non-Muslim groups—Afghanistan's Sikhs and Hindus, Syrian Jews and Bukharan Jews—who left at the end of the twentieth century the cities in which they had lived in Muslim Asia. In the sizeable scholarly literature on these groups, there is a tendency to focus on the forms of community and identity established by migrants in the diasporic settings to which they have relocated. Many studies have noted how migrants from these backgrounds have sought to preserve their identity in relation to their regions of origin rather than to simply assimilate into the host societies or embrace more abstract and global forms of religious identity. The articles in this Special Issue seek to build on the existing literature but also take it in a different direction, both analytically and empirically. We are interested less in the forms of identity created by migrant communities in the diaspora and the relationship of these to the homeland. Instead, we are more interested in asking to what extent the forms of life and coexistence important to such groups in Muslim Asia have remained important to their livelihoods, activities and self-understandings elsewhere today. We focus on forms of life and coexistence rather than more specific notions of identity or heritage because we are interested in the extent to which these groups have or have not maintained the skills and sensibilities of importance to their lives in Muslim Asia. As we shall see, such skills and sensibilities revolve less around rigid attempts to preserve identity and heritage in the diaspora, than the ability to adjust to changing situations, new scenarios and economic opportunities; these skills also entail building networks and relations with people outside their distinct communities.

The communities we have studied all played an important role in the commercial dynamics of Muslim Asia and did so by way of establishing and maintaining networks that connected the settings in which they lived to wider regional economies. In order to work across multiple regions, the traders making up networks were mobile and able to create attachments to multiple contexts and places. Two of the articles

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in the Special Issue explore how this history of participation in mobility and commerce and skills in the art of forging networks played an important role in the ways in which groups re-established themselves outside of Muslim Asia. Magnus Marsden's article focuses on Sikhs and Hindus from Afghanistan—collectively designated as 'Hindkis'—who left the country and especially its capital city of Kabul in large numbers in the early 1990s following the collapse of the pro-Soviet government and the rise to power of Islamists. Afghanistan's Hindkis are often treated in the literature as a small minority that in the context of their migration out of Afghanistan have continued to emphasise their belonging as being 'Afghan' instead of blending within Hindu and Sikh communities they encounter in diaspora. Marsden's contribution emphasises, however, the extent to which the notion of 'community' is unhelpful in analysing the experiences of Hindkis after the 1990s. He discusses the manner in which having left Afghanistan they re-established the networks of trade and commerce they had orchestrated that had focused around Kabul. In particular, Afghanistan's Hindkis sought commercial opportunities in the countries of the former Soviet Union in the 1990s, establishing businesses in thriving commercial nodes located in cities such as Tashkent, Moscow, Kyiv and Odesa, as well as Yiwu in China. During the 2000s, these traders expanded such networks in changing political circumstances—racism and mafia-like structures in Russia led an increasing number of traders to move to Europe where they also quickly established themselves in the import of commodities made in China. In all these locations, while emphasising their religious identities as Hindus and Sikhs from Afghanistan, they continued to develop and maintain commercial connections with Muslims from the country—providing them with goods on credit as well as various financial services. In the light of this ethnographic material, Marsden argues that conceptualising Afghanistan's Hindkis in relation to narrow ideas of ethnicity, community and identity fails to appreciate the flexibility of the networks they formed and their ability to work with traders of different religious backgrounds.

Paul Anderson's article, similarly, analyses the growth and durability of Syrian Jewish commercial networks by following the trajectories of merchants who emigrated from Aleppo following the Ottoman collapse and later the partition of Palestine. Scholarly literature on Syrian Jewish dispersal often focuses on boundary maintenance, ethnic persistence and associated dynamics of cultural production in particular locales. Similar to Marsden's article, Anderson's contribution instead

deals with the enduring translocal orientations which Syrian Jews maintained, in this case through commerce, mobility and the building of social and religious institutions. He asks: What accounts for the durability of geographically expansive networks and orientations through periods of sustained economic and political turbulence? Dispersed from Aleppo, Syrian Jews built up and moved between nodes in Beirut, Kobe, Shanghai, Milan, Buenos Aires, São Paulo and New York. In many nodes, elites built synagogues and community infrastructures, providing employment for religious specialists and reinforcing endogamous matchmaking practices. However, such institutions not only provided for ethnic persistence in each locale; they were also bound up with the maintenance and expansion of commercial networks. By reproducing values that circulated translocally—such as the prestige of certain forms of architecture, marriage, sociability and family names, which became recognisable and admissible everywhere—these institutions rendered each site as a node in a wider global network. They, and the values they circulated, maintained the coherence of that network, enabling merchants to move around, forge careers and navigate new contexts more easily. Adopting a mobile rather than sedentary perspective on 'community' institutions, Anderson highlights their role as infrastructures of circulation, sustaining translocal and commercial orientations and modes of livelihood.

A different take on migratory trajectories and navigation in the new settings is adopted in Vera Skvirskaja's article that focuses on Bukharan Jews of (post-)Soviet Central Asia—mainly what is today the independent states of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. In contrast to Afghan Hindkis and Syrian Jews' pattern of mobility and networks of trade as discussed by Marsden and Anderson respectively, Bukharan Jews' transnational migration was much more tightly controlled and constrained by the Cold War migration regime. The first opportunity to leave Soviet Central Asian Republics *en masse* appeared in the late 1960s when Bukharan Jews—as part of Soviet Jewry—were allowed to emigrate from the USSR to Israel and the USA. The first wave of controlled migration that took place in the 1960s and 1970s was followed by mass emigration of Bukhran Jews in the late 1980s and early 1990s, resulting in the establishment of a new global diaspora with prominent diasporic nodes primarily in the USA and the EU. One of such diasporic nodes in Europe is the city of Vienna, Austria. It has arisen by chance, reflecting not so much the intention of Bukharan migrants to settle in the city as the constraints of 'migration infrastructure' that

enabled migration flows from the USSR. Vienna has become a site for new expansive networks of Bukharan Jews linking communities in the USA, Israel and Central Asia via kinship, matrimonial unions, circulation of religious specialists and (post-Soviet) migration of Muslim Tajiks and Uzbeks. Skvirskaja's article traces forms of coexistence in Soviet Central Asia by looking at economic and cultural-religious dispositions of the Bukharan ethno-religious minority and the ways in which these experiences of coexistence with the Muslim majority have informed social navigation and economic and labour relations in diaspora. Skvirskaja argues that the urban Jewish infrastructure that has developed as a result of the Bukharan Jewish migration to Vienna has become a part of migration infrastructure that has recently facilitated migration of Muslim Central Asians to the city. Thus, Jewish-Muslim interfaces that emerged in various Soviet contexts have been reproduced in the new diasporic settings.

In all three ethnographic cases, we study the migratory experiences and geographic mobilities of minorities from Muslim Asia with its rich history of managing cultural diversity and leading mobile lives. This Special Issue seeks to contribute to the research on ethno-religious minorities by bringing to the fore the new or changing modes of mobility and forms of coexistence that arise in the context of migration in the present day. In this way, we highlight the role of cultural imagination and cultural mobility in Muslim Asia's global interconnected diasporas.

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The Merchant Networks of Afghan Sikhs: The Cold War, its Legacies and Beyond

MAGNUS MARSDEN

Abstract

This article documents the migration of Afghanistan's Sikh communities to Asia and Europe during the Cold War and its aftermath. It analyses these migratory trajectories both in the context of conflict in Afghanistan and the refugee flows it created as well as in relation to the long-term role of Afghan Sikhs in transregional trade. The article argues that exploring Sikh migration from Afghanistan through the twin analytical lenses of trade networks and the Cold War helps to illuminate a more complex range of identities and experiences than allowed for by a singular focus on their status as either 'refugees' or migrants from 'the Global South'.

***Keywords**: Afghanistan; migration; trade networks; commerce; London*

Introduction

This article documents the migration of Afghanistan's Sikh communities to Asia and Europe and explores the ways in which their migration trajectories are entangled with the Cold War and its aftermath.[1] It analyses these migratory trajectories in the context of conflict inside Afghanistan and the refugee flows of Afghan Sikhs in which this violence resulted (especially to the former Soviet Union, UK, EU, Canada and the USA). I also explore Sikh migration in relation to the historic role that Sikhs in Afghanistan have played as a 'middleman trading community' operating between South and Central Asia and northern Eurasia. Simultaneously deploying the analytical devices of the Cold War and trading networks, I argue, illuminates the complexity and diversity of Afghan Sikh networks and experiences.

Besides contributing to the understanding of the contemporary history of this little explored trading group, the article seeks to make a contribution to inter-disciplinary literature on migration and diaspora

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in two ways. Firstly, framing the migratory trajectories of Afghan Sikhs in the context of the Cold War and its ongoing aftermath brings attention to geographies obscured in scholarship that focuses on South-North migration. The material presented in the article illuminates the significance of migration from Afghanistan to post-Soviet contexts but also the critical implications this has had for the identities and activities of people from the country living elsewhere, especially in Western Europe and North America. Secondly, the article also seeks to demonstrate the ways in which Afghan Sikhs embark upon modes of making a livelihood in relation to a longer history of commercial activity. Recognition of Afghan Sikhs' ongoing identification with long distance trade between Afghanistan and the wider world complicates more one-dimensional representations of this and other historically 'mobile societies' within the literature on migration and refugee studies (Ho 2017).

Afghanistan, Sikhs and the Cold War

The Cold War was the central geopolitical dynamic that resulted in violence and conflict in Afghanistan, the disintegration of the country's state structures and the rise to power of Islamist-orientated regimes hostile towards the country's historic religious and cultural diversity (Leake 2022; Nunan 2016). The war between the pro-Soviet government of Afghanistan and mujahidin resistance organisations supported by countries in Western Europe and North America as well as their allies in Asia and the Middle East eventually resulted in state collapse in 1992 and the emergence of a series of governments led by groups and individuals standing on Islamist political platforms. Internal and geopolitical antagonisms stretching back to the Cold War also played a powerful role in the chronic insecurity that affected Afghanistan following the US-led international intervention of 2001. Across these periods, Sikhs left Afghanistan in successive waves.

Cold War dynamics not only led Sikhs to flee Afghanistan but also shaped the range of contexts to which they moved and subsequently (re)established themselves as trading communities. Most Sikhs from Afghanistan initially moved to India in 1992 before a significant proportion sought refugee status in Europe and North America later in the decade. At the same time, Sikhs from Afghanistan also moved to multiple urban settings across the former Soviet Union. These settings were connected to Afghanistan through a history of interaction and

exchange dating back to the sixteenth century (Dale 2002) and, of more relevance to this article, a modern history of Cold War cooperation which materialised in the form of migration from Afghanistan to the Soviet Union for higher education and technical training (e.g., Ibañez Tirado 2019). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the emergence of new economies in the post-Soviet world meant that cities such as Moscow, Odesa and Tashkent offered significant commercial opportunities for groups with an understanding of and expertise in long-distance and cross-border trade (Humphrey 2002). Sikhs and Hindus from Afghanistan numbering between approximately two and five thousand individuals lived across former Soviet countries and were involved in a range of commercial activities. The wealth and commercial knowledge the traders acquired in the post-Soviet world eventually enabled them to play a significant role in the fortunes of increasingly globally dispersed Afghan Sikhs.

Afghan Sikh communities continue to be mobile, relocating businesses, families and community institutions. The post-2001 international intervention in Afghanistan resulted in chronic levels of violence and hostility in the country, some of which directly targeted the country's remaining Sikhs and Hindus and led them to flee. The aftermath of the Cold War has also affected Sikhs in the countries in which they settled after leaving Afghanistan. In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Afghan Sikhs living in the country have moved their families to the UK and EU; Afghan Sikhs living in Russia have also moved their families and businesses to London over the past twenty years because of organised crime and the regular experience of racist attacks. A consideration of the migratory trajectories of Afghan Sikhs in the wider context of the Cold War reveals activities, transregional and global connections and commercial geographies that a singular focus on their experiences as 'refugees' or as migrants from 'the Global South' conceals.

Note on Methodology

The article is primarily based on fieldwork conducted between January 2022 and March 2023 in Southall, a 'post-migration' suburb in West London (Baumann 1996) that is now home to approximately 25,000 Sikhs of Afghan heritage. It also includes fieldwork amongst Afghan Sikhs and Hindus living in Vancouver (April 2023), Hamburg (February 2023) and Frankfurt (March 2023). Fieldwork entailed spending

time with Afghan Sikh merchants in the wholesale and retail markets in which they run businesses. Furthermore, I conducted and recorded semi-formal interviews and visited gurdwaras established in London. I was also invited to attend festivals in the religious calendar of Afghan Sikhs, as well as events at which concerns about the community's future in the diaspora and in Afghanistan were the focus of discussion. My relationships with Sikhs from Afghanistan living in London stretch back to research I conducted during the 2010s (Marsden 2016; 2021). I conducted extensive ethnographical fieldwork on trading networks comprising merchants from Afghanistan. In London, Ukraine and Russia, an international trade city in China and in Afghanistan, I met tens of Sikhs and Hindus from Afghanistan who were involved in the long-distance commodity trade (e.g., Marsden 2018). I visited gurdwaras in Kabul in 2018 and 2019, and spoke to several Sikhs and Hindus in the city who continued to live in Afghanistan until shortly after the return to power of the Taliban in August 2021.

From Transregional Trading Community to Global Dispersal: Afghan Sikh Experiences of the Cold War

Sikhs and Hindus formed a sizeable and influential community of between 80,000 and 250,000 persons in modern Afghanistan; from the early 1990s onwards, both of these closely interlinked communities began to leave Afghanistan in large numbers. Relatively little is known about the history of 'Hindki' communities living in the territories that make up modern Afghanistan. According to Hanifi, Afghanistan's 'Hindkis' (a term used in the country to refer to people of Indian background) included Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus who worked as 'bankers, merchants and traders' and shared 'social origins in and economic connections to various localities in India' (Hanifi 2011).[2] Historical studies tend to suggest that communities identifying as Sikh and Hindu today are most likely the descendants of merchants and bankers from Punjab and Sindh who settled in towns across present day Afghanistan from around the seventeenth century onwards (Bonotto 2021). Hindki traders and credit providers were not isolated 'minority' communities; they are better thought of, rather, as a 'mobile society' (Ho 2017) that formed dispersed networks connected to the multiple societies of the transregional arena across which they worked.

Hindki merchants were initially encouraged to settle in the region by Afghan rulers who had close relations to India's Mughal rulers (Dale

2002; Hopkins 2009; Levy 2002). In the eighteenth century, Indian firms established contact with these merchants and sent their own agents (*arethi*) to the region. The merchants predominantly belonged to the Khatri caste (historically merchants and agriculturalists). Hindki merchants from this background sold textiles on behalf of Indian firms, and invested profits raised from trade in both short and long-term interest loans to Muslim traders and farmers. In the nineteenth century, Hindkis played a pivotal role in trade between South, Central and West Asia (Hanifi 2011) and beyond to Russia, building close relationships with the nomads who moved goods and also capitalising on their literacy by way of engagements with British India's colonial authorities (Dale 2002). Bonotto (2021) estimates that in the mid-nineteenth century, Hindkis were roughly equally divided between Sikh and Hindu. From the 1920s, a Sikh movement of reform was founded, the Chief Khalsa Diwan, which actively encouraged Khatri communities to publicly profess their adherence to the Sikh faith (cf. Barrier 2000).

Central Asia's incorporation within the Russian Empire resulted in major transformations in the region's commercial dynamics. The Russian administration of Turkestan targeted the activities of Indian moneylenders, initially allowing them to trade but preventing them from giving the loans from which they derived the bulk of their profits. Small Indian outposts remained in Central Asia until the Bolshevik revolution, but most merchants left the region after the Russian conquest (Levi 2016).[3]

In Afghanistan during the first half of the twentieth century, Hindkis conducted business in urban centres and small towns across the country. Sikhs in particular were reputed *hakims* (medical experts), known for their knowledge of and ability to administer *yunnani* medicine (the Indo-Muslim expression of Ayurvedic tradition) (e.g., Alavi 2016). Wealthier families were also involved in the trade of medicinal plants, such as asafoetida and liquorice, both within Afghanistan and between India and the country. Sikh hakims continued to be much sought after by local communities across Afghanistan until the present day.[4] Hindkis also owned and farmed land in Afghanistan's provinces. Afghan Hindki respondents in London, for example, have told me that their families owned land in different parts of Afghanistan, including Jebul Seraj and Charikar in northern Afghanistan, Nangahar in the southeast and Ghazni and Helmand in the south. Sikh religious life was inscribed on Afghanistan's landscapes. Shrines (*dargahs*) and places of religious significance in urban and rural Afghanistan and the

northwestern provinces of British India were a focus of veneration by Hindki communities who travelled locally and across national borders to conduct pilgrimages and participate in religious festivals.

Under the leadership of Amanullah Khan (1919-1929), Afghanistan's state embarked upon the path of modernisation (e.g., Ahmed 2017); this had complicated implications for the country's ethno-religious minorities (e.g., Koplik 2015). During the reign of Amanullah, individual Hindkis expanded their influence in society beyond the domain of commerce. As in the case of 'middleman trading diasporas' in other contexts (Curtin 1994), the skills of members of the networks had historically been capitalised upon by power holders in Afghanistan who appointed Hindus and Sikhs to senior positions, including in the court's treasury (Dass nd.). During this period, Hindkis also became state employees, especially in the fields of education, health and, to a lesser extent, the armed forces. Most, however, continued their historic roles in trade. Hindki traders became pivotal to Afghanistan's economy, especially the export of dried fruits and nuts to India and Pakistan and the import of manufactured goods—including textiles, electronic goods and car spare parts—from Asian countries, including India, Korea, Japan and Hong Kong. Firms run by Sikhs and Hindus distributed imported commodities to commercial centres across Afghanistan. Sikhs continued to be active in the provision of *yunnani* medicine. They also deployed their knowledge of medicine and reputation as medical specialists to study medicine and pharmacology in Afghan universities, open pharmacies and import drugs to Afghanistan, mostly from India, but also, later in the century, from Eastern European countries, notably Yugoslavia. Through such activities, families cemented their repute as knowledgeable *hakim*s in towns and villages across Afghanistan. A man in his mid-sixties who lives in London mentioned to me that a local leader in the northern city of Kunduz had gifted his grandfather several hectares of land after the latter had successfully cured one of the leaders' relatives.

The relative stability of the era of King Zahir Shah (1933-1973), especially after the launch of a new constitution in 1965, as well as the economic success of Hindki communities, resulted in gurdwaras openly functioning across the country. Policies launched in the 1930s that sought to 'nativise' Afghanistan's economy had resulted in some Sikhs and Hindus being required to relocate from villages and rural areas into the country's urban centres on the pretext of their security (O'Halpin 2016). Between the mid-1960s and late 1980s, their role in the public life and administration of the country grew. Wealthier Sikhs

and Hindus in Kabul moved out of historic urban neighbourhoods (such as the Hindu Guzaar neighbourhood in Shor Bazar) and into newly constructed residential areas, notably that of Karte Parwan in which a gurdwara was also constructed. During this period, families purchased orchards and small properties in rural regions of Afghanistan, visiting them in large groups for picnic parties during the summer months. A man in his mid-fifties from Lalpura, a district in the province of Nangahar which is of religious significance to Sikhs who live in London, remarked to me, 'we used to think one day this country will become something, so we bought land and spent our money there, not knowing what was actually going to happen'.

During the 1980s, Hindki communal life in Afghanistan became increasingly concentrated in Kabul. The 1979 invasion of Afghanistan by Soviet forces and the US's decision to support the mujahidin by creating supply routes located in Pakistan resulted in violence and insecurity across much of Afghanistan, especially the country's rural areas and provincial towns. A small proportion of Afghanistan's Sikhs and Hindus were politically active during the pro-Soviet governments of the 1980s. The membership of both the Khalq and Parcham wings of the leftist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) included Hindkis. Some Sikhs also directly worked for or alongside Afghanistan's security services. A shopkeeper from a town in central Afghanistan told me how he supplied information gathered in his shop to Afghanistan's intelligence service (KhAD). The pro-Soviet government of Afghanistan in the 1980s and early 1990s built good relations with Afghan Hindkis, supporting the construction of religious buildings and appointing Sikhs and Hindus as representatives in various legislative assemblies. President Najibullah is reported to have told a gathering of the country's Sikhs and Hindus that their commercial acumen had ensured the movement of vital commodities, including foodstuffs and medicine, into the country, especially from India and the former Soviet Union, and that he considered this as a form of military service to the country. As with other citizens of the country, Sikhs and Hindus were required to undertake compulsory military service (*askari*), but a special provision enabled them to return to their homes at night.

For most Hindkis in the country, the final years of the pro-Soviet governments were marked by rising levels of violence and by what they now describe as a shift in attitude towards Sikhs and Hindus by the country's Muslims. A Hindu man in his fifties currently living in London remarked: 'Before the Muslims were very good, treated us with respect,

like our family. After the beginning of war and when more and more [people] went to Pakistan, they changed completely, hating everybody who was non-Muslim'. Insecurity in Afghanistan's provinces led Hindkis living in various parts of the country to relocate to Kabul. In some instances, Islamists directly targeted non-Muslim communities. A place of worship of importance to both Sikhs and Hindus in the eastern province of Khost, for example, was damaged in an attack in 1986, leading many of the approximately 200 Hindki families living in the town and neighbouring villages to move to Kabul. In 1988, an attack by gunmen on Sikhs in a gurdwara in Jalalabad led both Sikhs and Hindus to leave the city. Sikh respondents in London often interpreted these attacks as resulting from the close relationship between various mujahidin organisations and Pakistan, a country keen to expand its role in Afghanistan. Conflict between the mujahidin and government forces in Khost and other regions had a serious effect on Hindki-run businesses; families from both communities moved to Kabul in search of more stable commercial opportunities. Initially, Hindki families migrated to Kabul from the provinces. From the mid-1980s, they increasingly sought to leave the country, mostly to India, though some individuals travelled to Germany. In the months following the capture of Kabul by the mujahidin in 1992, approximately 60,000 Sikhs and Hindus living in Afghanistan left the country for India, most travelling with family and possessions in large trucks by way of Pakistan, the government of which had assured them a safe passage.[5]

Infighting between the various mujahidin groups seeking influence in the government of Afghanistan between 1992 and 1996 affected the entire population of Kabul yet had especially significant implications for non-Muslim Hindkis. Given their historic role as merchants in Afghanistan, mujahidin fighters and criminal gangs operating in the period assumed that all Sikhs and Hindus living in Kabul were wealthy. Strongmen and their fighters forcibly occupied properties belonging to both Sikh and Hindu families in Kabul and other provincial towns from 1992 onwards. A pharmacist from Kunduz who now lives in London told me how the land gifted to him by a local figure of power and authority was occupied by groups aligned with the mujahidin in the 1990s. Several Sikh and Hindu religious buildings were also occupied by mujahidin groups and were used as military bases in the street fighting that destroyed much of Kabul during the 1990s. Individuals seeking to defend their property were murdered and kidnapping for ransom was a regular occurrence. A Hindu originally

from Laghman told me how one of his Hindu neighbours in Kabul was killed in front of him after he had refused to sell his property at a low cost to a Muslim family. The security of Hindkis remaining in the country continued to be connected to wider geopolitical conflicts across the Indian subcontinent. The destruction of the Babri Masjid by Hindu fundamentalists in India in 1992 resulted in attacks on Hindu and Sikh religious institutions in Afghanistan, including a Hindu temple in Khost that a trader from the town who now lives in London told me was largely destroyed in a bomb blast.

By 1996 and the onset of the first era of Taliban rule, Hindkis continuing to live in Afghanistan formed a small community largely though not exclusively comprising families that did not have sufficient capital to emigrate to India or elsewhere. The first era of Taliban rule (1996-2001) resulted in further restrictions on Hindki activities—members of the community were required to wear yellow insignia in public that distinguished them from Muslims. A few individuals who had sent their families abroad returned to Afghanistan, mostly those who imported medicine from India and travelled regularly between Kabul and Delhi; others maintained retail shops in the city; still more ran businesses but primarily stayed in the country to act as the custodians of Hindu and Sikh religious institutions.

Hindkis living in Afghanistan and in the diaspora experienced relative stability during the period between 2001 and 2021 in which a US-led NATO coalition provided security to formally-elected governments. This period in Afghanistan until 2010 enabled the repair of Sikh gurdwaras and Hindu temples. A handful of individuals returned to the country from abroad—sometimes with the hope of gaining access to family property which had massively increased in value. Few, however, settled, reporting being threatened by powerful individuals who occupied the houses they had left a decade or more previously. In the post-2001 period, Afghanistan's government enabled representation of Hindkis in the parliament.[6] Sikhs living in Afghanistan whom I met in September 2018 and July 2019 told me, however, that they felt the government treated them as a 'treasure to be preserved' yet did little to support them practically. Land allocated by the government for the communities to cremate their dead was located, for example, on the outskirts of the city—during cremations, local Muslims pelted Sikhs and Hindus with stones in front of miniscule police presence who reportedly lacked the power to do anything other than stand back and watch. As the Taliban insurgency intensified after the

partial withdrawal of international forces commenced in 2014, Sikh and Hindu places of worship were the target of several attacks by Islamist militants. On 1 November 2018, an attack in Jalalabad resulted in the deaths of several Sikh community leaders. In this context, families continuing to live in provincial cities (mostly Jalalabad and Ghazni) relocated to Kabul and lived in Sikh gurdwaras and Hindu mandirs in Shor Bazar and Karte Parwan. Families able to leave Afghanistan continued to do so; Sikh movements and organisations, especially the Canada-based Manmeet Singh Bhullar Foundation in collaboration with the World Sikh Organisation, increasingly supported the emigration of Afghan Sikhs (especially those living in the insecure provinces of Helmand and Kandahar).

Upon the return to power of the Taliban in August 2021, international organisations evacuated several Hindki families in Afghanistan, mostly to India from where they began the process of being resettled in Canada. A handful of individuals continue to live in Afghanistan largely because they do not have access to passports. The economic crisis and attacks by ISIS-Khorasan, including on the Karte Parwan Gurdwara on 17 June 2022, meant that by the beginning of 2023 only a handful of Sikh men remained in Afghanistan. Those who left after August 2021 report that while their relationships with Taliban officials were cordial, they were concerned for their lives after the ISIS-Khorasan attack on the gurdwara. Sikh Afghan men escorted the remaining sacred scriptures in the country by air to India in January 2023. Even though Muslim security guards defended the community's religious sites, the Taliban pledges to protect these sites were a source of little comfort to Sikhs and Hindus in the diaspora.

Nodes, Networks and Markets

Having explored the Afghan Sikh global dispersal in the context of the Cold War and its aftermath, the article now explores their migratory trajectories in greater detail. It emphasises the entwinement of these trajectories with Cold War historical processes and analyses their structure and dynamics in relation to concepts developed by historians who have studied the functioning of trade networks. Sikhs from Afghanistan have established concentrated populations in cities across a range of countries. Scholarly discussions of these communities tend to focus on migration from Afghanistan to India and from there to Western Europe and North America. As a result, it is easy to conceive of Afghan Sikh migration as a form of South-North mobility driven by

conflict. As Cheuk (2013) has explored, however, Sikhs have fashioned commercial networks in multiple settings, including, for example, between Hong Kong and mainland China. The following analysis builds on work addressing the importance of religion and ethnicity in the understanding of Sikh commercial activities and seeks to contribute to a wider body of scholarly work on the role of social networks in long-distance commerce.

Much literature on trade networks emphasises the role played by shared bonds of religion and ethnicity in facilitating the type of trust-based relationships of significance to the functioning of long-distance trading networks (cf. Cohen 1971). More recently, however, studies have focused on the specific structure of trading networks. An especially interesting area of debate concerns the ways in which variations in the structuring of networks affect their durability over time and resilience in the face of major shocks (e.g., Aslanian 2016; Marsden and Anderson 2020; Trivellato 2009). In his historical work on the Armenian trading diaspora, for example, Sebouh Aslanian (2016) has brought attention to the critical role played by 'nodes' in the economic fortunes of trading networks, and the forms of discipline and solidarity upon which their social and cultural reproduction depends. Aslanian identifies two types of trading networks. 'Multinodal monocentric networks' references how multiple nodes were critical to the activities of merchants, yet a single dominant 'nodal centre … defines and regulates the identity and economic vitality of the network as a whole' (2016: 14-15). By contrast, 'multinodal polycentric' trading networks have no single 'nodal centre' but operate from numerous centres, each of which plays if not equal then varying importance for the activities of the trading network as a whole. A nodal centre is both critical for the circulating of the objects and credit necessary for commerce but also the women and religious specialists central to the network's social and cultural reproduction. Aslanian suggests that networks comprising a dominant nodal centre are often less able to respond to major ruptures than those in which multiple nodes are of critical significance to networks' commercial activities and their cultural and social reproduction (cf. Trivellato 2009). After the Armenian networks studied by Aslanian lost their dominant node in Iran, the traders shifted their activities from the field of commerce to the domain of politics, pressing for the establishment of an Armenian nation-state.

The trajectories of Afghan Sikh networks in the context of the Cold War and its aftermath add a further layer of analysis to debates about the relationship between the structure of trading networks and their

resilience. Unlike the Armenian networks studied by Aslanian, Afghan Sikhs did not respond to ruptures in their commercial activities brought about by the Islamist takeover of Afghanistan by vacating the field of commerce and transferring their energies into a different field of activity. Rather, Afghan Sikhs altered the commodities in which they dealt, the geographies of the routes along which they traded and the locations of the nodes at which their networks intersected.

Afghan Sikh Commercial Nodes in the Post-Soviet World

Since they began leaving Afghanistan in the 1980s, Afghan Hindkis have established multiple nodes in various parts of Asia and Europe. As noted above, the vast majority of Sikhs living in Afghanistan left the country for India after the collapse of the Soviet-backed government in 1992. India's historically rigid policy towards refugees and the difficulty of doing commerce in the country, however, led Sikhs to leave the Delhi neighbourhoods in which they lived from the early 1990s onwards. In the early 1990s, Afghan Sikhs mostly moved to cities across the former Soviet Union, especially Tashkent, Moscow and Odesa.[7] These cities became important sites for the commercial activities of Afghans in the 1990s and continue to play an important role today (Marsden 2018).

After 1992, Moscow came to be regarded by Muslims and Hindkis as the dominant commercial node of Afghan trading networks in the former Soviet Union. Sikh traders from Afghanistan were able to bring capital to Russia from Afghanistan and India without using formal banking mechanisms. Traders moved their capital in the form of beads and semi-precious stones such as amethyst. A Muslim involved in the money transfer business in Moscow in the 1990s told me how he worked closely with Sikhs:

> They would travel on the flight between Delhi and Moscow with bags full of stones which they would give me on their arrival in Moscow. I would ask them for two days to sell the stones and then give them both cash and a receipt. I made money by selling at a higher price than that at which I bought the beads from them. The receipt of sale was important for them because it demonstrated how they had earned the money in their possession, thereby facilitating their opening bank accounts in Russia and allowing them to move the money wherever in the world they needed.

From 1992 onwards, wholesale merchants living in Moscow imported goods on credit from factories and outlets in China, often travelling with the goods overland by way of Kazakhstan. Commodities imported to Russia (from toys to hardware to beads, electronic cigarettes, textiles and clothing and electronic goods) were then sold to local buyers and given on credit to Afghan Muslims who owned businesses in both wholesale and retail markets dotted across the country. Afghan traders undertook forms of trade with which they were familiar from their experiences in Afghanistan, such as the sale of cloth, textiles and electronic goods, though they also expanded their activities into new fields, including toys and hardware. 'In Afghanistan', reported a trader originally from Jebul Seraj who now lives in London, 'we never sold cigarettes or tobacco because it is not allowed in our religion. Having moved from Afghanistan and needing simple ways of making money, more of our traders have engaged in such forms of business even though we are not supposed to'. The creation of commercial nodes in new contexts required merchants to be flexible not only in terms of the commodities in which they dealt but also the normative and religious standards they deployed to evaluate participation by Afghan Sikhs in different types of trade.

Markets in the post-Soviet world rapidly came to play a key role in the commercial activities of Afghan Sikhs globally. Traders in Moscow, I was often told, can make higher daily profits in the city compared to anywhere in the world, including Dubai.[8] Traders seeking to build business in Moscow needed significant sums of capital to invest in their fledgling businesses. Tashkent was an especially important city in the capitalisation of Afghan trading networks (Muslim, Sikh and Hindu) in the years immediately following 1992. A Hindu trader whose family hails from eastern Afghanistan told me how he and his father had established a trading venture in Tashkent before moving to Moscow after having made enough money to do so. In Moscow, Sikh, Hindu and Muslim traders from Afghanistan (many of whom had studied in the Soviet Union and were aligned with the pro-Soviet regimes of the 1980s) established wholesale businesses in the building of a hotel initially constructed to host participants in the Moscow Olympic Games of 1982 (Marsden 2016; 2021).

Afghan Sikhs regard linguistic versatility as pivotal to their commercial success in Russia. A handful of Sikhs who moved to the former Soviet Union to trade had learned Russian while studying in the Soviet Union on state-sponsored bursaries during the 1970s and 1980s; most,

however, learned the language during day-to-day conversations and interactions with their customers. Sikh traders in Moscow learned not only Russian; younger Sikhs brought up in India who had moved to support family businesses also learned Farsi and Pashto as a result of working alongside Muslims from Afghanistan. Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus ran offices next to one another in the market in Moscow and regularly visited each other to buy goods and request commodities on credit.

Traders in Moscow imported goods not only directly to the city from China—they also imported goods to the Ukrainian port city of Odesa and used informal transporters to bring commodities to Moscow along routes that avoided custom posts. Afghan Hindkis established sizeable businesses in Odesa (as well as Kyiv) which facilitated this trade; these companies also supplied markets in Ukraine. By 2014, Afghan Sikhs owned substantial properties in Odesa. At this time, Afghan Sikhs constructed a gurdwara in a small village close to the 7 Kilometre wholesale market in which Afghan Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus conducted business alongside local traders, as well as Turks and Arabs (Marsden 2018; Skvirskaja and Humphrey 2015).

According to Muslim traders from Afghanistan, Sikhs were the dominant traders in economic terms in the Afghan wholesale market complex in Moscow. As a result, Sikhs in Moscow were able to exert their collective influence to set prices and weaken the business of traders they regarded as being a threat to their activities. In Odesa, they ran sizeable businesses but did not exert the same level of influence as they did in Moscow. According to Muslim traders with whom I have spoken, their weaker comparative position in Odesa had important implications for the nature of the commercial strategies in the city. In Moscow, Sikhs were able to work with one another and set prices in the commodities in which they dealt at a level that ensured their domination of those markets. By contrast, in Odesa, Sikhs were required to build closer social relations with Afghan Muslim traders in the market in order to protect their businesses. A Muslim trader in Odesa told me that a Muslim Afghan friend of his in Moscow had remarked to him: 'You should be thankful that there are not so many Sikhs in Ukraine, otherwise by God you would not be able to make the profit you currently do'.

Across these post-Soviet contexts, Afghan Sikh merchants alongside their Muslim compatriots played a major role in establishing social

institutions (notably markets) that played a significant role in the commercial fortunes of the community as a whole. As we shall see below, however, Odesa and Moscow were of significance to Afghan Sikhs primarily as commercial nodes and not as centres of the cultural and social reproduction of the community. In this respect, they differed significantly from Kabul's status as a social, cultural, commercial and political centre for the life of Afghan Sikhs in the years leading up to 1992.

Nodes of Cultural and Social Reproduction of Afghan Sikh Life in Europe

In spite of their commercial successes, a sizeable number of Sikhs and Hindus working in post-Soviet settings moved to European countries and the UK in particular during the 2000s and 2010s. Southall increasingly came to play the role of a dominant node in the commercial activities of Afghan Sikhs as well as in the social and cultural reproduction of their networks. A critical mass of families in London has enabled Sikhs to establish religious institutions that are central to ensuring the discipline of traders, the building of relationships of trust between them and maintaining the cultural distinctiveness on which the networks are based. London is home to a significant number of Sikh communities from India, yet the concentrated residence of Afghan Sikh families in the city enables them to maintain distinct places of worship that are critical to the social and cultural reproduction. A concentration of Afghan Sikhs in London has also enabled the establishment of wholesale markets that are critical to the pooling of knowledge about commerce and reputation that is central to the overall functioning of the networks.

A mixture of commercial opportunities, the scope for integrating families within expanding Afghan Sikh communities in Western Europe and the difficulties of life and business in the former Soviet countries informed this migratory trajectory. Afghan Sikh merchants regularly lost significant sums of money in the former Soviet Union having been targeted by criminal gangs and state officials. Political instability and conflicts also impacted the types of business in which Sikhs in particular and Afghans more generally were active in the post-Soviet world. The annexation of Crimea and the Donbass by Russia in 2014, for example, reduced the size of businesses run by traders from Afghanistan based in Ukraine in two ways. On the one hand,

both Crimea and the Donbass constituted important markets for the commodities which Afghans imported to the country. On the other hand, the increasingly securitised border between Russia and Ukraine made it increasingly difficult if not impossible to move goods informally between the countries. Traders from Afghanistan based in both Ukraine and Russia had previously increased their profit margins and volumes of trade by circumventing customs regimes—restrictions on trade across the border resulted in diminished returns on the commodities in which they dealt. Racism directed against migrants from Asia (especially but not exclusively those living in Moscow) was a further factor that encouraged traders living in Russia to move to Europe. Traders working in Ukraine were also affected by a tighter regulatory environment given the increased importance placed by the country's leadership on closer ties with the European Union.

Concerns relating to the ability to reproduce Afghan Sikh cultural and social life in Moscow also resulted in Afghan Sikhs moving out of the former Soviet Union. Afghan Sikh businessmen often sought to relocate their families to the UK and elsewhere while they continued to run businesses in Moscow. The small size of communities in the former Soviet Union and the growing tendency for these communities to consist of men living apart from their families reduced the scope for maintaining ritual and social life for the limited Afghan Sikh families who remained there. In light of the increasingly outpost-like nature of life for Afghan Sikhs in the former Soviet Union, cities in Europe, and especially London, increasingly became centres for the social and cultural reproduction of trading networks.

Sikhs leaving the former Soviet Union moved to cities in Europe in which there were established communities of Afghan Sikhs (mostly dating to the late 1990s though Sikhs from Afghanistan have run businesses in the German cities of Hamburg and Frankfurt since the early 1980s). Cities in Europe where Sikhs from Afghanistan were concentrated increasingly came to function as sites of cultural and social reproduction. Sikhs who moved to Europe from Russia also capitalised more and more on the commercial potentials of the cities in which they settled, especially London, Hamburg and Amsterdam. These were all cities in which the trade in low-grade Chinese commodities, especially products aimed at tourists, flourished from the 2000s onwards. All of these cities were also home to older and more recent communities of Afghan Muslim refugees who sought to make a living by engaging in commerce. Repeated streams of Afghan refugees fleeing conflict in

Afghanistan and moving to cities in Europe constituted an important and expanding market for inexpensive Chinese commodities, notably inexpensive cooking ware and home items. More importantly, Afghan families bought such goods for their own homes, but men from Afghanistan also sold them in the shops and market stalls they ran in order to make a living.

Sikhs who moved to London were especially well-positioned to import inexpensive commodities at cost to the UK because of the connections they had built with Chinese factories whilst doing commerce in Russia and Ukraine; they were also knowledgeable about high volume low profit-margin trade. In London, they also used airfreight to import commodities and gain commercial advantage over other importers. Some businessmen active in the market were also said to be knowledgeable of the trade in counterfeit goods such as watches, telephones and handbags.

Wealthy Hindki traders moving to the UK from Russia and Ukraine were also able to transfer their capital to the UK, capital they invested in the purchase of commercial property, especially wholesale and retail markets. As in Moscow, so too in London, markets were not only economic institutions—they also functioned as nodes in which knowledge about commercial opportunities and the trustworthiness of traders circulated (Anderson 2023). Markets established in the UK enabled traders to work alongside one another, as well as to maintain old and build new social relations. One market in London in particular became a hub for the import of commodities from China to the UK by independent traders. The market is well-known by traders from Afghanistan living across the city and elsewhere in the UK for its high volumes of trade. Merchants who have businesses in the market are all said to be millionaires, while shops are said to be so successful that in addition to paying the property fee, traders will often pay a substantial 'good will' fee. Traders running import businesses in the market exclusively identify themselves as being Afghan; those working there estimate that 90 per cent of businesses operating are owned by Hindu and Sikh traders from Afghanistan, the remainder being run and owned by Muslims from Afghanistan.

Traders who have come to the UK from Russia and Ukraine own some of the largest businesses in the market. Afghan Sikhs living in London often bring attention to the presence of thriving Sikh communities in Russia to indicate their community's skills and successes. A Sikh trader living in London who sells motor insurance and is involved

in Afghan Sikh activism made the following remarks to me: 'There are Sikhs in Moscow and Ukraine. They are very successful because they are multi-lingual and also because they are known in the region for being trustworthy—people know that Afghan Sikhs do what they say and do not cheat. There are no Indian Sikhs working in Russia, only Afghan Sikhs'. During a trip to the wholesale market in London, a Sikh community activist who showed me around also repeatedly pointed out traders who came to London from Moscow: 'He is young but a millionaire. He speaks seven languages and is a clever entrepreneur'.

Hindki traders who made money in Moscow play an active role in the collective fortunes of Afghan Sikhs in London. A Hindu trader from Afghanistan owns the wholesale market in London. He initially rented out shops and warehouse space in the market to Afghan Sikh, Hindu and Muslim traders, many of whom then bought the commercial units outright. Owning the property in which they did business gave them a competitive advantage over other importers: it enabled them to maintain their businesses during periods of economic decline in the UK. A Sikh trader in his late twenties from Khost told me in January 2023, for instance, that he was not facing difficulties because he owned the warehouse and shop in which he was doing business in London.

Afghan Sikh merchants used profits made from trade to establish a wide range of institutions that played a critical role in the social and cultural reproduction of the networks and the range of commercial personnel required for their success. Success in trade in London, the movement to the city of wealthy traders from Russia and Ukraine and the culturally open nature of the city enabled capital to be invested in aspects of life regarded as being central to community identity. These included the construction of gurdwaras, the purchase of commercial property including wholesale and retail markets that acted as a node for commercial activities, the hiring of immigration lawyers and the organisation of ostentatious religious and familial events. By 2022, Sikhs from Afghanistan living in London had not only constructed a purpose-built gurdwara: they also ran two other gurdwaras in the city and had collectively bought properties intended for the development of two further gurdwaras. In Birmingham and Manchester, Afghan Sikhs had also purchased property upon which they planned to construct gurdwaras.

Besides London, other cities were also of significance (especially Amsterdam, Antwerp, Frankfurt and Hamburg in Europe and Toronto

and New York in North America) to the activities and identities of Afghan Sikhs. An indicator, however, of London's status as the central node is evident in the decision of Afghan Sikhs living in Europe (especially The Netherlands, Germany and Austria) to relocate their families to London, a move that was relatively straightforward up to the UK's formal exit from the European Union in January 2020. Afghan Sikhs opted to move their families and businesses to London having invested considerable energy and capital in building smaller nodes in Europe. One Sikh merchant, for instance, played a major role in establishing a gurdwara for Afghan Sikhs in the Belgium city of Antwerp, only to decide to relocate to London—a decision that other Antwerp-based Afghan Sikhs followed. Afghan Sikhs living in London have moved from a wide range of European cities including Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Hamburg and Vienna, and have chosen to shift their families and activities despite establishing successful businesses. A woman in her 60s originally from Kabul lived in Hamburg with her family between the 1980s and early 2000s. She told me why the family had decided to move to London: 'So we could all live as a family close to one another; if not, we would have had our daughters dispersed across Germany, Austria and Holland'. A combination of Brexit and attempts by the UK government to restrict the movement of refugees to the UK will likely limit the ability of the Afghan Sikhs to move to the city from other parts of the world.

Conclusion

Over the past fifty years, urban centres across Muslim Asia that were previously home to sizeable ethno-religious minority communities have become increasingly homogenous in terms of the religious adherence of their inhabitants (Green 2016). The emigration of ethno-religious minorities out of cities in Muslim Asia has arisen in the context of multiple political, social and economic transformations including economic nationalism, the rise to power of Islamist regimes hostile to non-Muslim minorities and violent conflict. By focusing on the case of Sikhs from Afghanistan, this article has sought to contribute to the wider understanding of the migratory trajectories, experiences and networks of Muslim Asia's non-Muslims during and after the end of the (first) Cold War.

The article has sought to make a contribution to the analysis of migration in the context of the Cold War and its aftermath in two specific

ways. At one level, it has sought to bring attention to the ways in which the migration of Sikhs from Afghanistan is enfolded within the history and legacies of the Cold War. Most Sikhs began leaving the country in the context of the collapse of the pro-Soviet regime and the capture of the state by mujahidin forces and leaders supported by the West. A combination of the close relationship of Sikhs to the pro-Soviet regime of the 1980s and Afghanistan's status as a location for proxy warfare between India and Pakistan made the country increasingly unsafe for Afghan Sikhs after 1992. The specific geographic trajectories of Afghan Sikh migration were also shaped by the Cold War and its ongoing legacies. Sikh traders moved their business to Uzbekistan, Russia and Ukraine in the 1990s having cultivated close connections with markets and industry in the Soviet Union in the prior decades. Furthermore, the migration of Afghan Sikhs from Ukraine in the wake of the Russian invasion of the country illustrates the ways in which the geographical contours of Sikh Afghan migration continue to be affected by the Cold War's afterlife (Kwon 2010). I have also sought to show the important role played by merchants based in Russia and Ukraine in the activities, networks and experiences of Afghan Sikhs living elsewhere, including London.

A second contribution of the article has been to analyse Afghan Sikhs' migratory trajectories in relation to their commercial strategies and dynamics rather than simply as the outcome of their ethno-religious 'identity'. The case of Afghan Sikhs provides an interesting example of a trading network that not only survived the loss of its nodal centre (Kabul) but also re-established a new one (London), raising questions about Aslanian's argument about the inherent vulnerability of monocentric networks. Movements of both people and capital arising from the Cold War have led London to become a pivotal node for Afghan Sikh networks. Initially, London functioned as a site for social and commercial reproduction, especially given the difficulties that Sikhs living in the post-Soviet world faced in engaging in rich forms of cultural life. By the 2010s, however, a combination of push and pull factors resulted in increasing numbers of Afghan Sikh merchants moving not only their families but also their businesses to the city; as a result, London came to occupy a central role in the fortunes of Afghan Sikh life globally. Over the course of three decades, Afghan Sikh merchants responded to the geopolitical forces that resulted in the collapse of Kabul as a city of central significance to their collective fortunes and identity in a manner that enabled them to establish and reproduce a multinodal monocentric network.

A consideration of Afghan Sikh mobility in the context of both the Cold War and the study of trade networks brings attention to the ways in which a focus either on South-North migration or national/international refugee policy reduces the complex forms of agency and strategy they have collectively and individually displayed over the past forty years of instability and rupture.

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NOTES

1 This study was based on data collected for the 'The Afterlives of Urban Muslim Asia: Alternative Imaginaries of Society and Polity' (grant number AH/V004999/1). Data relevant to parts of the article is available at https://protecteu.mimecast.com/s/W9kTCg2QrT1Dp3KfN0rtN?domain=doi.org.

2 Little is known about the historical trajectories of Muslim Hindkis in Afghanistan over the twentieth century.

3 See Markovits (2002) and Falzon (2004) on the globalisation of Sindhi networks after their departure from Central Asia.

4 Sikhs with knowledge of yunnani medicine living in Europe and North America continue to give medical advice to Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus from Afghanistan. Indeed, some Sikhs living outside of Afghanistan continue to own medicinal shops in Kabul which are staffed and managed by Muslim employees and business partners. Muslim customers in Kabul call Sikh shopkeepers living in the UK, Canada and elsewhere for medical advice.

5 Many in the community claim their ability to leave the country prior to the collapse of the pro-Soviet regime was a result of the efforts of President Najibullah who instructed government officials to distribute passports to Sikhs and Hindus, ensuring that officers in the Indian embassy in Kabul were in a position to issue visas.

6 See Bonotto (2020) on the legal position of Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan during this period.

7 Sikhs from the Punjab in India also travelled to Russia and former Soviet countries such as Kazakhstan and Ukraine in the 1990s. International education and the parallel use of the region as an informal route for migration to Europe drove much of such mobility. See Bochkovskaya (2017).

8 Approximately 400 Afghan Hindkis are active in UAE's import-export trade, mostly importing and re-exporting textiles.

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A Circulation Society, Reconsidered: Syrian Jewish Merchant Networks after the Exodus from Aleppo

PAUL ANDERSON

Abstract

This article analyses the durability of transregional Syrian Jewish merchant networks through the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, when the centre of these trading networks shifted several times in response to economic transformations and political pressures. Migration patterns from Aleppo following the Ottoman collapse and the exodus after 1947 call for a modified conceptualisation of centres, peripheries and circulation from dominant approaches to merchant networks and circulation societies. Centres are generally thought of as the origin points of persons and goods—namely, women, religious specialists and collateral-free credit—which circulate exclusively within the network; peripheries are nodes which merely receive and depend on centres in these respects. I add to this by analysing central or critical nodes as those where different kinds of mobility intersected to inject new vitality into the networks. Peripheries are not only dependent nodes, but vital points of refuge and transition in times of duress. Furthermore, beyond persons and credit, the circulation of aesthetic and ethical standards, in addition to name values, has helped to maintain the integrity of the network in a period of geographic reconfiguration.

***Keywords**: Syria; Jews; trading networks; Milan; Kobe; São Paulo*

Introduction

This article outlines the emergence of worldwide Syrian Jewish trading networks from the remnants of an earlier Sephardic Mediterranean-centred commercial diaspora and offers an account of their durability during turbulent decades through the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The individual and family trajectories documented here show that after they adapted to the industrial revolution and the

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attendant transformation of trading routes, Aleppine Jewish merchant networks were transformed by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the emergence of twentieth-century nationalisms, decolonisation and the Jewish exodus from Aleppo and Syria after 1947. Compared to other ethnic trading networks—such as the Armenians and Western Sephardim in the early modern period and the Sindhis and Baghdadi Jews in the long nineteenth century—what is distinctive about Syrian Jewish merchants, who were mainly of Aleppine origin, in the twentieth century is the number of times their geographic hub shifted: from Aleppo to Aleppo and Beirut; then from Aleppo and Beirut to Beirut and Milan; and from Beirut and Milan to Buenos Aires, São Paulo and New York, with New York now the leading demographic and cultural-ideological centre of the worldwide networks.

What accounts for the resilience of trading networks amid such disruption? Studies of 'trading diasporas' have highlighted the significance of trust rooted in shared ethnicity, religion and kinship, and the accountability mechanisms that these afford (Curtin 1984). Cautioning against taking ethnicity for granted, some have stressed the effect of hostile host environments in reproducing intra-group solidarity, economic specialisation and ethnic consciousness among 'middlemen minorities' (Bonacich 1973). Others have focused on the structure of networks, understood as channels of circulation (Aslanian 2014; Markovits 2000). Analyses of 'circulation societies' (Markovits 2000) and 'mobile societies' (Ho 2017; Marsden 2021) understand trading networks as translocal societies constituted by multiple kinds of circulation. Some of these are exclusive to the network and define its cohesiveness. For example, Markovits (2000) argues that while commodities circulate both within and beyond an ethnic network, other goods and persons stay within it, and these define a relationship between central and peripheral nodes. Centres are those nodes which are the source of persons and goods that circulate exclusively within the network: women, religious specialists and collateral-free credit. Because these are necessary for the social and cultural reproduction of the network and determine its economic vitality, the preservation of the centre is essential for the durability of the network through time. Accordingly, some have argued that the ability of a network to withstand turbulence can be enhanced by having multiple centres: Aslanian (2014) has argued that this explains why the early modern Western Sephardim were able to survive the loss of Iberia, but the Armenian New Julfan network dissipated after the loss of New Julfa in Iran.

The rapidly shifting configuration of Syrian Jewish merchant networks through the twentieth century also calls for some modifications to this notion of a circulation society, which was developed from studies of trading networks that enjoyed a relatively stable geographic configuration over a period of time. The Syrian Jewish experience from the early twentieth century until the present day—especially their rapid emigration and the emergence of a sequence of new centres after the Ottoman collapse and partition of Palestine—calls for a different conceptualisation of centres, peripheries and circulation. In brief, I propose that during a period of turbulence, the central or critical nodes are those where different kinds of mobility interact to inject new vitality into the network. Peripheries are vital points of refuge and transition in times of duress. Moreover, I suggest that the circulation of aesthetic and ethical standards, along with name values, are among the exclusive forms of circulation which help to maintain the integrity of the network during periods of geographic reconfiguration.

Scholarly literature on the Syrian Jewish diaspora tends to focus on the history of settlement or dynamics of cultural production and ethnic persistence in particular locales, rather than the translocal structure of the wider network.[1] This article synthesises elements of this secondary literature and draws on primary sources to document and theorise the translocal nature of the network and relationship between nodes: for example, how Milan was related to Beirut, Beirut to Latin America and East Asia to New York. Methodologically, it identifies the trajectories of a series of connected merchants and merchant families, tracing their trading connections and mobilities through time. To do so, it uses interviews I conducted with Syrian Jewish merchants in New York in 2023; memoirs and biographies of Syrian Jewish traders published over the last ten years; transcripts of interviews with merchants conducted in 1983 by Joseph Sutton, author and member of the community, and published in Sutton (1988); online blogs and archives compiled by members of the community;[2] and immigration databases and public records.[3] I used genealogy databases[4] to cross-reference between these sources and identify connections between individuals documented in them. I have used pseudonyms to refer to interviewees and their direct relatives, but otherwise have reproduced the names of individuals where they already appear in publicly available sources.[5]

From a Mediterranean Centre to a Worldwide Network

By the 1700s, Aleppo was the third largest city in the Ottoman Empire—an entrepot on the Silk Route connecting trading posts across Eurasia. Alongside Muslim Ottomans, its merchants included Armenians, Greeks, Christian Arabs, Europeans and Jews from Venice and Livorno. After the expulsion of Jews from Iberia in the 1490s, a network of Sephardic entrepreneurial elites had taken shape around the Mediterranean, with Livorno becoming an important centre of Europe-Middle East trade from the 1600s. As a node in these Mediterranean Sephardic networks, Aleppo's Jewish community became a mixture of descendants of Iberian emigres, Italian merchants who arrived in the 1700s ('Francos') and native Middle Easterners with ancient roots in the region (Marcus 1989). This community was to play a significant role in the city's commercial connections, both as traders and financiers, with commerce reportedly stopping on Jewish holidays by the late eighteenth century (Laskier and Simon 2002). European firms often relied on Jews as agents; in 1682, the French had granted protection to Jewish merchants in Aleppo, and in the 1800s, Britain registered many Jews as its own protected subjects as capitulation treaties became a means for European powers to extend influence in Ottoman lands (Collins and Bierbrier 2008).

The centuries-old Sephardic Mediterranean-centred trading network declined in importance as the Ottoman empire weakened and global trade shifted away from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic (Laskier and Simon 2002). However, leading families in Aleppo adapted to the opportunities offered by the industrial revolution. Members of the Silvera family, who had moved to Aleppo from Livorno in the 1700s, were key actors in the export of cotton from Manchester to the Middle East in the nineteenth century (Collins and Bierbrier 2008). As the centre of industrial revolution and cotton trade, Manchester attracted merchant capital and immigration, including from Sephardim who exported the city's high quality and cheap textiles to the Middle East and beyond, often to compatriots and co-religionists. From the 1860s to the 1920s, Syrians—and Aleppines in particular—came to dominate the Sephardic community in Manchester and established outposts in the Americas and Caribbean (Haiti and West Indies). From one branch of the Silvera family which settled in Manchester in the 1880s, three children subsequently settled in Haiti and three in Buenos Aires (in the 1930s and 1940s) (Collins and Bierbrier 2008). Joseph Sutton's

interviews show that another well-known merchant, Ezra Sitt, moved from Aleppo to New York City in 1892 and made a name for himself by shipping Manchester textiles to Aleppine Jews in Buenos Aires, Colombia, Chile, Peru and Haiti (Sutton 1988).

As the industrial revolution and the shift in trade routes accelerated by the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 ended Aleppo's predominance as a caravan city between Asia and Europe, many emigrated to the growing cities of Beirut, Cairo and Alexandria. Others went further afield in search of economic opportunity; from the 1880s and through the first half of the twentieth century, Syrians emigrated to New York, Latin America and the Philippines. Emerging nationalisms in the Middle East also encouraged emigration from the region in the early twentieth century; for example, the Young Turks ended exemption from conscription for minorities including Jews in 1908 and the erecting of new state borders after the First World War obstructed trade (Laskier and Simon 2002). While elite merchants travelled in search of new sites of investment for their capital, most who moved beyond Europe had considerably less means and found work either as labourers or as peddlers. Through both kinds of economic mobility, global networks of Aleppine Jews took shape in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Initially, many emigres went with the intention to sojourn and return, but then settled as they grew prosperous (Harel 1998). Even settled communities tended to maintain Aleppine or Damascene identities; they were connected to Aleppo and other nodes of Syrian settlement through continuing forms of circulation: commerce, new arrivals and the movement of religious specialists (ibid).

After 1948, some Jews remained inside Syria, as successive regimes prohibited emigration until 1992 and sequestered the property of those who left. By the mid-1950s, rapidly industrialising economies in Latin America drew Syrian Jewish elites to booming cities. Some Syrian Jews moved between cities in the Americas—entrepreneurs seeking to make their fortunes or expand existing businesses and rabbis and religious functionaries circulating between nodes as openings arose in different locales. Such mobility was observable among all social classes but was easier for the elites. Eduard Farhi, born in 1938, was from a well-known Damascene family, members of whom were community presidents in Beirut and Rio de Janeiro (see interview in Sutton 1988: 208). He moved from Aleppo to Beirut in 1955, where he secured a job with a textile merchant on the strength of his family name, then to Milan and shortly afterwards São Paulo. After his business of selling

clothes and furniture to homes via commission brokers failed in Brazil, he tried to establish businesses in various other nodes of the Syrian Jewish merchant network, such as in New York, Panama and Mexico City. While these attempts did not bear fruit, he supported himself by taking non-rabbinical leadership positions in synagogues in São Paulo, Mexico City and later New York. His example shows that the value—the recognisability and cachet—of family names could circulate between Damascus, Beirut and Latin America.

Through the twentieth century, Brooklyn in New York became the site of the largest concentration of Syrian Jews in the world—today numbering perhaps around 60,000—who maintained a distinct cultural identity from the wider society (Shelemay 1998, Zenner 2000). The first arrivals in the 1890s were mainly peddlers, but after 1948, New York city became a destination of choice for wealthier emigres. A vibrant community infrastructure developed through the twentieth century, including several synagogues, mutual aid societies, a Sephardic Community Centre and a news website. Many Syrian Jews maintained a pattern of residential clustering in Brooklyn, as well as in Deal, New Jersey, which began and still serves as a vacation community alongside Aventura in Florida. Since the late twentieth century, some have gone into the professions, but the community retains an occupational clustering in commerce, mainly in retail, with some in import-export, especially textiles, electronics and tourist goods. Many have become professional investors in real estate. New York City can be seen as a cultural-ideological centre as well as a demographic one: it is the site of heritage organisations which cater to Syrian Jews mainly in New York but also beyond the US. The Sephardic Heritage Foundation was founded in the 1970s to produce Aleppine rite prayer books and Syrian Jewish songs (*pizmonim*) for Syrian communities in the US, Mexico, central and south America, Europe and Asia. The Sephardic Heritage Project, founded in 2004, has compiled marriage and circumcision records of the worldwide Syrian Jewish community; furthermore, the Sephardic Heritage Museum, founded in 2005, funds and organises efforts to preserve Syrian Jewish heritage in the Middle East.

Having sketched some of the commercial and migratory geographies that took shape during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I now introduce a series of merchant biographies, in order to identify the institutions, practices and forms of circulation that enabled merchant networks to cohere through time.

Merchant Biographies

Moise D.[6]

Abraham D. was a partner in a leading Jewish firm in Aleppo, which imported textiles mainly from Manchester in the early twentieth century. He maintained a friendship with merchants from the Silvera family, to whom the D. family were also related by marriage. Abraham's two eldest sons went into the family business, which went on to enjoy great commercial success in the First World War through their access to textiles in a time of shortage. A third son, Moise, who was born around the turn of the century, did not follow his brothers into the family firm, but instead partnered with his cousin in money exchange, banking and the gold trade. Moise made money during the First World War by selling Turkish currency which could be purchased at a 50 per cent discount in Aleppo for gold in Istanbul where it still commanded confidence. Between 1916 and 1920, he moved between Aleppo and Cairo on business; he then moved to Jerusalem to sell gold (1920-23); and to Istanbul to sell discounted notes (i.e., offering short-term loans) as a private banker (1923-28). In 1927, he married into another wealthy banking family. Moise returned to Aleppo where he invested the deposits of Turkish livestock traders, issuing checks for them through his connections in Istanbul (1928-38). He also served as a member of the Jewish community's leadership committee. Next, he moved to Beirut (1938-53) where he traded gold, buying gold from London and the United States and selling to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and later to Hong Kong, Indonesia and Indo-China. Profits in the international gold trade in Beirut peaked in 1948-49, when he made 15 per cent per transaction.

In Beirut as in Aleppo, Moise was appointed to the leadership committee of the Jewish community. After 1947, he became involved in organising the clandestine passage of Jews out of Aleppo to Beirut and then Israel. As this role exposed him to growing tensions with the Lebanese authorities, he moved to Milan in 1953, where he met a Silvera whose father had known his father in Aleppo. He soon moved on via São Paulo to Buenos Aires, where one of his brothers had settled and where Syrians and Aleppines dominated the Sephardi community. Early Syrian Jewish arrivals there had built factories, established an Aleppine community and synagogue and supported new arrivals by giving them goods to sell. Consulted about a suitable rabbi for

the community, he recommended an Aleppine rabbi who had fled to Beirut and whom he knew personally. The rabbi was duly appointed in Buenos Aires, and Moise credited him with bringing many back to observance of the Sabbath. Moise commented in an interview with Joseph Sutton in 1982 that wherever they settled, even the Far East, Aleppine Jews were known for their religiosity, and Buenos Aires was second in religiosity to New York: 'the simha party for close friends is not held on Saturday mornings as in Brooklyn'. Moise sent his three sons to the Jewish school at Brighton, Whittingehame College, between 1948 and 1967.

Abraham D.[7]

Moise's brother Raffoul went into the family textile business. He married Renee L. in Aleppo. Their three sons, born in 1912, 1914 and 1916, all went into the import-export business. In 1936, the eldest son Abraham travelled from the family base in Aleppo to Kobe in Japan, where he stayed for five years, also travelling to Shanghai, Hong Kong and India to export textiles. He purchased piece goods and sold them to the family firm in Aleppo, which sold them to merchants in Aleppo and across the Middle East. He also imported textile piece goods in partnership with a Muslim businessman based in Khan al-Gumruk in Aleppo and represented a large Italian firm of weavers. Abraham returned to Aleppo in 1941. His first son, Raffoul, was born there in 1944. Raffoul recalled that on 1 December 1947, two days after the UN announced the partition of Palestine, a Muslim mob came to the Jewish quarter of Jamiliyyeh where the family lived, burning synagogues, schools, social centres and Jewish shops. Two days later, the family left, having sold what possessions they could. Ninety per cent of Abraham's money was already outside Syria. He joined his brothers in Hong Kong, where the three of them had business, before moving to Milan for six years (at least one of his brothers also moved his main residence to Milan).

In 1954, Abraham moved to São Paulo as a permanent resident. His immigration card declared his nationality as Iranian. His brothers had visited São Paulo earlier that year, on documents declaring Panamanian and Argentinian nationality respectively. After 1948, it was usually not possible for Jews to renew their Syrian travel documents, and it was not uncommon for those with means to acquire passports from other countries, often central American[8] and Iran (Gross 2022).[9] In Brazil, Abraham traded chemicals and metals, which were in heavy

demand as Brazil rapidly modernised and the region around São Paulo turned from agriculture to manufacturing. His son recalled that Abraham was with Edmond Safra (who had also moved from Milan to São Paulo at about the same time) and was the head of the Syrian community in São Paolo, where he established a synagogue, a youth movement and after-school activities such as learning Hebrew. He also recalled that the family integrated with Jewish communities, both Ashkenazi and Sephardi. A biography of Edmond Safra also reports that Syrian Jews joined a Greek-Turkish Sephardic synagogue in São Paolo. In 1958, Araham D. convened a wealthy committee to expand it under an Aleppine rabbi. The first Jewish immigrants from Syria had arrived in Brazil several decades earlier, but those who arrived in the 1950s formed the bulk of the community and tended to bring wealth and modern education acquired in the French Alliance Israelite schools. Many had also experienced the confiscation of their wealth and turned to each other for support (Gross 2022). One of Abraham's distant cousins who left Aleppo for São Paulo in 1955, and a great nephew of Moise D's business partner, suffered the confiscation of family wealth on leaving Syria. He went on to become a prominent Brazilian real estate developer and philanthropist.

Syrian Jewish merchants who had settled in Brazil before the 1950s had been active in the textile trade, importing linens from England and silks from France (Sutton 1988). Between 1945 and 1960, Brazil's textile manufacturing sector was expanding rapidly, and Abraham's eldest son Raffoul set up a factory in São Paolo. However, the business did not succeed, and Raffoul instead took a consignment of precious stones from a Syrian Jewish friend, whose father had moved from Damascus to Beirut during the mandate period and then onto Antwerp in the 1950s where he had established a diamond trading business. In Antwerp, the founder's sons joined the firm and sought to expand its global reach through the 1960s and 1970s. They supplied Raffoul who went on to become wholesaler and retailer of diamonds, with customers in Brazil, Argentina, France, Israel and the United States. Raffoul met his wife in São Paulo—an Aleppine Jew born in Beirut who immigrated to Brazil with Iranian travel documents in the 1960s. Like most Syrian Jews, the two assimilated linguistically, learning Portuguese—they spoke Arabic at home, but it had more or less died out by the third generation. The family moved their main residence from São Paulo to New York City in the 1990s, where they continued to trade gemstones from the diamond district in Manhattan. From there, Raffoul commented to me

that unlike Egyptians, few Aleppine Jews in Brazil intermarried with non-Jews. But he would permit his grandchildren to marry European Jews—it was good, as in Brazil, not to be culturally insular.

Rahmo Sassoon[10]

When Abraham D. travelled from Aleppo to Kobe in Japan in 1936, he arrived with another young man born in Aleppo in 1912: Rahmo Sassoon. A representative of a large Italian firm of weavers, Sassoon had studied at the Alliance school in Aleppo. His brother-in-law, an agent for Manchester textile merchants, was already in Kobe. Rahmo sojourned as an independent trader in Kobe between 1936 and 1964, before moving to New York. During this period, he was a leading figure in the Jewish community of Kobe, playing a key role in establishing a Sephardic synagogue. According to some accounts, a large building rented by Sassoon was used as a synagogue in 1939, when Sassoon named it 'Ohel Shelomoh' and took over the Torah scrolls held by Isaac Antaki. Others report that Rahmo's furniture warehouse was converted into a synagogue named Ohel Shelomo between 1945 and 1948. Sassoon's leadership role included liaising with the Japanese government on behalf of the Jews in Kobe. He was a member of a Sephardic committee formed to help Polish Jews who were fleeing the Nazis and arriving in Japan via Siberia in 1940. He played this role alongside Nissim Tawil, a textile exporter from Aleppo who became the rabbi and cantor of the Sephardic synagogue. Sassoon's family home in Kobe later hosted many Jewish businessmen who visited Japan after the Second World War.

In 1949, Rahmo Sassoon went to Milan to find a Syrian Jewish bride (Gross 2022). He married Renee, a member of the Silvera family whose father had moved from Aleppo to Milan (Sassoon's own mother also moved to Milan). The two married in Italy in 1951 before returning together to Kobe. During his stay in Milan, Rahmo met Edmond Safra, who asked him for business associates in Shanghai, Japan and Bangkok, agreeing to split the commissions equally between them. After moving to Milan, Edmond Safra had continued to arbitrage gold between Europe and East Asia, with a consortium of Syrian Jewish businessmen, using a family member as a receiving agent in East Asia. But after gold prices harmonised and arbitrage was no longer possible, his focus in East Asia turned to trade finance, where he sought to access Syrian Jewish customers. He and Rahmo Sassoon formed a business partnership, financing exports from Shanghai, Japan and

Bangkok. They remained partners for decades (ibid). In 1956, Rahmo travelled with Renee from Kobe to São Paolo, Buenos Aires and New York, declaring his profession as 'businessman' on his arrival in Brazil. In 1968, after they had moved their main residence to New York, Rahmo visited São Paulo where he declared his profession as 'banker' and stayed at an apartment on Avenida Paulista—a few doors down from where Edmond Safra had lived ten years earlier. Between 1948 and 1954, after his Syrian travel documents had become invalid, Rahmo travelled on a UN document and on passports from Central America; he then acquired an Israeli passport 'under mysterious circumstances'[11]—Brazilian immigration records show that it was issued in 1955 citing Tel Aviv as a place of birth—which he used until he became a US citizen in the 1990s.

Ezra and Lucy Choueke[12]

Aleppine Jews in Kobe were a small community of perhaps thirty families, but they were a regionally and globally connected one. They belonged to a global network of Aleppines—based in Aleppo, Beirut, Manchester, Milan, Buenos Aires and New York—which converged on Kobe, as well as Shanghai and Hong Kong, as East Asia became a source of high-quality textiles undercutting European products in the 1930s. Most were not as wealthy as the D. family and the Sassoons, but came with relatively modest resources of their own and intended to return to Syria once they had accumulated some reserves. Another member of the same prayer group (*minyan*) in Kobe as Rahmo Sassoon was Ezra Choueke. In Aleppo, Choueke had been a travelling salesman through Syria, employed by a Christian importer of textiles. In 1935, his employer sent him to Kobe, where he established himself both as a commercial agent and as a trader on his own account. Ezra and his Aleppine-born wife Polissa (known as Lucy) exported cotton sheeting, shirting, blends and jacquards. They expanded their network of customers through her brothers in Palestine and through Syrian Jewish contacts in Brooklyn, to whom they shipped tablecloths, shoes and clothing accessories. They bought up excess goods taking up warehouse space in Japan—clothing and fabrics from cancelled orders and wastage allowances from large orders from the US which could be sold in markets outside the US, such as Panama and Latin America where there was a Syrian diaspora.

In 1941, the United States embargoed international trade with Japan. Lucy turned to trading currency and food on the black market. The

couple started exporting again after 1945 as US demand grew for Japanese goods, with Ezra shipping goods to two Syrian Jewish importers in New York and to Jewish customers who had moved from the Middle East to Italy. While Ezra focused on radios and electronics, his wife exported pearls and jewellery. They were able to put the Syrian Jewish owners of a large electronic firm in Mexico in touch with Japanese suppliers, including a forerunner of Panasonic. After 1947, Lucy's brother Rafoul used his record store in Aleppo—for which he sourced goods in Beirut—as a front for smuggling Jews out of Syria. He later moved to Hong Kong where he worked as a buying agent, shipping clothes, shoes and accessories to customers whom he had smuggled out, and to others to whom they had recommended him. Lucy's other brother David had been a commercial agent in East Asia since 1933, exporting cotton, including from Kobe (where he was a competitor to Ezra), and then based himself in Hong Kong. When Rafoul joined him in Hong Kong, he moved to Milan to look for a Syrian Jewish bride. Rafoul expanded the business, exporting Chinese goods around the world.

In the 1970s, many import agents moved from Kobe to China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Korea. Ezra and Lucy stayed in Kobe but sourced goods from China, attending the Canton Fair in 1978, and banked in Hong Kong. They thought of moving to Brooklyn for the education and marriage of their children; however, they stayed in Kobe while their children moved to the United States and Mexico where they expanded the family's trading business, working in jewellery, electronics and fashion. The family went on to supply Target and Walmart, major US chains. When Ezra and Lucy retired as commercial agents, they transferred their customers to Albert Hamway, a religious member of the Jewish community. Albert Hamway and his daughter Gail had arrived in Kobe from New York in 1957. Gail Hamway described their family as the 'only Orthodox' family in Kobe; her father had kosher food shipped in from New York,[13] and he presided over synagogue services, ensuring that the prayers mostly followed the Aleppine rite, which appealed to the Syrian majority. He put a plaque at the port, inviting any Jew who needed a meal to call him, and in that way came to host several visiting businessmen. In 1968-69, when the Kobe community raised money to replace Rahmo Sassoon's old warehouse with a more solidly constructed synagogue, Albert Hamway instructed the architect to design it so that it resembled the Shaare Zion synagogue in Brooklyn.[14] Shortly after Ezra and Lucy transferred their customers to him on their retirement, he decided to leave Japan and return to New

York. They then introduced their customers to a Muslim commercial agent and a good friend of theirs in Kobe—a move which surprised some of their customers initially.

Mike Sutton

According to a memoir written by his daughter, Claudette Sutton (2014), Mike Sutton travelled from Aleppo to China in 1941 at the age of 19, sent by his importer father Selim who feared the rise of Arab nationalism and the decline of Jewish fortunes in Aleppo. Selim preferred his sons to go into the medical professions rather than commerce and saw Shanghai as a way station for his sons to get to the US, for which there was a long wait for visas. Sutton was employed in China by Selim's brothers, who were importers and US citizens based in New York with an export office in Shanghai, for hand-embroidered linens managed by a Syrian Jew from Brooklyn. International trade was shut down during the war, after which Mike resumed travelling within China and to Manila, Hong Kong and trading posts in Japan, buying tablecloths, linens and pillowcases for the US market. He and his friends did not experience an 'enveloping' Syrian Jewish community of their own in Shanghai, but socialised mainly within their own families and were friends with Christian as well as Jewish Syrians and Lebanese. Cultural and social boundaries were more fluid in Shanghai than he had known in Aleppo; for example, he had a Russian Orthodox girlfriend. In 1947, Mike Sutton achieved his goal of entry to the US. He settled in a culturally Americanised suburb of Washington, where he took over his father-in-law's retail business in children's clothes. He attributed his ability to live away from the centre of Syrian Jewish life in Brooklyn to his experience of living independently from family and community in the Shanghai trading post.

Analysis: The Reconfiguration of Syrian Jewish Trading Networks

These biographies show that some Aleppine Jews leaving the Middle East in the first half of the twentieth century sojourned in East and South East Asian trading ports, especially from the 1930s, when high-quality East Asian textiles began to rival more expensive European ones. Those who travelled operated either as independent businessmen or as agents for their family firms in Aleppo, Milan, Manchester and New York. Ezra Sitt, the well-known Syrian merchant mentioned above

who moved from Aleppo to New York city in 1892, imported embroidered tableware and shoelaces from Japan, which he sourced through an Aleppine Jewish agent (Sutton 1998). Syrian Jews operating in East Asia frequently travelled between nodes—Kobe, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore, Manila and later Bangkok—to procure supplies for their customers; some also sojourned for a few years in one node before moving to another. For example, Sutton's interviews show that Isaac Djemal, born in Aleppo in 1912, travelled to Kobe where he resided from 1936-38, trading textiles with his brothers who lived in Syria and Lebanon. After Kobe, commerce took him to Shanghai (1938-41) and then—when the Japanese seized Shanghai in 1941 and confined many Jews to the ghetto of Hongkou—he moved to Thailand (Sutton 1988). Because each settlement was integrated into wider regional networks, residents were able to manage political turbulence by cultivating alternative bases which they could fall back on if they were forced to move (Clarence-Smith 2004).

The biographies also suggest that until the 1940s, Aleppo continued to function as a regional distribution centre for textiles imported from Manchester, Milan and East Asia, for merchants visiting from across the Middle East (see Choueke 2021). However, Moise D.'s trajectory points to the significance of Beirut as a node of elite Syrian Jewish mobilities. In the interwar period, Beirut developed infrastructures for the Jewish community: a newspaper, a bank run by Edmond Safra (a scion of an Aleppine Jewish banking dynasty), a new synagogue which opened in 1920, a community council funded by an obligatory tax—with committees for poverty relief and education and a burial society, holiday resorts in the mountains at Aley and Bamdoun and connections between community elites and Lebanese politicians (Gross 2022, Tomer 2012). After the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, the Jewish population of Beirut rose significantly, as Jews flocked in from Syria and Iraq; the city became a node for organising the clandestine passage of Jews out of Syria. Eventually, the political tensions between Arab nationalism and Zionism reached Beirut too: through the 1950s, many elite Jewish merchants left for Milan and cities in Latin America.

Milan attracted many, including Moise D. and his brothers, Abraham D. and Rahmo Sassoon. Visas were fairly easily arranged for those leaving Beirut, and by 1947 its textile and car industries were reopening and required trade financing; its jewellery industry also made the city a centre for gold trading (Gross 2022). Edmond Safra set up a gold trading operation supplying European gold to markets in the Middle

East (Lebanon and Kuwait), India and the Far East (ibid). Some Syrian Jewish families had established a presence in the city in the 1920s, joining a predominantly Ashkenazi community that had been established in 1866, and in some cases introduced wealthy new arrivals to Italian Jewish families. For a few years, from 1947 to the mid-1950s, Milan was an important commercial and community hub for Syrian Jewish business families. Around a thousand Middle Eastern Jews arrived in the city, perhaps doubling the Sephardic population; in 1954, Syrian Jews led the establishment of a Sephardic prayer room in the main synagogue (Rossetto 2022). Traders based in East Asia visited the city to find a wife. Some, during their visits, formed business partnerships with Aleppine Jewish financiers based in Europe who were seeking to fund trading enterprises in East Asia (see Gross 2022). Several Milan-based merchants, such as Moise D., sent their children to the Jewish Whittingehame College in Brighton, which attracted elite families fleeing the Middle East after 1948, until it closed in 1967.

Peripheries as Stabilising Forces

The durability of Aleppo's Jewish trading networks through the twentieth century was facilitated by the staged nature of Aleppo's decline as a Jewish centre, as it faced first an economic challenge from the late nineteenth century and then a political one in the 1940s. This chronology enabled an alternative centre to develop in Beirut in the interwar period. Yet Beirut's pre-eminence was also short-lived, as economic changes—the decline of gold-trading opportunities between Europe and East Asia—and rising political tensions connected to the partition of Palestine led to an emigration of Jewish business elites from Beirut after the Second World War and through the 1950s. Despite the rapid decline of Beirut as a centre, the trading network did not dissipate. Rather, multiple new centres developed in what had previously been peripheries: Milan, Buenos Aires, São Paolo and New York. This suggests that any account of the durability of the trading network should acknowledge not simply the stability of centres, but the role of peripheries in providing stability in times of turbulence. Peripheral nodes in East Asia and South East Asia provided a point of refuge for capital and people who were politically precarious, as in Abraham D's case. The mix of cooperation and competition between family members described by Ezra Choueke in Kobe and Hong Kong illustrates the dual function of these locations as both commercial nodes and sites of

refuge. East Asian cities could also, as in Mike Sutton's case, serve as way stations to more desirable locales with more stringent immigration controls, such as New York, which was to become the dominant centre of the whole network (Sutton 2014). Finally, East Asian ports served as fall-back bases and alternative supply nodes, providing flexibility for the wider network, as in the case of Isaac Djemal and New York-based merchants who invested in Manila. In England, Brighton and Haywards Heath—sites of the Jewish Whittingehame College between the 1930s and 1967—also served as points of refuge and cultural preservation, enabling Jewish identity to be transmitted intergenerationally among Sephardi families leaving the Middle East. The durability of the network depended in part on merchants' strategies of deploying capital and people in multiple peripheries prior to and in response to shocks.

Centres: Where Different Types of Circulation Interact

Peripheries could also develop into new centres, vital to the reproduction of the network as a whole; this was the case in Beirut, Milan, Buenos Aires, São Paulo and New York. The economic, political and historical context of each node helps to explain why particular peripheral nodes were able to develop into new centres. Milan's textile and jewellery industries recovered quickly after the Second World War, offering opportunities for gold and textile traders, visas were offered to Beiruti Jews, and the city already had a small Sephardic merchant community with connections to wider Italian Jewish peers, enabling it to become a centre for elite reproduction. Latin America, Argentina and especially Brazil were industrialising rapidly after the Second World War and offered economic opportunities for those with capital and trading skills. Visas were accessible to wealthy Sephardim, and key cities already had a demographic base of Syrian Jewish petty traders and some importers. Ongoing Syrian Jewish migration to New York since the late nineteenth century had also established a base community there, and after the Second World War, the city was increasingly attractive as a centre of global finance and trade.

From the perspective of circulation societies, the question is not just why particular locales flourished, but how the network as a whole retained its integrity: what kinds of circulation connected the locales and defined them as nodes of a translocal Syrian Jewish network. An account of mobilities and trading connections through time helps illuminate the role that particular locales played vis-à-vis the wider network. Beirut

and Milan, peripheries to Aleppo at the turn of the twentieth century, became temporary centres of finance, marriage and transit in the inter-war and post war periods. As such, they enabled merchant networks to expand commercially, reproduce themselves socially and reconfigure themselves geographically. They became centres, temporarily, in the sense of organising the dynamics of the wider network. They were able to do this because they were nodes of multiple kinds of circulation which intertwined in a way that injected new vitality—more dynamic and expansive forms of circulation—into the wider network. For a few years after the Second World War, Milan became a place where Syrian Jewish businessmen came to look for a wife; Rahmo Sassoon and David Choueke visited Milan from Kobe and Hong Kong respectively in the late 1940s. It was also a centre for gold trading between Europe and East Asia, which Edmond Safra and his consortium of Syrian Jewish bankers developed. And it was a transit hub between the Middle East and Latin America for those fleeing the Middle East—including the gold trader Moise D. who moved there from Beirut after being exposed to mounting political risk. These various forms of mobility and circulation could interact with productive results. For example, Edmond Safra (relocating his gold trading operations) and Rahmo Sassoon (seeking a bride) were introduced to one another and formed a business partnership which lasted for decades, bringing trade financing to many Syrian Jews in East Asia and South East Asia. Networks formed and expanded through the intersection of multiple kinds of mobility. Another example is Rafoul Choueke who, like Moise D., was an agent in Beirut organising the clandestine emigration of Jews from Syria. He later became a commercial agent in East Asia for some of the merchants whom he had smuggled out and for their wider network to whom they recommended him. Fundamental to the creation of this wider network was the status of Beirut as a centre both of commerce (where Choueke sourced goods from France for import into Syria) and of clandestine emigration. Since mobilities connected to marriage and clandestine emigration were tied to Syrian Jewish identity, their interaction with trade also served to reinforce the cohesion of the commercial network.

Communal Institutions: Circulating and 'Boosting' Translocal Values

In both peripheral and central nodes, business elites financed or supported the establishment or development of communal institutions—especially synagogues. Rahmo Sassoon played this role in Kobe, and

Abraham D. did so in São Paulo with Edmond Safra and others. In Milan, a separate Sephardic prayer room was established after Syrian elites arrived in larger numbers after 1947. Similar institutions were established in most places where Syrian Jews settled. Such institutions can enable ethnic or religious persistence in a specific locale (Zenner 2000), and the vigour of their leadership can determine the degree to which communities in particular locales maintain their ethnic and religious identities and boundaries (Milkewitz 1991). These institutions also played a role in enabling translocal circulations between nodes. In cities in the Americas where Syrian communities were large enough, they often sought to appoint rabbis from notable lineages. They also tended to promote endogamy—officially among Jews, but also cultural-ethnic endogamy among Syrian or even Aleppine Jews. The value of recognisably Syrian or Aleppine names was therefore reproduced. As these names were recognisable in any nodes of the Syrian Jewish global network, they had a value—a name value—that circulated exclusively within the network. Marriages arranged in Milan in the 1940s and 1950s, whose parties subsequently circulated to other nodes, also reproduced the value of elite names within the wider network.

Donations and leadership roles in synagogues and associated institutions also reproduced the name values of elites. Syrian synagogues, for example in Manchester and New York, display the names and sometimes images of donors and religious and community leaders. Such name values moved between institutions, as they were created in a communal institution in one locale and recognised in another. In Damascus, Farhi's name coded prestige linked to wealth and community leadership. The value of the Farhi name was recreated in Beirut (as community president); it was recognised in shops there (enabling Eduardo Farhi to find a job) and subsequently recognised in synagogues in south, central and north America, where Eduardo took a series of positions. Abraham D. made a name as a community founder in São Paulo—a fact invoked by his grandson on the website of his real estate business in Tel Aviv 70 years later in order to establish the credentials of his company. In New York in 2023, his uncle Raffoul D. invoked the name of his cousin in São Paolo and business partner in Antwerp as well-known philanthropists who had funded the restoration of synagogues there.

Conclusion: Circulation Societies Reconsidered

The circulation of name values from older, dying centres in the Mediterranean to newly emerging centres in the Americas and their peripheries in East Asia and Israel enabled the network to maintain its coherence through the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Synagogues, community centres and endogamous match-making practices did not only provide for ethnic persistence in discrete locales—the dominant approach to them in the literature; by reproducing values that circulated translocally, they also acted as nodes in a wider global network. From a mobile rather than sedentary perspective on social institutions, name values themselves were not created only by local institutions, but also by wider processes of circulation. The Farhi name had value in Latin America not just because a Farhi was community president in Rio de Janeiro, but because the name had travelled and was known to have travelled from Damascus to Beirut to Latin America, and because it had long circulated between nodes of a far-flung Syrian Jewish merchant network. The name embodied the translocality of the wider 'community', and in this sense constituted 'the community' as a cohesive, expansive entity. Eli Hedaya, interviewed by Joseph Sutton in 1983, recalled that Ezra Sitt had been 'known over the whole Syrian world—Manchester, Buenos Aires, etc., in Syrian commerce' (Sutton 1988: 264). The value of Sitt's name was constituted in part through its circulation over large distances, reflecting Nancy Munn's (1992) analysis of the relationship between value and movement through space-time. The 'Syrian world', both as a structure of circulation and as a concept available to people's imagination, was co-constituted in the early twentieth century with the name of Ezra Sitt and other prominent mobile merchants.

Alongside merchants' reputations, another aspect that circulated within the network, through time and space, were inter-familial ties. Moise D. recalled that in Milan he had become friends with a Silvera whose father had been friends with his father in Aleppo. I encountered similar reflections among Syrian and Middle Eastern Jews in New York in 2023: 'I knew him [at Whittingehame College] in Brighton, and our sons have become business partners here in New York', or 'my father knew him in Syria, and my son became friends with his grandson in New York'. As with reputations, inter-familial relationships could circulate through space and time, and their translocal properties were central to how individuals constructed

the value of such relationships. Even demographically minor or transitory nodes—such as Whittingehame College in Brighton from the 1930s to 1967, or the marriage hub in Milan during the late 1940s and 1950s—take on a new significance when the network is considered as a structure through which name values and inter-familial relationships circulated.

In addition to name value and inter-familial relationships, ethical and aesthetic standards and templates also circulated exclusively within the network, maintaining its coherence as it was reconfigured geographically in a time of turbulence. Aesthetic templates circulated through the network via synagogues. For example, the establishment of separate Syrian synagogues was often connected to a preference for the Aleppine style of prayer and Torah recitation, and a foundation was established in New York in the 1970s to publish prayer books according to the Aleppine rite and distribute them in Latin America, Europe and Asia as well as North America. When the synagogue in Kobe was being rebuilt in 1967-68, Albert Hamway instructed the architect to copy the design of the Shaare Zion synagogue in Brooklyn: its architectural template circulated from the centre in New York to the periphery in Kobe. Synagogues were also nodes through which ethical standards circulated. The prohibition of marrying converts, considered until today to be distinctive of Syrian Jewish identity in New York, was issued in Buenos Aires by an Aleppine rabbi in 1927, and subsequently adopted and proclaimed in NY in 1935 and reaffirmed in 1946, 1972 and 1984 (Roffe 2006), where a copy of the proclamation was displayed on the wall of the Magen David synagogue in Bensonhurst. Like a signal travelling with a telecommunications network, it travelled from Buenos Aires to New York, where it was 'boosted' (Zuntz 2023) or amplified by rabbis at Syrian Jewish synagogues in the city. Similarly in 1983, on a visit to New York from Buenos Aires, Moise D. invoked the pious sociality of the community in New York as a standard by which to measure communal life in Buenos Aires. The same year, Eduardo Farhi, who had taken a job at a synagogue in New York having turned down an offer from Buenos Aires, invoked the greater levels of intermarriage in Argentina as a reason to rank New York above Buenos Aires. Standards of sociality and religiosity were not simply promulgated and cultivated in particular locales; they circulated within the network from node to node as individuals drew comparisons, posited hierarchies and advocated emulation. The circulating values were not uncontested and could

shift through time. In 2023, Raffoul D., who thirty years earlier had moved from São Paulo to New York, suggested that marriage between Syrian and European Jews was desirable, implying that Syrian or Sephardic boundary maintenance—which some associated with the community in New York—could be a negative form of insularity.

Previous accounts of circulation societies (Aslanian 2014; Markovits 2000) have focused on the movement of women, religious specialists, information and collateral-free credit as processes which establish and reproduce the cohesiveness of an ethnic trading network. Syrian Jewish trajectories in the twentieth century enable a reconsideration of the nature and durability of merchant networks, and the ways in which particular nodes become central to them. This trading society was constituted as a cohesive network not just by the circulation of people and materials, but also by the circulation of ideological forms—templates, standards and name values—exclusively within its channels. Nodes became central when their institutions succeeded in amplifying such values, whether name-cachet or particular aesthetic and ethical standards, making them available for further circulation—which is to say recognition elsewhere in the network. Community leadership committees in Beirut and São Paolo; Edmond Safra's banks in Beirut and São Paolo; synagogues in New York and Buenos Aires; and marriage match-making in post-war Milan, can all be understood in this light. Such institutions not only provided for socio-cultural boundary maintenance in particular places; they also maintained the coherence of the wider network as boosters for values that circulated across it. The heyday of this multi-nodal commercial world may have passed, as New York-based merchants increasingly invest more of their capital in New York real estate. But the invocation of Abraham D.'s name on a real estate website in Tel Aviv suggests that efforts are still being made to circulate Syrian Jewish name values across time and space.

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NOTES

1 Key works in English include Sutton 1979, Harel 1998, Shelemay 1998, Zenner 2000.
2 jcckobe.org (Jewish Community of Kansai), http://historyofjewishkobejapan.blogspot.com/2009/11/hi.html, accessed 15/6/23.
3 Available through www.familysearch.org, accessed 15/6/23.
4 farhi.org (Les Fleurs D'Orient), geni.com (Geni, a MyHeritage company), accessed 15/6/23.
5 Data relevant to parts of the article and the wider project is available at www.jcckobe.org, http://historyofjewishkobejapan.blogspot.com/2009/11/hi.html and https://reshare.ukdataservice.ac.uk/cgi/users/home?screen=EPrint::Summary&eprintid=856242.
6 This section draws on Sutton (1988). Pseudonyms are used for this family.
7 This section is based on interviews, genealogical archives and immigration records.
8 www.jcckobe.org (Jewish Community of Kansai), accessed 15/6/23.
9 Moise D. had arrived in Brazil in 1953 with a Panamanian passport issued a year earlier; his sons who were born in Aleppo and Beirut travelled from London to Rio de Janeiro in 1955 on Argentinian passports.
10 This section draws on archives at http://historyofjewishkobejapan.blogspot.com and jcckobe.org (Jewish Community of Kansai), accessed 15/6/23.
11 www.jcckobe.org (Jewish Community of Kansai), accessed 15/6/23.
12 The account of trading networks and relationships in this section is based on the biography of Lucy and Ezra Choueke by their grandson Ezra Choueke (2021).
13 http://historyofjewishkobejapan.blogspot.com/2009/11/hi.html, accessed 15/6/23.
14 http://historyofjewishkobejapan.blogspot.com/2009/11/hi.html, accessed 15/6/23.

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Twisted Trajectories and Jewish-Muslim Interfaces: Bukharan Jews of Central Asia in Vienna

VERA SKVIRSKAJA

Abstract

This article discusses migration of Bukharan Jews—an ethnic-religious minority in (post-)Soviet Central Asia—and the establishment of multi-confessional, multi-ethnic Central Asian diaspora in the city of Vienna, Austria. During the Cold War period, Vienna was transformed from being a major transit hub for Soviet Jews moving from the USSR to Israel, USA and other destinations to a site of the most numerous and prominent Bukharan Jewish diaspora in Europe. Using the concept of 'migration infrastructure', the article investigates the ways in which this transformation took place. Furthermore, it focuses on Jewish-Muslim interfaces, both in Soviet Uzbekistan and present-day diaspora, to document the ongoing, albeit changing, coexistence and collaboration across ethnic-religious boundaries that facilitate transnational migration. I argue that the Jewish infrastructure, which emerged in Vienna's historically Jewish district of Leopoldstadt in the last decades, has also become a migrant infrastructure for the post-Soviet Tadjik-speaking Muslim migrants from Central Asia.

Keywords: *USSR; Uzbekistan; shadow economy; migration infrastructure; cultural mobility*

Introduction

Migration from the former Soviet Central Asian republics (or post-Soviet Central Asia) and Central Asian diaspora have been a subject of in-depth anthropological and other social scientific research for decades. Studies of ethnic Russian repatriates (i.e., return Soviet migrants) as well as Uzbek and Tajik labour migrants have produced nuanced and diverse scholarship of post-Soviet mobility in Central Asia (e.g., Abashin 2017, 2022; Pilkington 2002; Reeve 2023; Turaeva

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& Urinboyev 2021). This article aims at complementing this body of Central Asian mobility and migration research by focusing on the Soviet and post-Soviet migration of Bukharan Jews who, until the collapse of the USSR, resided mainly in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan but by now have almost completely disappeared in the region. During the Cold War era, Bukharan Jews represented the only transnationally mobile group of Central Asians; besides migration within the USSR (mainly to Russia) and *aliyah* or 'moving up' to Israel, they have established prominent diasporic hubs in the USA (mainly New York) and Western Europe (mainly Austria and Germany); some families have also settled in Canada, Australia and other countries.[1]

The term 'Bukharan Jews' designates an ethno-religious minority who represent 'native' Jewish traditions in Central Asia, speaking Bukhori or Jewish-Tajik language.[2] Bukhori is still spoken alongside Russian in the diaspora, as well as in Israel and post-Soviet Central Asian countries, but it is disappearing among the younger generations, being replaced by the national languages of their new homelands (e.g., German, English and Hebrew). Bukharans have also formed distinct urban identities that have 'followed' them in emigration. For instance, Bukharan Jews of Samarkand have claimed a particularly energetic and ambitious identity, pointing out that many community and religious leaders in diaspora and Israel, as well as the majority of diamond traders in New York's 47th district, are native Samarkandis.[3] Many Bukharan Jews from Tashkent have tended to distance themselves from what they see as Bukharan 'parochial' attitudes, taking pride in their educational achievements, cosmopolitan outlook and Soviet/Russian modernity. 'They have always been much freer in Tashkent', explained a Bukharan from Samarkand who left the USSR in the early 1970s.

In contrast to the histories of mobility of other Asian Jews throughout the 20th century (e.g., Afghan and Syrian Jews, see Anderson 2023, Marsden 2023 in this volume), Bukharan Jews' transnational mobility was punctured by the arrival of the Soviets. Prior to that, Bukharan merchants established commercial hubs and invested in commercial properties in Moscow and other big Russian cities as well as in London and Palestine (Levin 2015: 7-13; Kimyagarov & Fazylov 2020). Some of the wealthy Bukharans moved to Jerusalem and built the quarter 'Shkhunat Bukharim' (Galibov 1998: 14). Today, the fifty year period (1867-1917) leading up to the Bolshevik revolution is represented by

Bukharan researchers and activists as 'the golden age' of Bukharan merchants, including wealthy wholesale traders, industrialists and landowners (Kimyagarov & Fazylov 2020: 82-92; Pinkhasov 2022; 2023: 28).[4] Recollections of the 'golden age' and mobile merchants (and their properties) feature in the diasporic publications (e.g., Galibov 1998: 15; Pinkhasov 2023) and in family genealogies told by the elders at various gatherings: tours to the ancestral graves, participation in life-cycle events and religious holidays in homeland and diaspora. People relate stories of global mobility in the distant past at a time when Central Asia's 'native' Jews are, once again, expanding their geography through transnational kinship networks and mobile businessmen with multiple homes.

Many aspects of the Bukharan Jews' migration history have been covered by Jewish Studies' scholars or published in Jewish Studies journals and book series rather than in Central Asian studies publications (e.g., Cooper 2011, 2012, 2023; Loy 2022). It is my intention to contribute to the studies of Central Asian migration with the case of Bukharan Jews not only by discussing their migration trajectories and experiences, but also by bringing into focus Jewish-Muslim interfaces and the ways in which these have structured coexistence in Uzbekistan and eventually 'travelled' to diaspora. Here, 'Jewish-Muslim interfaces' refer to issues of mutual concerns and collaboration, past and present. Recently, the interfaces' underlying idea of inter-confessional, inter-ethnic cooperation or mutuality has been integrated into people's diplomacy (*narodnaia diplomatiia*, in Russian) agendas promoted by the Bukharan global diaspora and Uzbek government (e.g., Shukurzoda 2019; Skvirskaja 2022).

Dealing with these issues methodologically, I discuss the case study of the Bukharan diaspora in Vienna, Austria—the site of the most prominent Bukharan community in Europe, numbering around 2,500 people[5]—and consider elements of their 'migration infrastructure' (Xiang and Lindquist 2014) and 'cultural mobility' (Greenblatt 2009). The former implies a combination of various institutions, practices, actors and broader societal transformations that enable migration. The latter highlights mobilities of Central Asian cultures that have not existed in isolation from one another at 'home' and have continued to converge in diaspora.

The ethnographic fieldwork for this study was carried out in Vienna and in the cities of Tashkent, Samarkand and Bukhara, Uzbekistan, in 2022-2024.[6] In Vienna, I have talked primarily to different cohorts of

'first generation' emigrants, i.e., those who were born in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and emigrated as either adults or children. All of my interlocutors are fluent in Russian and the community has Russian-speaking rabbis of Bukharan Jewish descent. While I use the phrase 'first generation migrants', I agree with Mandel (2008: 19) that a simple periodisation of emigrants into first-, second- and third-generations of migrants can disguise complex sociocultural configurations. My usage refers to the place of birth of my diasporic informants and not to assumed shared dispositions.

In what follows, I discuss the Cold War and post-Cold War migration from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and the establishment of Vienna as a new diasporic hub of Soviet Jews.[7] I then turn to the theme of coexistence and diasporic relations, suggesting that the Bukharan Jewish infrastructure in Vienna now provides the elements of migrant infrastructure for the new wave of Tadjik-speaking Muslim migrants, contributing to the emergence of the ethnically heterogeneous Central Asia diaspora.

Broken Promises and a New Diasporic Hub

Taking off

The migration of Bukharan Jews has been an integral part of Soviet Jewry emigration from the USSR that involved complex procedures, obscure decision-making logic by the OVIR (Office of Visas and Registration) and months if not years of waiting for 'exit visas' (Loy 2016; Zaltzman 2023: 361). While culturally different and geographically dispersed Soviet Jews had shared several reasons for leaving the USSR (improving their living standards; anti-Semitism), many Bukharan Jews claimed to have been motivated by Zionism. My interlocutors in Vienna and New York as well as some diasporic publications (e.g., Borokhov 2015: 24) have stated that the first Bukharan families emigrated not because they desperately wanted to leave the Soviet Union like many Soviet Ashkenazi did, but because they wanted to move to Israel.

'Ordinary' Soviet antisemitism might have made some Bukharans feel that they were 'second class people' (Loy 2016: 148), but in his memoirs, the former community leader of the Bukharan Jews in Vienna, Grigorii Galibov (1998: 18-23), has underlined that many Bukharans were well-integrated into the state structures and enjoyed 'good life' in Central Asia. According to Galibov, it was Soviet

anti-Israeli propaganda at the time of the Six-Day-War (1967) that represented the conflict as the Jews' hostility towards Islam that had nourished people's Zionism; this in turn had provoked negative attitudes towards local Jews among Muslim Uzbeks and Tajiks, including outbursts such as: 'Go to your Israel!' (Galibov 1998: 23). 'Only when the troubles started in Israel, we understood that we have to go there. Before that we did not pay much attention to who was who', explained a woman who was around twenty at the time of the war. A similar trigger for Jewish emigration was also recorded in other Asian regions; in Afghanistan, for instance, the war resulted in the growing hostility towards the Jews and, at one point, Afghani Jews had to seek refuge in the synagogue in Kabul to protect themselves from the mob (Marsden 2023).

A very different trigger was a fear of Soviet authorities in the realm of the shadow economy. The particular pervasiveness of the shadow economy at the Muslim periphery, which was made public in the whole of the USSR by a number of high-profile corruption cases in the 1980s, had even cast doubt on representations of Central Asia as a socialist region (Abashin 2023). Participation in informal and 'underground' economic activities—from running 'underground' factories (e.g., *tsekhoviki* in Russian) and private trade in furs, carpets and small commodities, to the underreporting of one's earnings (e.g., in shoe repair businesses, informal food joints)—was commonplace. Bukharan Jews, not unlike many Uzbeks or Tajiks, preferred to have independent cash earnings in addition to or instead of state wages. '[Many] people wanted to bring some money home every day, rather than receiving a fixed salary once a month', I was told by a resident of the Jewish neighborhood, *Shark* ('East') in Samarkand (cf. Zaltzman 2023: 380).

The shadow economy was embedded in the state bureaucracy and extensive patronage networks. While it was 'living by its own laws' (Tokhtakhodzhaeva 2007: 113) and incorporated Central Asian ethnic diversity, it was also hierarchically ranked and divided along ethnic lines. A glass ceiling prevented the most ambitious Bukharans to raise to the very top in Soviet bureaucratic and administrative structures. Yet, various lucrative positions, such as an administrator of the Soviet House of Services (*dom byta*, in Russian)[8] or a warehouse director, were within their reach and provided opportunities for large-scale informal activities. Some 'underground entrepreneurs', including Bukharan Jews, became the protagonists of urban myths in the 1950s-1970s in

which their fabulous wealth was often 'matched' by capital punishment or disappearance in the KGB structures.

There were, of course, different ways to legitimise or disguise illegal earnings,[9] but the shadow economy also took its toll on people. 'In Samarkand, a woman of fifty looked like an old woman. Here [in Vienna] she looks twenty-five. Here she does not have to think about a tax inspector! My father was a *shochet* (kosher slaughterer) and a taxman would come to us. What stress!' shared an elderly Bukharan in Vienna. In a similar vein, one of my interlocutors in Tashkent illustrated people's anxiety about their involvement in the shadow economy with a story:

> A Jewish woman had been talking enthusiastically to her Uzbek neighbour about emigration to Israel together with her son who had a good position at a textile factory. The neighbour was puzzled by her optimism: 'But your son will never have such a good job in Israel, and he will not have money to give you, and you, with your poor health, will not have the money to pay for your medicine!' The Jewish woman replied: 'When we move to Israel, I will no longer have this poor health and need medicine! All my worries [about this money] will be gone'.

Freedom to do business and/or freedom of religious worship were associated with life outside the Soviet Union. Moreover, the state of Israel had an affective and ideological appeal as 'the land of the Jews' and lost ancestors. Many families traced their genealogies (real or imaginary) to Israel via ancestors who moved to Palestine in the late 19th and early 20th century or managed to escape from the Soviet Union in the 1920s or early 1930s. Although this early migration often resulted in irrevocably broken social ties and truncated kinship networks, the memories of the vanished emigres have been cultivated as families' cultural capital, often supported by references to actual capital, i.e., properties in Jerusalem owned by their ancestors.[10]

Despite the affective relationship to Israel and the newly found 'freedom', for many Bukharans, the experience of *aliyah* was marked by disappointment. Some felt humiliated by the low social status ascribed to Eastern Jews, especially to the Soviet Central Asian Jews, by the Ashkenazi (see also Skvirskaja 2022: 62). 'In Tajikistan, many Ashkenazi came as refugees during WWII; they were poor, had hard lives, but in Israel they ruled and looked down upon us', an educated

Bukharan, a former teacher in his 70s, shared with me in Vienna. As Sadjed (2022: 2208) pointed out in her discussion of Israelis' hierarchies at the time, the official definition of a person's nationality was based on their religious affiliation, but many Soviet Jews did not share this understanding. Bukharan Jews were among those newcomers who challenged Israelis' vision of a single, homogenous Jewish people (cf. Shohat 1988: 24; 2-5).[11] The (few) religious Bukharans who were among the first to leave Central Asia were, in turn, disappointed by the modern secularism in Israel (Lechleitner & Lomidze 2008: 572).[12] Many Soviet emigrants were also unwilling to sacrifice themselves for Israel in the ongoing conflicts. 'My children are not cannon fodder', my interlocutor in Vienna recalled how his father explained his decision to return to Uzbekistan.

Returning

Having touched upon Bukharan Jews' motivations to migrate to Israel and many people's disappointments with the move, I consider the aspects of the migration infrastructure that enabled Bukharans' anchoring in Vienna. The founding of the Bukharan Jewish diaspora in Austria is a particularly illuminating case of the role played by the regulatory (state apparatus) and the technological (communication and transport) dimensions of this infrastructure (Xiang and Lindquist 2014). A mix of geopolitics and the available transport infrastructure conditioned the initial arrival of Soviet Jews to the Austrian capital.

The Six-Day-War caused the severance of diplomatic ties between Israel and the USSR and an approximately two-year ban on exit visas to Israel. The Netherlands became the diplomatic intermediary between the USSR and Israel, and the Dutch embassy in Moscow came to represent Israel and took care of the emigration paperwork (Zaltzman 2023: 360-370). Austria, in turn, offered Vienna to be used as a transit hub for Soviet Jews on their way to the USA, Israel and other destinations like Canada and Australia. The infrastructural focal point was not the city but a transit camp near Vienna, isolated from the surrounding society for security reasons. In the camp, the representatives of the Israeli organisations (the Jewish Agency and the Ministry of Religious Affairs) attempted to make sure that migrants proceeded to Israel rather than to other destinations, and that they were 'real', *halakhic* Jews (i.e., born to a Jewish mother or converted to Judaism, Zaltzman 2023: 372-373).

Crucially for the Bukharan diaspora, the city had also become a major transit hub for *yerida* (moving 'down' from Israel)—the return Soviet Jewish migrants (*yordim*), Bukharan and Ashkenazi Jews alike, on their way back to the Soviet Union. The Soviet Embassy in Vienna processed documents of the prospective returnees while Austrian emigration authorities, different international and American Jewish emigration organisations, dealt with yordim and Jewish migrants who did not want to move to Israel to begin with. Some of these agencies constituted important humanitarian and social dimensions of migration infrastructure (Xiang and Lindquist 2014). For example, the Jewish Orthodox organisation 'Rav Tov', which promoted emigration to the USA, set up a religious school, a kosher kindergarten and employed a Russophone administrator to cater to the Soviet Jews stuck in Vienna (Galibov 1998: 27-29).

And stuck they were: the history of Vienna's Bukharan diaspora doubles as a story of the Soviet state's 'deceit' (Galibov 1998: 34) of its Jewish repatriates. The yordim who wanted to go back to the USSR arrived on tourist visas that allowed them stay in the country for only three months; after this period, they had to be in formal employment or register with emigration organisations to be able to stay in Vienna legally. Very few individuals were issued Soviet visas; people's desire to return was exploited for the purposes of Soviet propaganda. Some migrants, often after years of waiting, received permission to move to the USA or other destinations, but many of those who were refused entry to the USSR settled in Vienna. Many had moved to the historical Jewish neighborhood of Leopoldstadt to be joined by their co-ethnics who arrived in subsequent migration waves in the 1980s and 1990s and were motivated by economic considerations, family reunions and fears of new ethnic nationalisms and violence.

In this way, the core of the Bukharan Vienna community was composed of the yordim who were not allowed to return to the USSR, and the city transformed from being a transit hub for the Soviet Jewish migrants to a global diasporic hub of Central Asians in its own right. The first migration wave or yordim has become integral to the social dimension of migration infrastructure, providing new arrivals from Central Asia ('direct migrants', *priamiki* in Russian, Galibov 1998: 28) with places of work, help with housing arrangements and, more importantly, with reliable information and contacts. A story of a Bukharan family from Tashkent that I introduce below illustrates this dynamic as well as people's reliance on diverse skills acquired in Soviet Uzbekistan.

The Case of a 'Tashkent Tailor' in Vienna

By the early 1970s, the Tashkent tailor David was not an ordinary tailor; he was trained as a professional tailor but worked as one of the top managers at a textile factory. This position allowed him to sell a share of his factory's produce 'on the side', i.e., on the black market. His family was very well off. His wife was a stay-at-home mother, taking care of the couple's two small children in a spacious apartment. In 1970, David's parents moved to Israel while his brother's family relocated to the USA. Two years later, David arrived to Vienna in transit where, after some deliberation, he decided to go to Israel to join his parents. Since it was not possible to take large sums of money out of the USSR, David converted his savings into valuable commodities (carpets, furniture and a grand piano) and sent them by sea to Israel. Most of his possessions were damaged during transportation, and he became disappointed by 'reality in Israel' (cf. also Zaltzman 2023: 376-381). In 1974, David was again in Vienna, penniless and waiting for the Soviet entry visa to return to Uzbekistan. 'Tomorrow, tomorrow', the Soviet embassy said again and again. In the meanwhile, his children went to an Austrian school. Similar to other Bukharan caught in transit, children's integration into the Austrian schooling system was a factor informing the family's decision to stay in the country: 'After some time, the children did not want to move; they said they would not manage yet another migration'. David decided to get a job that would allow him to obtain an Austrian residence permit until the visa situation was resolved. Day after day, he roamed Vienna's streets looking for a sign of a tailor workshop where he could offer his services. He eventually found one. He started from scratch as a 'mute tailor', because he did not know a word in German.

David was later introduced to an Austrian owner of a textile factory and got a job for seven days a week, including a small flat nearby. It was a difficult professional relationship, but soon David was overseeing production, and as a manager, he could employ other Bukharan migrants: one would clean the premises, the other would attach buttons and yet another could do the ironing. When the factory owner went bankrupt, David bought some of the factory equipment and opened his own workshop. After some years, he paid off his loans and started a bigger production employing more than twenty people at his premises. By the 1980s, the family became well-off and moved to Leopoldstadt to be close to their Russian- and Bukharo-speaking co-ethnics. David's business came to an end in the late 1990s when

it could no longer compete with China-made clothes, and he had to resign due to ill health; none of his children were interested in taking his business in the direction of transnational trade. (By that time, real estate had become a popular option among the business-minded Bukharans.)

David's story was told to me by his daughter, an educated woman in her early fifties. Reflecting on her father's life, she noted that he always told his children about the importance of having 'a real profession' (*spetsal'nost'*, in Russian) that one can rely upon in the most adverse circumstances. All of David's children studied tailoring after they graduated from school, even though they were not interested in this profession. 'Our father built this Vienna', exclaimed David's daughter when she described the expansion of the Bukharan community and how socially and religiously relaxed it was in the 1970s and 1980s. 'Everybody was visiting each other, and nobody was concerned about kosher and non-kosher homes. You did not have to worry about being seen doing shopping on Shabbat'. At the time, the Bukharan diaspora still reflected the spirit of Soviet coexistence and Jewish identity where the rules of *halakhah* were largely unheard of (cf. Sapritsky 2012: 75).[13]

Today, by contrast, in the words of Levi Levaev (2024: 4), the president of the World Congress of Bukharan Jews, the younger generations of Vienna's Bukharans 'have created a real revolution'. The revolution here implies Jewish religious revival that has had a profound impact on diasporic sociality, resulting in some ruptures hinted at by David's daughter. By the estimates of my informants, eighty per cent of the community observe kosher rules; the number of synagogues is growing.

It is now widely recognised by the wider Jewish community that Bukharan Jews have reinvigorated Jewish life and contributed to the development and greater visibility of Jewish infrastructure in Leopoldstadt.[14] They have opened new synagogues, founded the bilingual (German-Russian) diasporic journal *Sefardinews*, established the old people's clubs, matchmakers 'agencies', a kosher supermarket, kosher cafes and restaurants. The Bukharan Jewish infrastructure in Vienna has not only taken on some of the functions of migration infrastructure (e.g., places of employment, information exchange, migration brokers) for the subsequent flows of co-ethnics from Central Asia and Israel; it has, moreover, enabled mobility of Muslims from post-Soviet Central Asia to the West and established new Jewish-Muslim interfaces in Leopoldstadt.

Cultural Mobility and Jewish-Muslim Interfaces

In Vienna, similar to Israel, the first Bukharan migrants brought along a cultural model of Jewishness that was unfamiliar, and sometimes not agreeable, to the host society and to Austrian Jews alike. For the locals, Bukharans were initially 'the unknown Jews' (Hoare 2018) as an Austrian newspaper once called them, or 'the Gypsy Jews' as one of my Bukharan interlocutors pointed out. Galibov (1998) recorded how Bukharan families with their noisy offspring had 'injected life' into the 'dead quiet' quarters of Leopoldstadt, provoking discontent among their Austrian neighbors. The Viennese Jewry were much less helpful than expected by the Bukharan newcomers. 'At the beginning, we were not accepted here—neither by the synagogues, nor by the Jewish community… We were pushed away. It is only after years of being here, that we have gained some respect of the local [Jewish] community',[15] shared a Bukharan woman who arrived in Vienna in the early 1990s.

Some Bukharan families have gone an extra mile to break the ice and secure acceptance by the Viennese Jewry. A Jewish university lecturer whose children attended the Jewish school in Leopoldstadt recalled that a Bukharan family invited all classmates and their parents to a birthday party of their daughter. It has not been a custom at the school to invite the parents of the classmates, but the Bukharan family wanted to extend the hospitality to the parents in order to get together as a community. This gesture was appreciated. However, as I also observed in Vienna, the overall social and cultural distancing from Bukharans is still present and many locals find Bukharans 'too Asian/Oriental'. 'We do not like how they treat their women—their rabbis marry them off too young', a middle-aged chocolate shop owner told me in Leopoldstadt. (Among the Bukharans, early marriages are indeed preferred due to the importance placed on the bride's virginity.)

Bukharans have had the status of an ethnic-religious minority (that at some periods and localities, doubled as a marginalised minority) for centuries, but this has not always implied cultural distancing or disregard. In this section, I discuss how this status had not been an obstacle to the emergence of Jewish-Muslim interfaces, and how Soviet experiences of coexistence moulded Bukharans' ways of dealing with difference in the new, diasporic context of Vienna. To start with, there is a body of scholarship on 'the Jews of Islam', i.e., the

Jews in the Islamic world (e.g., Lewis 2014) that has described centuries-old Jewish-Muslim interfaces by looking at similarities between Jewish and Muslim beliefs and practices. Lewis (2014: 77-78) uses the term 'symbiosis' to account for the interfaith relations and reciprocal influences of Jewish and Muslim cultures in the classical period.[16] Prior to the Soviet conquest, Bukharan Jews and their Muslim neighbors were hardly distinguishable by their ethnic dress (Emel'ianenko 2020), and until today, Bukharan Jewish *kippah* (Jewish male hat) and traditional square Uzbek hat *tiubiteika* (in Russian) have been identical. Some of the shared cultural-religious traits, such as marriage norms (polygamy, bride's virginity), gender segregation and dietary restrictions had been present to varying degrees throughout the Soviet period.

It was the cultural proximity and economic interdependence of Bukharan Jews and Muslims in Soviet Central Asia that had often mitigated against hostilities and social segregation in the minority-majority relationships. Alongside the state's ideological insistence on 'friendship between peoples', intermarriages[17] and the formal integrative role of the Soviet 'collectives', there were also informal practices that sustained cultural proximity and encouraged collaborations across ethno-religious boundaries. Let me briefly illustrate this Soviet legacy with two examples of inter-ethnic mutuality and collaboration: the realm of religious practices and the shadow economy.

In the Muslim periphery of the USSR, the key strategy of anti-religious propaganda was to convince Soviet subjects that their culture, traditions and spiritual values existed independently from religion. It was argued that national/ethnic cultures and customs had been changing long before the emergence of Islam (Rogovaia 1986: 166-167).[18] For many Soviet Central Asians, some Islamic and Jewish rituals had remained a part of local customs and a marker of identity, for which no personal observance (of religious laws or restrictions) was necessary (Khalid 2003: 578). For instance, Uzbek and Tajiks, including the communists, were habitually buried according to Islamic ritual (Khalid 2003: 579). I was told about Ashkenazi from the European part of the USSR bringing their sons to Uzbekistan to be circumcised. Some Bukharans adhered to *kashrut* (Jewish dietary practice) (Cooper 2012: 141); their insistence on bringing their own food to the festivities of their non-Jewish neighbors to avoid pollution was approved of by their Muslim neighbors as evidence that

people cared about their 'customs' and were cultured (Humphrey et al. 2009: 210-211). As these examples demonstrate (and there are many more, cf. Cooper 2012; Khalid 2003), both Muslim and Jewish modes of religious belonging were reproduced as cultural or national traditions.

The point here is that for this reproduction to happen in the context of the Soviet repressive state where the (well-justified) fear of denunciation was always present, the local nodes of solidarity had to operate across majority-minority/Muslim-Jewish divides. Cooper (2012: 21) argued that antireligious campaigns were not as harshly enforced in Central Asia as in other parts of the USSR. Yet, enforcement of such campaigns would need many (willing) subjects to do it. Muslims respected Bukharans' insistence on their own 'traditions' because preservation of one's own 'cultural traditions' was an issue of mutual concern. As Galibov (1998: 18-19) put it in his memoirs, many Soviet leaders in Central Asia remained 'close to Islam' and therefore turned a blind eye to adult Bukharan Jews attending synagogues. Some religious practices were simply kept hidden from public-professional life.

A different type of collaboration across the ethnic-religious divide was instigated by the shortcomings of, or opportunities provided by, the Soviet planned economy. Some forms of 'the embezzlement of socialist property' were taking place in ethnically heterogeneous work collectives as a matter of course (e.g., Loy 2016: 110-112). For decades, in Samarkand, some Bukharan households sold 'underground' kebabs that were popular with the Muslim neighbours (Skvirskaja 2023). In Bukhara, a Jewish woman worked as an intermediary between two Muslim groups by supplying Uzbek villagers with golden jewellery that were privately manufactured by Muslim migrants from Dagestan.

Given that top managerial and administrative positions were mainly held by the representatives of the titular nationalities, Uzbeks or Tajiks, many operations of the shadow economy were based on the hierarchically structured inter-ethnic partnerships and networks. Samuel, whom I met in Vienna, told me how back home in Tashkent in the 1970s, he approached an Uzbek director of an entertainment park and offered him his refurbishing services together with 'a scheme'. Samuel's plan was to employ a fictive team of decorators, claim their salaries and do the job single-handedly.[19] The director welcomed Samuel and his plan and always treated him with respect. Samuel worked hard,

the salaries of the ghost employees were shared between the two, and, in addition, Samuel gave his Uzbek boss the accrued annual bonuses. It all ran smoothly until the day the inspection arrived. To Samuel's dismay, his Uzbek boss refused to use his network to help him out. 'You just leave me out of this', he told Samuel. To avoid imprisonment, Samuel had to go to 'his own people' (i.e., Bukharan networks) in commercial structures who had access to the powerful in Muslim networks and found a solution. Despite the bad ending, which also showed the limits of inter-ethnic cooperation, Samuel remembered the warm welcome he was given by the Uzbek: 'Your people bring blessing and prosperity'.

With the mass emigration of Bukharan Jews, the hard-learned skills of navigating Muslim-Jewish interfaces in Soviet Central Asia have proven to be useful in the diaspora and have helped some Bukharan migrants to negotiate new parameters of coexistence with the host society in Austria. This dynamic, including rough experiences that today people are often not keen to talk about because they prioritise an emphasis on harmonious coexistence promoted by people's diplomacy discourse (cf. Shukurzoda 2019), is captured by the elderly Aron who shared an episode from his early days in Vienna in the 1970s. Aron used to run a vegetable stall on the market, and one day an Austrian man, a passer-by, approached his stall and started abusing him verbally: 'You dirty emigrants, why did you come here?' and so on. Aron did not lose his cool:

> My grandmother always said, 'An angry dog has to be fed'. So I took a plastic bag and filled it up with a bit of everything from my stall. Potatoes, onions, carrots. I gave it to the raging man. 'Take it', I said. 'All is good'. The man was very surprised, but he took the bag and left.

This situation was repeated a couple of times and eventually Aron won—the hostile Austrian was pacified. 'I ended up even employing the guy at my stall', Aron concluded proudly.

As this episode indicates, Bukharan skills of coexistence have become transferrable to a different type of society where their minoritarian status has changed but not disappeared. With the post-Soviet migration of Central Asian Muslims to the West (and Israel), the Jewish-Muslim social networks have again been activated while the Soviet hierarchy of the minority-majority relationship has been reversed, which I turn to now.

Post-Soviet Central Asian Diasporic Collaboration

The majority of adult 'first generation' Bukharans in Vienna, especially those who arrived during the Cold War (similar to their compatriot co-ethnics in Israel and the US), could not count on securing livelihoods by using their old, Soviet professions from the start. An exception were cobblers, nurses and tailors who were in demand (Galibov 1998: 42). Limited local networks, the inability to speak German fluently and the absence of capital led many Bukharans to take up any low-skilled jobs that were available: they worked as cleaners, baby-sitters, gardeners, cooks, porters, dockworkers, factory workers and vegetable sellers.

Many Bukharan families settled in the same neighbourhood not only because they used the same real estate agents, but also to cooperate and help each other with childcare and other tasks, thus freeing 'labour resources' from domestic chores. Some people moved into petty trade, running 'Waren aller art' shops (similar to 'One Pound' shops) or grocery stalls, while their children went to college. With time, individuals and clusters of families (e.g., a group of brothers), pulled resources together to branch out into real estate, jewelry trade and/or restaurant business. The later covers both the kosher segment in Leopoldstadt and non-kosher venues in the city, including the upscale market-cum-food-court in the city centre, such as Nashmarkt where the first Bukharan migrants sold vegetables in the 1970s-80s.

The collapse of the USSR has opened up new avenues for global interconnectedness and migration from Central Asia: similar to Bukharan yordim decades earlier, Muslim Uzbek and Tajiks have arrived in Vienna on tourist visas or entered the country illegally. With Russia losing some of its appeal as a key migration destination, more young Muslim Central Asians have been embarking on educational migration to Europe, including Austria. Some students come from the new resource-strong middle-classes. For others, formal 'educational migration' can also entail labour migration and/or emigration (e.g., Dadabaev and Soipov 2020; Olwig and Valentin 2015). Numerous formal and informal brokers have appeared on- and off-line to facilitate both legal and illegal Central Asian migration to Vienna.[20]

These diverse migration pathways rely on different infrastructural processes; Bukharan Jewish infrastructure has become a dimension of migration infrastructure that has enabled the mobility of hundreds of Tajik and Tajik-speaking labour migrants from Samarkand and

Bukhara, along with less prominent sites.[21] Linguistic, not only cultural proximity, seems to be important for the social aspect of Jewish infrastructure enabling migration. Most of the Central Asian Muslims who have been absorbed by Jewish infrastructure have either been helped by brokers or arrived as tourists and overstayed their visas; many have settled in Leopoldstadt where they share accommodations and can navigate without much knowledge of Germany or formal residency for years. Today, when you visit a Bukharan-owned kosher restaurant in Leopoldstadt, there is a likelihood that a Tajik cooks your kosher food. Central Asian Muslims are offered low-paid jobs as workers, cleaners, waiters, drivers and domestic helpers. (Very similar processes have taken place in the Bukharan diaspora in the USA and Israel.) Some Uzbek and Tajiks also cooperate with the Afghan-run food joints that attract less observant Bukharan clientele keen on 'home-made' Central Asian cuisine.

The majority of illegal Central Asian migrants stay in Vienna as long as they have to or can because after violating the visa regime there is no possibility of traveling in and out of Austria. Some Tajik-speaking Muslims have become a fixed feature of Leopoldstadt for years. For instance, one can often spot Mohamad, a tall and strong man in his late thirties, in different Bukharan places—in the kosher supermarket, synagogues and cafes. Considered to be 'intellectually challenged', Mohamad came from an impoverished Tajik village with a group of migrants in the 2000s. My acquaintances, who worked with Mohamad, speculated that back home he would not have had a chance of getting married or managing economically. In Vienna, he has been taken care of by the Jewish infrastructure; he is provided with accommodations by his different employers and, for modest remuneration, he does regular and odd jobs: he stacks shelves at the supermarket, cleans dishes in a restaurant or helps in a synagogue. Mohamad has not managed to learn German, but his knowledge of Tajik and limited Russian is sufficient for the tasks he is allocated. Before I learned about Mohamad's identity, I met him at a commemoration feast in a synagogue. Wearing a casket, he was enjoying the meal and listened attentively (it seemed) to the rabbi's moral tales.

Jewish-migrant infrastructure in Vienna may contribute to the representation of Central Asian Muslim migrants as a racialised cheap labour force (not unlike in Russia). It is known in the neighbourhood that some owners take advantage financially of their migrant employees, as is often the case with illegal migrants. There are, however, also

success stories that closely resemble Bukharans' own strategies of securing a livelihood and underscore the role of Jewish-Muslim interfaces in the Central Asian diaspora. We can see this dynamic and the ways in which cultural mobility is manifest in Central Asian migration in the case of Karim.

A Tajik Cook, Vienna Schnitzel and Public Diplomacy

In the late 2000s, as a young single man, Karim came to Austria from Samarkand and succeeded in receiving asylum as a representative of the repressed Tajik minority. Upon his arrival to Vienna, he came to Leopoldstadt and started working as a dishwasher and a helper in a kosher restaurant. Karim made an effort to learn German as quickly as possible, but for work, he had been reliant on the linguistic community of Tajik- and Russian-speaking Bukharan Jews. On one occasion, he was asked whether he could cook pilaf rice (*plov*, in Russian); he cooked a good pilaf and this set him off on a new path of becoming a chef. He studied all kosher rules, learned when to call in a kosher supervisor (*mashgiach*, in Hebrew) and how to cook a range of Jewish dishes. In other words, Karim became not just a chef, but a chef responsible for kosher catering. (A similar development in Muslim-Jewish interfaces has taken place in Uzbekistan, where Uzbeks have studied kosher rules and Jewish cuisine in order to work in the remaining synagogues and to cater for the caravans of Bukharan Jewish tourists and pilgrims.)

As Karim's German improved, he could look outside of the Bukharan community. Eventually, he 'passed the test' of cooking a Vienna schnitzel and landed a proper contract-based job at a Hasidic school. From time to time, he also helped different Bukharan outlets with catering and is generally held in high esteem. In Vienna, Karim has met his future spouse—a Tajik girl who came to the city as a labour migrant and worked as a nanny and domestic helper in a Russophone Bukharan household. By now, Karim and his wife have several children together; the children speak fluent German and good Russian. The children's proficiency in Russian is considered to be an important asset in the global multi-ethnic and multi-confessional Central Asian diaspora that spans over Israel, the USA, Western Europe, South Korea and Japan.

The story of Karim's family is not only a story of an individual migrant's success, although people comment on his agreeable character, work discipline and dedication. It also fits neatly into the people's

diplomacy discourse that extols 'historical interconnection of different peoples of Central Asia' and specifically, the unique history of Bukharan Jews that show to the world that the tradition of mutual respect and tolerance can exist in Jewish and Muslim communities (Shukurzoda 2019: 195-196). These formulations of people's diplomacy are part and parcel of Uzbek official narrative and declarations of Bukharan community leaders worldwide (e.g., Skvirskaja 2022), but this very language has also been adopted by my interlocutors in Vienna. As a 70-year-old Bukharan lady I met at the old persons' club put it:

> We were born in Uzbekistan. We were born in the Muslim lands. For us, an Uzbek or a Tajik is our brother. We respect each other. If you look around, you will see that we mainly work with Tajiks and Uzbeks … because they are our brothers. Other Jewish groups cannot yet accept [Muslims] in their midst as Bukharan Jews do. It is more difficult for them, because there is still this border (*gran'*, in Russian) between them and the Muslims. But we, via our attitudes, will attain [God's] love. We believe that God expects us to be close to our brothers—Muslims.

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed some of the infrastructural processes and Bukharan Jewish-Muslim interfaces that have resulted in the establishment of a Central Asian diaspora in Vienna. In contrast to many migration destinations that are actively sought after by mobile subjects, Vienna was initially only a temporary transit point for Soviet Jews leaving the USSR. The city has since been transformed into a migration destination largely by chance as a result of Soviet diplomacy on the one hand, and by the desire and inability of some members of the first wave of Soviet Jewish migrants to Israel to return to the USSR, on the other. At the time, it seemed a bad twist of fate.

With time, however, Vienna has become an important centre of Bukharan social, cultural and economic life where migrants have managed to organise themselves as a distinct ethno-religious community and contribute to the Jewish infrastructure of the historical Jewish neighborhood of Leopoldstadt. Nothing like that has happened in, for example, London or Paris (cf. Levaev 2024: 5; Pinkhasov 2022: 311-313). Today, it is a global diasporic hub that, similar to New York, attracts newcomers from Israel (e.g., via marriages) and hosts various important events in the Bukharan community. Family members, friends and relatives come to Vienna from far and wide to attend weddings, bar and

bat mitzvahs and to commemorate their dead. The city's significance is reflected in the parallel that Bukharans have drawn between their Soviet and current mobility and kinship geography: 'Today Austria, Israel and the USA are just like Tashkent, Samarkand and Dushanbe' (Galibov 1998: 179).

The mass emigration of Bukharan Jews from Central Asia during the Cold War and post-Soviet periods has changed the fabric of the local society in the cities and towns where they previously resided. The legacies of Soviet inter-ethnic coexistence have not, however, been obliterated. The engagement between Muslim Tajiks, Tajik-speaking Uzbeks and Bukharan Jews—the Jewish-Muslim interfaces—have taken new forms and moved into new spaces, both in Central Asia and in the diaspora. In Vienna, these Jewish-Muslim interfaces have operated by expanding and diversifying the Central Asian diaspora in Leopoldstadt. The global Bukharan community has now become a pull factor for Central Asian labour migration, demonstrating the ways in which cultural mobility can mediate migration.

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NOTES

1 At present, the majority of Bukharan Jews—approximately 120.000—live in Israel. For the diaspora's numbers elsewhere, see Pinkhasov (2022).

2 Until the early 1930s, Hebrew letters were used to write/print in Bukhori. Throughout the Soviet period, Bukhori was a language of everyday communication in many Jewish families; it was used in tandem with Russian, but

proficiency in both languages varied from place to place. In Bukhara, approximately five per cent could only use Russian (Niiazov 1992: 173). According to my informants, this number could be higher in Tashkent.

3 Rafael Nektalov, Editor-in-Chief of 'The Bukharian Times', September 2022, personal communication.

4 This 'golden age' is different from 'the golden age' of the Tajik-speaking population of Central Asia that today is identified with the rule by the Iranian dynasty of Samanids (IX-X centuries) when the Persian-Tajik language was formed and trade, arts and science flourished. It is an ideological construct of the post-Soviet Tajikistan where the Tajik-speaking regions of Samarkand and Bukhara are considered 'sacred territories' that ended up in Uzbekistan by 'historical mistake' (Bolashenkova 2023).

5 According to Shlomo Ustoniyazov, the president of the Bukharan community of Vienna, there are 2500 Bukharans in Vienna (personal communication, 4 January 2024). Pinkhasov (2022: 308) has stated that the Bukharan community in Vienna consists of 400 families.

6 With exception of public figures, names of all interviewees and informants are changed to secure anonymity. In some cases, gender is changed as well. Data relevant to parts of the article is available at https://doi.org/10.17894/ucph.bbf942d0-f2b5-4330-8dbe-ae537316a5f0.

7 In literature, culturally and linguistically different groups of Jews from the USSR are sometimes called 'Russian Jews' (e.g., Zaltzman 2023) while Bukharans often refer to Russophone Ashkenazi as 'Russian Jews'. Borokhov (2015: 217) has recalled how the nationality 'Russian Jew' was registered in Soviet passports in Samarkand during WWII because local Uzbeks did not recognise Ashkenazi as Jews due to their 'whiteness'. To avoid terminological confusion, I refer to all Jews who resided in the USSR as Soviet Jews.

8 An organisation that in Soviet times provided a wide range of services to the population—from making clothes and footwear to laundry and photography.

9 For instance, I was told about one Bukharan manager who used to buy a large number of lottery tickets to cover up his expensive purchases.

10 A common story I heard was about a male (a 'father') or a small family group crossing the Soviet border illegally or being smuggled to Afghanistan, hoping to reach Palestine, and then organising a move for the remaining family. These stories often describe the violence, including rapes of the female family members, and sacrifices faced by the brave who dared to cross illegally.

11 A similar hierarchy was also reproduced within the Soviet Jewish emigrant community where Soviet Ashkenazi sometimes referred to Bukharans as Uzbeks.

12 One of the very first Bukharan Jews to leave the USSR was the Head Rabbi of Tashkent, Mani Borukhov. He left in 1965 (Galibov 1998: 20).

13 An important exception was the community of Chassidic Jews who moved to Samarkand during WWII and established an underground *yeshiva* (religious school, Zaltzman 2023).

14 The state has contributed to the Jewish visibility by means of the projects of memorialisation of Viennese Jewish past and the Holocaust, such as commemorative lampposts and Stolpersteine.

15 My interlocutor refers here to The Vienna's Jewish Community (*Israelitische Kultusgemeinde* Wien, IKG). See also Galibov (1998) on the ways in which the IKG distanced itself from the Bukharan newcomers in the 1970s-80s.

16 This is a schematic historical representation of Jewish-Muslim coexistence in Central Asia. There were also historical periods where Jews 'disappeared' from Central Asia. Kaganovitch (2019), for instance, speculates whether this

disappearance was due to mass conversion to Islam or emigration. He points out that the Jewish quarters in Bukhara appeared 'suddenly' in the 17th century (Kaganovitch 2019: 936).

17 Bukharan-Uzbek Muslim marriages, including arranged marriages, were common and continue until today in the diaspora, Israel and Uzbekistan (cf. Levaev 2024: 4). See also https://www.mako.co.il/men-weekend/Article-d0595e2d9856d81027.htm?sCh=7d61bdd9ccbc4310&pId=1471243973&Partner=mw. Accessed on 5 February 2024.

18 This understanding permeated different aspects of Soviet life, including material culture. For instance, there is a Tashkent metro station built in the madrassa style, but in the Soviet context, it was understood as a case of national rather than Muslim architecture (Azimov 2024).

19 This was, apparently, a common scheme; see, e.g., Zaltzman (2023: 258-257) for a discussion of his operations in Soviet Samarkand. It is notable that in his recollections of Soviet life, Zaltzman refers to himself as a businessman.

20 For an example of the educational migration website, see, e.g., https://xn-----8kcgc5afa4eeffhe4d8d7b.xn--p1ai/vysshee-obrazovanie-v-avstrii/ucheba-uzbekistan. Accessed on 19 September 2023.

21 I do not have any reliable figures as to how many Muslim Central Asians reside in Vienna. By my informants' own estimates, there are approximately 500 Tajik-speaking migrants working in Leopoldstadt.

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EMERGING SCHOLARS

Political Martyrdom Revisited: Iran's Contemporary Perspective and Insights from the Woman-Life-Freedom Uprising

OKSANA DIDYK

Abstract

Martyrdom holds significant cultural and historical importance in Iranian culture. It has deep roots in Shia Islam, the predominant religion in Iran, and frequently appears in Iranians' collective memory. The concept of martyrdom gained significant prominence during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) when many Iranians, including soldiers and civilians, lost their lives while defending their country. The war led to a surge in a culture surrounding martyrdom, with commemorations, ceremonies and rituals that continue today. Years after the war, new conceptions of martyrdom appeared, and the traditional ones transformed. The latest uprisings in Iran in 2022, with the slogan 'woman-life-freedom', have spurred a lively discussion as to how to consider martyrdom nowadays. This article examines the concept of martyrdom, offering fresh interpretations influenced by generational shifts and the rise of social activism in the 2020s, which diverge from traditional revolutionary ideologies. Drawing from survey data and qualitative interviews, the research proposes a taxonomy of martyr categories.

Keywords: *political martyrdom*; *shahadat*; *Iran*; *Islamic Revolution*; *Mahsa Amini protests*

Introduction

In the wake of the uprising, the Woman-Life-Freedom movement catalysed by the tragic demise of Mahsa Amini in September 2022, following her arrest in Tehran by the morality police for supposedly not following the norms of compulsory hijab (modest dress), the discourse surrounding *shahadat* (martyrdom; Farsi) has experienced a resurgence

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within Iranian society. The protesters who met their untimely end during confrontations with the law enforcement forces have frequently been posthumously regarded as martyrs or *shahid* (Farsi)—a designation particularly fervently embraced by their bereaved families. This nomenclature adorns tombstones and obituaries and permeates their admirers' posts on social media platforms. Consequently, martyrdom has become a subject of animated discussion, prominently featured in televised programs, especially on oppositional channels in exile, that have a significant influence on the Iranian communities inside the country and abroad. These discussions have centred around the loss of lives of protestors attributed to the current political regime. Given the evolving socio-political landscape in Iran, with mounting economic pressures, generational shift and the rise of social activism, scholars are now compelled to scrutinise this phenomenon from a fresh vantage point, as it promises to offer crucial insights into the nation's contemporary societal and political transformations. The principal focus of this study is thus to explore the recent interpretations of martyrdom in Iran, examining the shifts that have occurred in recent years notably in the aftermath of September 2022 and the Woman-Life-Freedom movement triggered by Mahsa Amini's death and advocating for gender equality, women's rights, and freedom from oppressive societal norms and legal restrictions. The main points this article endeavours to address are as follows:

1 In light of the recent protests and the discussions that followed, to what extent can Iranians relate to the 'traditional' conceptions of martyrdom delineated by religious doctrines and post-revolutionary scholarly interpretations?
2 What is the prevailing interpretation of martyrdom *shahadat* in contemporary Iran, including in Iranians' everyday lives?
3 Has the comprehension of martyrdom in Iranian society undergone a metamorphosis recently (with particular emphasis on the period post-September 2022)?

Over the past few decades, especially in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution of 1978-1979, the conception of martyrdom in Iran has undergone a dynamic evolution. It has transitioned from a traditional paradigm rooted in mysticism and Persian philosophy to a novel blend of concepts. In Iranian society, martyrdom is now a cultural, spiritual and political archetype. It is emerging as a foundational tenet of the ideology underpinning the post-revolutionary religious democracy as the country's governing regime brands its political system.

Amid the various efforts made by the Iranian people to enact political change in recent years, as is well exemplified by the Woman-Life-Freedom movement, a shift in the popular understanding of martyrdom seems to be taking place. This prompts a question: Are contemporary perceptions of martyrdom undergoing a discernible transformation, contrary to the viewpoints commonly asserted by official government sources? If they do, what are they a reflection of?

Using content and concept analysis (Olsthoorn 2017: 153-154), this article aims to uncover the intricate layers of meaning in the modern understanding of martyrdom in Iran. The first stage of the research involved two brief surveys administered to 386 participants within private social media groups (Burnham et al. 2008: 97-132). One of them was a pre-existing group of university alumni with a large diversity of age, gender and education majors. Two other groups were formed during the survey's preparation phase based on the participants' geographical location (inside Iran and abroad). The first survey, conducted in the period from November 2022 to February 2023, aimed to determine the general attitude to martyrdom, its place in the contemporary political culture, and respondents' emotional connection to it. While I do not expand on the results of this first survey in this article, the overall results provided valuable insights into the attitudes of Iranians toward what has traditionally been thought of as martyrdom, and it introduced new categories to further elucidate this complex phenomenon. The second survey asked the respondents to rank the listed conceptions of martyrdom from most to least relevant nowadays, eliminate the conceptions they found least appropriate and propose their own categories. The list of martyr categories used in the survey was formed by the author based on the analysis of a range of publicly available sources, such as the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (which shortly describes what individuals can be considered martyrs but does not specify their categories), works of clerics during the Islamic Revolution and in subsequent years, interviews with Iranians on both state and oppositional TV channels in exile, social media posts by Iranians primarily after September 2022, and on my own observations of local communities in Tehran, Shiraz, Isfahan and Tabriz and diaspora groups in Canada, the US and the EU between 2009 and 2022. The second survey allowed identifying a subset of ten martyrdom categories that were subsequently explored in-depth during the second stage of the research process through the follow-up online interviews with 22 respondents. The survey participants and interviewees represented a

diverse demographic profile—primarily undergraduate students from Iranian universities (41%) and individuals with advanced degrees (59%) in engineering, architecture, medicine, management, and education. The respondents' age ranged from 19 to 67, with a relatively even distribution of male (48%) and female (52%) participants. Respondents had different religious backgrounds (Shia Muslims - 37%, Sunni Muslims - 20%, Christians - 23%, Bahai - 11%, atheists - 3%), though some chose not to disclose this information (6%). Twenty interviewees were selected to represent diverse demographics with regards to age, gender, religion and profession. The remaining two represented the *shahid* families: a nephew of a platoon commander, who was killed in 1989 by the Iraqi army, and a sister of a veteran in the Iran-Iraq War who was subsequently killed in a military operation in Syria in 2013.

It is important to acknowledge that data collected during the initial analysis of primary sources may be influenced by a lack of objectivity and relevance to authentic societal experiences (Burnham et al. 2008: 194), primarily due to the authors' adherence to the regime's official ideology. In addition, conducting research in contemporary Iran faces specific challenges, as potential respondents can be reluctant to participate in interviews and surveys due to concerns about persecution and associated threats. Iranian survey respondents prioritise safety and anonymity when participating in research with potential political implications due to concerns about government surveillance and possible repercussions for dissent. Establishing familiarity with the researcher and ensuring non-disclosure of personal information were crucial factors in encouraging participation throughout the research process.

I start with a brief overview of the theoretical underpinnings of martyrdom in Iran as seen through the lenses of religion, philosophy and ideology. I then move on to the analysis of the survey and interview responses to finally suggest what the contemporary notions of martyrdom can tell us about Iranian society in the current historical moment.

Martyrdom in Religion and the Works of Revolutionary Scholars and Ideologists

The concept of martyrdom holds profound significance within Islam and Irfan (also recognised as Islamic mysticism or Sufism). Within Islam, martyrdom represents a revered status attained by individuals who meet their fate while defending their faith or engaging in jihad.

This notion is deeply rooted in the Quran and Hadith, emphasising the qualities of self-sacrifice and unwavering courage. Martyrdom in Islam is therefore characterised by a proactive approach, where individuals actively seek out circumstances to attain it and where it typically entails perishing in battle. In other words, in Islam, a martyr 'is called to seek out situations in which martyrdom might be achieved' (Cook 2015: 26-27). However, 'in comparison to the Bible, the Quran does not detail the martyrdom extensively' (Cook 2007: 19) potentially opening it up to novel interpretations as will become apparent below.

Shahid (martyr) is the nominalisation form of *shahadat* (martyrdom) that encapsulates the essence of one who has attained the zenith of consciousness. According to Naser Makarem Shirazi, an influential ideologue within Iran's regime and an Islamic scholar, this heightened awareness stems from 'perception through both the lens of empirical observation and the lens of the heart' (Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi, n.d.).[1] Nevertheless, within the religious literature, individuals who have met their end in the path of Islam are routinely designated as *shahid* regardless of the state of their consciousness.

In contemporary Iran, the Ashura rituals, commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussein and emphasising his sacrifice, and the Karbala Narrative are prominent in shaping the understanding of martyrdom. These traditions are related to the Battle of Karbala, where Imam Hussein, a revered figure in Shia Islam, and his companions were martyred in their stand against injustice, associated with the usurpation of power by the ruling caliphate, which they perceived as deviating from the principles of Islam and oppressing the Muslim community. Ashura, the tenth day of Muharram, the first month of the Islamic lunar calendar, is marked by mourning rituals, processions, and passion plays based on the stories about the martyrdom of Imam Hussein. The collective memory of these events continues to play a significant role in Iran's cultural, religious and political fabric, influencing contemporary interpretations of martyrdom and fostering a sense of resistance against oppression and tyranny. During the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1978-1979) aimed at establishing an Islamic government rooted in Shia principles, rejecting Western influence in the region and advocating for Iran's self-determination, the Karbala Narrative (Aghaie 2004: 6) and Imam Hussein's martyrdom served as a potent and mobilising force. Eventually, it resulted in the downfall of the Pahlavi monarchy and the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Having played a pivotal role in rallying support for the Islamic Revolution's objectives,

the revolutionary interpretation of the Karbala Narrative shaped the identity and ideology of the emerging Islamic Republic (Varzi 2006: 51). Since then, Imam Hussein's figure and events in Karbala have continued to be a significant component of Iranian political and cultural life, contributing to the country's ongoing socio-political landscape.

The writings of prominent figures such as Mahmoud Taleghani, Ali Shariati, or Ruhollah Khomeini are foundational pillars in shaping the ideology surrounding martyrdom in Iran. Subsequent generations of thinkers have expanded upon and refined these foundational ideas, contributing to a nuanced understanding of martyrdom and its significance within Iranian society.

Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleghani (1911–1979), a prominent Iranian cleric and political activist offered influential insights into *shahada*t in Islam. Recognised for his efforts to harmonise Islamic principles with social justice and political engagement, Taleghani perceived *shahadat* as a profound manifestation of faith, sacrifice and devotion to divine causes. In his view, martyrdom was not confined to physical death but encompasses a spectrum of sacrifices and struggles in pursuing righteousness. Taleghani asserted that martyrdom was the gateway to paradise in the hereafter and to the establishment of justice and social equity on earth. For him, actual martyrs willingly forfeit their comfort, desires and lives to uphold Islamic values and serve humanity. In Taleghani's perspective, the 'souls of martyrs are brimming with joy, and they dream of martyrdom' (Surdykowska 2012: 74).

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902–1989), the architect of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the leader of the Iranian Revolution, played a pivotal role in shaping the concept of *shahadat* in the Islamic Republic. Khomeini's teachings and rhetoric were instrumental in promoting and glorifying *shahadat* among his followers. He regarded martyrdom as a central and honourable facet of the Islamic faith (Osiewicz 2020: 45). Khomeini believed that *shahadat* served to draw closer to God and attain an elevated spiritual status. He deemed those who sacrificed their lives for Islam as true heroes and believed they would be rewarded in the afterlife. Khomeini stressed the importance of selflessness and unwavering commitment to Islam, prioritising these over personal desires and worldly possessions. His rhetoric consistently depicted martyrdom as a noble and heroic act, motivating his supporters to embrace the idea of self-sacrifice for the sake of Islam. In his interactions with followers in 1980, Khomeini underscored the distinct attributes of a martyr and the great honour associated with

achieving this state, quoting the Prophet by saying: 'As the Prophet (peace be upon him) says, all sins will be forgiven to the martyr since the first drop of his blood falls'.[2] Khomeini's advocacy for *shahadat* played a significant role in galvanising the masses during the Iranian Revolution and subsequent conflicts, including the Iran-Iraq War.

Ali Shariati (1933–1977) also an influential figure in shaping the ideology of the Islamic Republic, is renowned for his role in popularising Islamic theology within Iranian society. Shariati engaged his contemporaries in discussions about Islam, traditional national values and religious discourse through extensive publications, lectures and audio recordings. He frequently delved into the topic of martyrdom in Islam, presenting it as a powerful and transformative concept extending beyond mere physical sacrifice on the battlefield. According to Shariati, true *shahadat* transcends armed conflict; it manifests in the willingness to sacrifice oneself for loftier ideals such as justice, freedom and the liberation of the oppressed. Shariati's perspective hinged on the notion that *shahid* (martyr) represents a 'spiritual crystallisation of collective spirit',[3] suggesting that by dedicating their lives to justice, individuals do not merely perish but transition into the values they have upheld. It is noteworthy that Shariati, like many Iranian clerics, acknowledged the existence of distinct tiers of martyrdom contingent upon the motivation and rationale behind self-sacrifice. Shariati believed that 'the highest form of martyrdom entails entering a battle with full knowledge of one's impending demise, all to unveil injustice' (Shariati, Taleqani and Mutahhari 2005: 124).

All in all, martyrdom in the Iranian revolutionary and post-revolutionary ideologic paradigm, exemplified by Imam Hussein's sacrifice, has been profoundly influencing Iran's contemporary political identity. Ali Shariati, Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleghani, and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini emphasised martyrdom as a means to mobilise support for Islamic ideals and resistance against perceived injustices. The current regime's commemoration of martyrs serves to reinforce further its ideological stances, such as Islamic fundamentalism and the promotion of Shia Islam as a guiding force in governance and society, and spur public sentiment against perceived external threats, particularly from Western powers.

Inclusive Approaches to Understanding Martyrdom: Findings from Surveys and Qualitative Interviews

In the light of the martyrdom nomenclature (*shahid*) spreading to those who had lost their lives as a result of the 2022 protests, the question emerged of how the contemporary Iranian general population conceives of martyrdom in relation to the more traditional, officially upheld definitions laid out in scholarly treatises such as those presented above. This section explores a selection of such conceptions, suggesting that the evolving perspectives on martyrdom reflect Iranian society teetering on the brink of substantial social transformations that incite unrest.

The following categories of individuals regarded as martyrs have emerged in the survey responses and interviews as ones relevant to contemporary Iranians: Iran-Iraq War martyrs, Islamic Revolution martyrs, religious figures, victims of terrorist attacks, Hajj pilgrims, people killed in minefields, firefighters and border officers, soldiers killed overseas, innocent people dying in disasters, social and political activists. Below, I explore each of these categories in detail.

Iran-Iraq War Martyrs

Throughout the 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq War, numerous Iranians laid down their lives to safeguard their homeland. These individuals have been revered as martyrs for their selfless sacrifice in protecting Iran's sovereignty and upholding its Islamic values. Different institutions, including the state-sponsored Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs and numerous charity foundations organised by individuals, were established to support the families of these martyrs during the war and in its immediate aftermath. These institutions provided the families of fallen soldiers with regular financial support, while the government, in most cases, guaranteed scholarships to their parents, spouses, siblings and children.

Remembered as the Holy Defence, the efforts of the Iran-Iraq War gave the Iranian society a new culture of martyrdom and resistance (Momeni 2019: 179). The Holy Defence perspective encompasses the collective memory and valorisation of the Iran-Iraq War, portraying it as a sacred struggle against external aggression and oppression. Within this framework, martyrdom is glorified as the ultimate sacrifice made in defence of Islam, the nation, and its revolutionary ideals. Many Iranian families have relatives who became shahid during the war. Ali, 35, shared this about his family:

> I grew up in a *shahid* family; my uncle was killed in one of the operations in Saqqez. I cannot think of him in any other way except as a patriot, hero and martyr. Being a brilliant student in his course, he was among the first in our city to join the Sepah (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps). He sacrificed his life to defend Iran, Iranians and his family.

The survey showed that 82% of the 386 participants would include this category in their understanding of *shahid* as they considered the fallen defenders of the Motherland during the war with Iraq heroes and martyrs.

Islamic Revolution Martyrs

Those who actively participated in the 1979 Islamic Revolution and lost their lives in the struggle against the Pahlavi monarchy are often considered martyrs. This includes individuals who perished during protests or confrontations with the security forces. Remarkably, the Islamic Revolution in Iran, despite the actual uprising taking place in 1978–1979, is considered by the official narratives of the Iranian regime as an ongoing process. Therefore, even those political and religious activists who played crucial roles in the Islamic Revolution and passed away many years later have been recognised as revolutionary martyrs. For instance, Mohammad-Ali Rajai, Iran's second post-revolution president, elected in 1981 but assassinated later that year, is officially acknowledged as a *shahid*. A more recent example is Qasem Soleimani, an influential Iranian military commander who led the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps from 1998 to January 2020, when he was killed in a targeted U.S. drone strike. Despite dying long after the Revolution's official conclusion, he is still celebrated as a revolution martyr due to his dedication to the Revolution's ideals.

However, the survey and the follow-up interviews conducted for this study suggest a significant decrease in appreciation of this category. Most survey participants between 19 and 63 (77%) would prefer not to include those fallen in the name of the Islamic Revolution in the contemporary understanding of who can be considered *shahid* as the respondents could hardly relate to the martyrs of the first years of the Revolution and even less to the modern ones. 'It is hard to understand what the purpose of this fight was. The ideals they were fighting for are the biggest tragedy our society can come to. Feels like our youth are coming to the streets to protest against these ideas', said Masih, 21.

And Rahim, 61, explained, 'I would say they have died for what they believed in. I remember that smell of freedom, heroism and the hidden sound of a war drum in our ears, bringing anticipation of becoming a righteous fighter, but now I can't relate to it'.

Religious Figures

Eminent religious figures or scholars who have been specifically targeted or eventually assassinated due to their opposition to the Iranian revolutionary regime have also received official recognition as martyrs. A case in point is Ayatollah Beheshti, who was assassinated in the early years of the Islamic Republic. Official sources unequivocally treat him as a martyr. Any reference to Beheshti in the media, political speeches, interviews, and articles consistently includes the title *shahid*. This practice extends to everyday conversations among ordinary people as well. The ubiquity of commemorative *shahid* street signage bearing the names of these revered figures serves as a tangible testament to their martyrdoms.

While roughly half of all interviewees (44%) strongly agreed with associating religious figures with the status of martyrs, it is intriguing that 63% of the survey respondents were ambivalent about whether these religious figures should be incorporated into the martyr classification. They acknowledged that, due to the influence of the educational system, society, and state institutions, they have become accustomed to appending the title of *shahid* to deceased religious figures from an early age. However, they often do not do it consciously. The fact that in the survey findings, merely 13% of the participants opted to exclude religious figures from the martyrdom categorisation as irrelevant today might also be indicative of the significant influence of these figures on the collective consciousness through deeply entrenched homage within everyday-life traditions and language.

Victims of Terrorist Attacks

Iranians who died in acts of terrorism, both inside and outside the country, are often regarded as martyrs. This includes victims of attacks attributed to militant groups or acts of violence perceived as targeting the Islamic Republic or its interests. Notably, individuals involved in nuclear projects who were either shot or killed with explosives in Mossad-linked attacks, particularly in the early 2010s, are considered martyrs for dedicating their lives to their country's well-being and strategic goals. The information extracted from the interviews contravenes this

conception. Although it is believed that the death of people caused by acts of terror is a tragedy, many respondents see it as too far from the self-sacrifice of soldiers of the Iran-Iraq War; in the majority of interviews, the respondents would prefer categorising them as victims, who tragically lost their lives due to the acts of violence. For example, Fatemeh, 43, said: 'I feel sorry for the victims of terroristic attacks, but don't find an act of martyrdom here, as it seems this person has got into trouble randomly due to injustice. They haven't been fighting for or against something'.

Hajj Pilgrims

The Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, constitutes one of the five pillars of Islam. As a paramount religious obligation (along with the faith creed, prayer, fasting and charity), it attracts to Mecca millions of Muslim participants each year. Among them, Shia Muslims from Iran also partake in this sacred journey. Tragically, the Hajj pilgrimage has been marred by incidents resulting in fatalities, including stampedes, overcrowding, accidents and other lamentable circumstances. For example, in September 2015, a collapsing crane claimed the lives of over 100 individuals, including 11 Iranian citizens. Another calamity during the same year, known as the Mina stampede, resulted in the deaths of 464 Iranian pilgrims. In numerous obituaries, these victims are posthumously honoured with the title *shahid*. However, many survey participants (42%) and interviewees (54%) expressed doubts regarding including these cases in martyrdom categories, citing a lack of conscious self-sacrifice or traditional heroic elements typically associated with martyrdom. Majid, 42, explained:

> I have been to Karbala several times and to Mecca once. I see pilgrimage as a part of my value system and my duty. It is a very different experience nowadays compared to centuries ago. I can arrange a safe trip, get an excellent place to stay, and prepare for this mission. If something happens to me during the Hajj, I would consider it an accident caused by negligence or lousy luck, not martyrdom.

While labelling these individuals as martyrs resonates with the prevailing sentiments and traditions among religious Iranians, this classification deviates from the conventional definition of martyrdom.

Traditionally, martyrdom emphasises action against injustice or in defence of specific religious principles or beliefs, whereas the circumstances surrounding these individuals' deaths do not fully align with these criteria.

People Killed in Minefields

After the Iran-Iraq War, there have been documented instances of civilians inadvertently traversing minefields, with a particular concentration of such occurrences in the regions close to Iraq's border. These trespasses have, regrettably, resulted in severe injuries and fatalities. In time, a custom has emerged whereby these individuals have been posthumously recognised as martyrs, and their memory venerated through visits to the sites where these tragic incidents happened. The most renowned of these endeavours, known as 'Rahian-e Noor' or 'Travelers of Light', is a pilgrimage program instituted by the Islamic Republic of Iran. It entails an organised dispatch of groups of Iranian citizens, usually religious youths, to visit sanctified sites integral to Shia Islam, including the revered Ahl al-Bayt shrines, associated with the familial lineage of the Prophet Muhammad and situated in Iraq, Iran and Syria, but also locations such as Shalamcheh, an Iranian town on the border with Iraq that was one of the first targets of the Iraqi invasion in 1988 and is now known for a war memorial complex. What is significant here, is that visiting Shalamcheh entails risking one's life or health given the vast concentration of undiscovered, but still active, minefields created during the Iran-Iraq War. These areas serve as enduring symbols of heroism, altruism and sacrifice. Consequently, instances, where participants of the Rahian-e Noor caravan have inadvertently perished in mine explosions, are officially deemed martyrdom, per the narrative espoused by the government. However, the reaction to such occurrences, as well as the subsequent public discourse surrounding them, manifests a pronounced polarity contingent upon the political and religious inclinations of the populace. Adherents sympathetic to the official ideological tenets of the regime may endorse the official posthumous classification of martyrdom as both 'correct and honourable'. In contrast, the younger generation, characterised by a more secular worldview, is inclined to perceive this designation as propagandistic and 'inappropriate'. For example, Armina, 21, explained: 'Strange adventure. I don't think it is appropriate to call martyrs those who neglect their safety and join dubious activities for no reason'.

Participating in the Rahian-e Noor campaign does not necessarily imply that individuals consider the people killed during these caravans to be martyrs. Saleh, 49, shared his memories:

> As a student, I joined the Rahian-e Noor caravan with my cousin. There was a guy in our group who hit a mine. Fortunately, he stayed alive but was severely hurt and became an invalid. I still remember that horrific day and would probably ban this kind of activity, as it is impossible to guarantee the safety of participants. Martyrdom, in this case? I think if we add Rahian-e Noor to martyrs, it is dishonouring actual martyrs.

Firefighters—Border Officers

In earlier sections of this article, we focus on expounding the case of soldiers who met their demise on the battlefield, in the Persian language tradition, and earned the revered title of martyr. This traditional construct is deeply ingrained within Persian sources' linguistic and cultural fabric. However, it is noteworthy that commemorating individuals as martyrs is not limited exclusively to military personnel but extends to individuals in diverse vocations, including firefighters who meet their unfortunate ends while diligently discharging their duties. A poignant illustration of this phenomenon is the tragic incident involving the Plasco Building, a towering 17-story structure dedicated to commerce and trade. In 2017, this tower succumbed to a devastating conflagration and ensuing explosions, resulting in the untimely demise of 20 individuals, many of whom were valiant firefighters. The entire nation was plunged into a state of mourning for selfless martyrs and honouring their unwavering commitment to safeguarding the lives of others. This category once again emphasises not only a willingness to sacrifice one's life as essential for a broad audience to acknowledge an individual reaching the status of a martyr. It also focuses on the idea that 'dying for somebody rather than something' makes a potential martyr more acceptable and leaves no place for alternative judgement. Recognising the cases of firefighters as instances of martyrdom, Iranians value social consciousness and responsibility to society. The survey results too revealed predominant agreement (89%) among respondents in categorising this category of individuals as martyrs. Here, the conception of a martyr is very close to such notions as 'saviour' and 'hero'—a 'secular martyr'(Koehler 2020 after Hoffman and McCormick 2004: 254). Such martyr-hero confronts evil and self-sacrifices to save people's lives (Koehler 2020: 124).

Soldiers Killed Overseas

The situation with soldiers dying in military operations in other countries during peacetime was quite different, as the slight majority of survey respondents (67%) questioned the purpose of the self-sacrifice. However, there is no doubt about considering 'modern fallen warriors' as martyrs in the official narratives of the Iranian regime. The case of Mohsen Hojaji, an Iranian soldier and a member of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), stands out as a salient exemplar of sacrifice and martyrdom within contemporary Iran. Hojaji's compelling narrative emerged as a symbol of dedication and sacrifice in the modern Iranian context. His journey led him to enlist in the IRGC, where he volunteered for various military operations, including deployments to Syria as part of Iran's assistance to the Syrian government during the ongoing tumultuous Syrian Civil War. Mohsen Hojaji's untimely demise in 2017 in Syria was not just mourned but also elevated to a status of national heroism and martyrdom in Iran. His legacy rapidly permeated various social media platforms and Iranian media outlets, accentuating his unwavering courage, selflessness and commitment to safeguarding the interests of Iran. Hojaji's family has been featured on state television talk shows, and documentaries chronicling his life and sacrifice have been produced. Additionally, the esteemed memory of Mohsen Hojaji is perpetuated through the naming of the streets after him in several provinces of Iran, including Bushehr, Markazi and Hormozgan.

In contrast to this conspicuous government attention and state media coverage, Hojaji's case emerged as one of the most memorable and simultaneously contentious episodes in recent years. It elicited multifaceted questions from the Iranian people—participants in the survey and social media commentators included. Among these questions are doubts concerning the nature of the conflict Mohsen Hojaji was engaged in—whose war was he fighting? Furthermore, observers have questioned the appropriateness of romanticising the ostensibly purposeless death of a young family man who left a vulnerable child bereft of paternal care. Indeed, these questions collectively underscore a pervasive sense of scepticism concerning the rationality and justification for the self-sacrifice of young Iranians in military conflicts that lack official Iranian involvement or take place outside the national borders. Atisa, 51, explained: 'The death of this young man touched me. The problem is that the street named after him can't return a father to the family. I don't get the purpose of our kids dying elsewhere, even heroically'.

Innocent People Dying in Disasters

As a general observation, it is noteworthy that the term 'martyr' is not conventionally attributed to individuals who tragically lost their lives due to natural disasters or accidents. Notably, there are no mentions of such cases in religious texts or official proclamations. Nevertheless, some families employ the term 'martyr' when composing obituaries for their deceased relatives. This usage is rooted in their belief that the untimely demise of their loved ones reflects the divine will, facilitating their ascent to the highest plane of *taslim*, which signifies submission to the will of God. This particular category of martyrdom has emerged from the compilation of materials extracted from obituaries I studied in a local community during my stay in Iran (primarily in Shiraz, Isfahan and Tehran) from 2011 to 2019 and has been subsequently elaborated upon through the interviews. A notable characteristic of this conceptualisation of martyrdom lies in its origin among individuals and local communities.

Social and Political Activists

Individuals actively involved in social or political activism and who meet unfortunate ends while championing specific causes, such as those related to human rights, democracy or social justice, are, on occasion, posthumously recognised as martyrs by their adherents and like-minded individuals. This category has had particular resonance during the 2022 uprising following the tragic passing of Mahsa Amini.

In a recent analysis, A.R. Murthy aptly proposed the concept of *political martyrdom* (Murphy 2023: 467) as a pertinent contemporary phenomenon helping to explain the process of surrounding ascription of martyrdom in contemporary Iran. The notion of political martyrdom draws on the Christian religious traditions and encompasses instances of self-sacrifice for the betterment of society, often stemming from resistance to state authority and its actions that are met with objection. In the case of Mahsa Amini, attributing her demise to police violence eliminates the possibility of associating her with several of the previously mentioned martyrdom categories because she neither died during the Iran–Iraq War nor was assassinated or killed while on pilgrimage.

Moreover, designating her as a martyr remains complex because she was not a political or social activist, and her death, although triggering the unrest, occurred prior to it during her peaceful stroll in Tehran. Her passive role and the absence of active resistance against oppression or

leadership in the uprising present challenges to such categorisation. While many survey respondents suggested that Mahsa Amini's passing can be framed as a form of martyrdom (39%) due to the profoundly distressing and painful nature of her death, the prevailing sentiment among the majority of the survey participants (72%) was that she was a victim of the regime cruelty and served as a *symbol* of the Woman-Life-Freedom unrest.[4] This perspective reflects specific theoretical ideas, wherein individuals are regarded as symbols, shedding certain personal traits while retaining specific social attributes (Breckman 2019: 69-71). In the case of Mahsa Amini, these attributes included her status as a young woman from an ethnic minority (Kurdish), her personality, which friends and family described as sincere and genuine, and her alignment with the philosophy of the Woman-Life-Freedom movement, often encapsulated in the slogan in Kurdish language *Jin, Jiyan, Azadî* (also meaning *Woman, Life, Freedom*).[5]

Since September 2022, reports from the oppositional news agencies and blogs of social activists in exile, as well as social media posts by families of deceased protestors, have been demonstrating a broader usage of the term 'martyrdom' than what is typically found in the works of clerics or statements from prominent political figures in Iran. Even the term 'a martyr of the Motherland liberation', which emerged during the Islamic Revolution, now carries fresh interpretations, especially regarding young activists killed by the government. The expanded use of the term 'martyrdom' diverges from the conventional understanding within the Islamic Republic's political doctrine and the objectives of the Islamic Revolution. Drawing parallels with the ethos of combatting injustice exemplified by Imam Hussein, many young protestors perceive the current regime as oppressive and seek to liberate Iran from its grasp.[6] This expanded usage encompasses accidental fatalities during protests and the execution of protestors by the government.

Most of my interviewees (69%) linked the tragic death of a young boy during the anti-governmental protests to Mahsa Amini's case. In 2022, the killing of Kian Pirfalak,[7] a 9-year-old, during a crackdown on the Mahsa Amini protests was blamed on the state security forces. Despite not being an active protestor, Kian Pirfalak, has since been considered a martyr because of who killed him. His martyrdom classification is ambiguous to some respondents, yet his death's profound impact on Iranian society within and outside Iran is undeniable. Amir, 29, explained:

> Political and economic reasons make people in Iranian cities and towns go to the streets and protest. The tragedies of Mahsa and Kian show that the political system in this country cannot provide us with the minimum personal safety. How many other innocent martyrs must sacrifice their lives for those who still pretend to sleep?

It is important to emphasise that, in comparison to Mahsa Amini, Kian Pirfalak, despite his young age, can be regarded as an activist. After Kian's demise, his family shared his written notes and paintings devoted to social justice.

Similarly, the notion of dying in confrontation with the official powers appears relevant to the two other cases suggested by my interviewees: that of Nika Shakarami and Khodanoor Lejei. Nika Shakarami, a 16-year-old student and blogger, went missing during the 2022 anti-government protests. When, after a few days, the news about her death reached her family, the government attributed it to a fall. However, based on a range of evidence and witness accounts, Nika Shakarami's family accused security forces of her abduction and murder.[8] Khodanoor Lejei[9] was a 27-year-old man severely injured during the 2022 protests and tied to a pole to bleed to death.[10] Despite official government accounts suggesting that his death was not related to the protests, many Iranians on social media views him as a martyr due to his participation in the anti-government protests. Lejei was treated inhumanely before his death; his crucifixion-like imagery and Balouch Sunni minority group affiliation further made his case very similar to the one of Mahsa Amini. Some social media users shared edited versions of Lejei's images, drawing parallels to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, to underscore the profound suffering endured by the protester before his death due to the regime's oppressive actions.

The case of Mohammad Moradi,[11] an Iranian citizen, who committed suicide in Paris to draw the attention of the global Iranian diaspora and the international community regarding the protests, brings yet another new perspective to the discourse of political martyrdom. Following his demise, Mohammad Moradi has been frequently called a *shahid*, with people commemorating his life and viewing his sacrifice as a potent act of despair deserving recognition. Seen as an *altruistic suicide* (Durkheim 2002 [1897]: 180), Moradi's death fits well into the view of martyrdom involving self-sacrifice. Martyrdom is often associated with religious or ideological motivations, while altruistic suicide

is primarily rooted in a strong sense of duty or obligation to one's community or society (Oakley 2011: 8). In other words, ideological motivations stem from deeply held beliefs or principles that drive individuals to act in alignment with broader ideological goals, religious norms or political preferences. In contrast, a sense of duty to a community involves a commitment to serve and support the well-being of one's local social group, driven by personal connections and shared values within that community. Scholars tend to highlight the distinction between altruistic suicide and martyrdom. Altruistic suicide is seen as a manifestation of a destructive psychological disorder, whereas martyrdom arises from heroic action and a willingness to die rather than a desire to do so. In Mohammad Moradi's case, these two commitments came to overlap both in his act and the interpretations that followed.

In conclusion, the cases of deaths of protesters (Nika Shakarami, Khodanoor Lejei and Mohammad Moradi) and those more passively involved but targeted by the regime (Mahsa Amini and Kian Pirfalak) expand our understanding of martyrdom in contemporary Iran by demonstrating its relevance in contexts beyond traditional settings. The incidents mentioned above highlight how individuals sacrificing their lives for causes such as democracy, human rights, or social justice can be regarded as martyrs, broadening the scope of martyrdom beyond historical or religious contexts and bringing it closer to the realities of modern-day activism and societal struggles. Among cases described above in separate categories, soldiers killed overseas, victims of terrorist attacks, and social and political activists represent different angles of the concept of political martyrdom, each illustrating the diverse contexts in which such sacrifices occur: from fighting for the existing government and ideology to battle against them. Firefighters exemplify a specific form of secular martyrdom, highlighting the significance of social values when the duty to protect lives transcends professional boundaries.

Conclusion

The Woman-Life-Freedom uprisings in Iran have sparked significant changes in the traditional concept of martyrdom, which was once strongly endorsed by the state. This article has explored the evolving public preferences, political shifts and ideological transformations that have blurred the previously clear lines of martyrdom within Iranian society. Through examining the shift from a religious understanding of martyrdom to the conceptions incorporating political and secular martyrs focusing on the image of social activist martyrs who died

during the 2022 uprising, we could trace the changing dynamics of martyrdom in Iran. At the same time, it is essential to note that the traditional concept of martyrdom, rooted in religious and nationalist ideals, still holds significant cultural and historical value for Iranians. For example, the memory of the Iran-Iraq War martyrs continues to be honoured within Iranian society, with the sacrifice of these individuals during the war still shaping the collective memory and identity of the nation. But the emergence of new understanding of martyrdom suggests a shifting societal perspective that challenges traditional notions associated with martyrdom, emphasising factors beyond religion and war. This evolution reflects broader changes in societal values, perceptions, and interpretations of sacrifice and heroism within contemporary contexts.

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10 In internet resources, there are at least two versions of how Khodanur Lejei died. Some sources claim he was wounded by police and left to die on the pole to which he was tied. Others suggest that after being shot and spending a considerable amount of time tied to the pole, he was later taken to the hospital but was denied assistance, being perceived as a protester.

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Mikkel Bunkenborg, Morten Nielsen and Morten Axel Pedersen, *Collaborative Damage: An Experimental Ethnography of Chinese Globalisation*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2022. 277 pp. ISBN 978-1-5017-5983-3

This fascinating and thought-provoking book exists as a palimpsest of different themes and 'levels' of analysis. Probably of widest interest is the topic of 'globalising China' and the question of whether it is possible to draw any general conclusions about the ways in which Chinese interests are attempting to root themselves in Eurasia and Africa and form win-win interactions with local populations. An equally important subject for the authors is anthropological methodology. How can such a geographically disparate and still shape-shifting process as globalising China be studied? Comparison of different cases of China in the world is seemingly the obvious method. But the authors of this book systematically undermine the idea that a collaborative research project in which anthropologists specialised in diverse sites of Chinese expansion compare and pool their results is adequate for the task. The third theme to run through the book is the most original and interesting. It focuses analytically on the 'failed collaboration' between the authors, positing it as a mirror of the failed collaboration and endemic misunderstandings between the Chinese and their interlocutors in the two sites studied, Mongolia and Mozambique. The misunderstandings observed in the field are shown to reappear in the discordances among the anthropologists about how to interpret their materials, even about what a visible event or thing means. Thus, it is argued, the real-life confusion of globalising China can be understood *from within*, from the several years of witnessing, documenting and debating its effects among the anthropologists. In theoretical terms, this poses a challenge to straightforward positivist-type analysis, since it disallows—or seems to disallow, a point to which this review will return—any observation from the field studies standing as a fact.

The book starts by setting out the research design with which the project began: a specialist on China, Bunkenborg, would centre a three-pronged study alongside a Mongolia expert, Pedersen and a Mozambique specialist, Nielsen. The global China perspective could

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then be compared with the local Mongolian and Mozambique ones. The fieldwork would be conducted in pairs and then all three anthropologists would visit each site to ensure each participant had overall knowledge. It was discovered that this formal design was obstructive and productive in equal measure. Discussion of the theoretical issues involved leads to a useful disquisition on what seems to many anthropologists an obsolete model of knowledge production, the comparative method. In this case, it emerged that there was no external vantage point from which to make a comparison between the three perspectives. Since the three authors themselves reproduced the same profound epistemic divergences as occurred between the Chinese businesspeople and their Mongolian and Mozambiquan interlocutors, the initial research model was judged to have failed. It was replaced by 'a hyper-reflexive mode of enquiry whereby a certain object of study fuses with the people who study it into a single analytical reality that we denote as "collaborative damage"' (p. 17).

This failed collaboration being the main focus of the book, readers looking for substantive information about the types and degree of Chinese penetration of the Mongolian and Mozambiquan economies will not find it here. What they will discover, however, is vivid and exquisitely nuanced information about how Chinese and local actors interact in many different situations, with descriptions and dialogues revealing eager (but misplaced) attempts at closeness as well as a variety of tactics of deliberate distancing. The book contains six ethnographic chapters, the first three on diverse instances of Chinese-Mongolian relations and the following three on case studies in Mozambique. We move from a Chinese agri-businessman who cannot understand why his efforts to make friends with the locals received a stony response in the first chapter, to a Chinese mining enclosure in the Gobi Desert in chapter two. The company attempted to establish a 'flower garden style' mine, and in line with Chinese practice over centuries, planted an enclosure with trees and vegetables aiming to create a pleasant, civilised society in a benign inoffensive manner. But as Bunkenborg et. al. observe (p. 73), 'imperial affects do not depend on having imperial intentions'. The Chinese attempt to introduce a radically different landscape was experienced as an alien imposition and rejected by the Mongols—such moves towards Sinification being furthermore something they were familiar with from centuries of imperial outreach. In return, they labelled the Chinese as uncivilised, chiefly for the unceremonious and ignorant way the workers inhabited Mongolian *gers* (felt tents). The

third chapter deals with the operations of a large Chinese oil company in a remote eastern corner of Mongolia. They built a road for export of the oil by truck. But the road paradoxically served to separate the Chinese from the Mongol herders living nearby. The Mongolian habit was to maintain diverse, multi-stranded networks of relations, travelling maybe slowly, calling in at *gers* on the way. This new road was physically and conceptually narrow, designed for one purpose only (oil export). Completely foreign to the local way of life, it denoted only estrangement. The following three chapters analyse Sino-Mozambiquan encounters. A study of local perceptions of Chinese engineers contracted to build a bridge and develop a non-urbanised district is followed in chapter five by discussion of Chinese enforced hierarchy and separation at various workplaces from construction companies to sawmills and shoe shops. Chapter six offers a fascinating case study of Mozambiquan forest scouts employed to track down high value trees for Chinese timber-export companies. It turned out that intuition, ancestral spirits, secrets and occult links with the Chinese were involved, all of which were differently understood by the various agents, scrambling any attempt at an overall analysis.

Each of the six substantive chapters includes as part of the ethnography accounts of how the anthropologists could not agree about what they were seeing. Bunkenborg, who spoke Chinese, could not help seeing the point of view of the Chinese protagonists, perhaps partly because he was pushed into this position by the suspicions his conversations in Chinese generated among Mongolians and Mozambiquans who could not understand them. Meanwhile, Pedersen and Nielsen, who spoke the regional languages, tended to side with the 'anticolonial' responses of Mongols and Mozambiquans respectively.

The authors coin the concept of 'intimate distance' to denote the awkward relations and latent or real conflicts between the Mongolians, Mozambiquans and Chinese, as well as amongst themselves. They expand Anna Tsing's idea of 'zones of awkward estrangement' described in her book *Friction* (2004) firstly through a critique of anthropology's tendency to fetishize positive connectivity, pointing out that it is possible to have a *relation* (of engaged estrangement) that is not a *connection* and secondly through a self-critique of their own biases. Yet there is something unsatisfactory about the authors' claim that 'intimate distance' is only a heuristic analytical prop when they describe countless instances of it as factual interactions that they recorded. The same is true of the two further 'central concepts' that

framed their endeavour, 'enclave' and 'empire'. They conclude at the end of the book that Chinese ventures do usually end up by taking the form of self-contained enclaves detached in most ways from their surroundings; and that 'empire in the making' is indeed a fruitful way to understand Chinese globalisation, provided that the idea of empire is rethought. Their own account of empire insists that conflicts, constraints and contradictions are integral to the meaning of the idea, rather than, as in other versions, external effects that empire is subject to. In the end, the reader, at least this reader, is left unsatisfied by the implications left hanging by the authors' emphasis on self-reflexivity. For their final claim is that by making a virtue of collapsing the boundary between analytical object and analysing subject, Chinese globalization is present not only out there but 'within and between the three of us': 'We too are the Chinese empire', they state on page 234. On the one hand, we readers can appreciate this important point about the reverberations of conflicts observed in the field within the observers; but on the other hand, the emphasis—even the fetishisation—of anthropological reflexivity and methodology leaves unanswered the status of the descriptions and analysis of whatever is 'out there'. The impression is given that Chinese globalisation in its entirety is to be understood as something in inverted commas, bracketed off by heuristic devices and the personal biases of the anthropologists. However, luckily, I think, the book does not work this way consistently throughout. The ethnographic chapters operate differently. They describe things seen and said at particular places and times, and only then discuss how the anthropologists disagreed about them. This means that the readers too can make their own judgements about these incidents and about the actual workings of Chinese globalisation.

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