My dissertation is concerned with the everyday life of Hazara[[1]](#footnote-1) Afghan refugees in Mashhad, Iran’s biggest shrine city. A large number of Hazaras have historically been present in Iran as fellow Shi’as, Persian speakers, seminary students, seasonal labourers, traders, and pilgrims. However, after a massive wave of immigration to Iran after the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, they came to be seen exclusively as *avareh*, war-afflicted migrants. While initially, they were given permission to spread across the country—rather than staying in camps—and to access a wide range of social benefits as Shi’a brothers, Iranian policy towards them grew volatile after the introduction of structural adjustment policies in the early 1990s. Social benefits were suspended, while repatriation policies led to mass deportations.

Conditions of prolonged war and instability in Afghanistan, combined with the legal and economic insecurities of living in Iran, have resulted in a cycle of recurring voluntary and

involuntary migrations back and forth between the two countries, as well as more recent forms of

movement towards Europe, Australia, and North America. For the young generation of Hazaras, many of whom are born and raised in Iran in the midst of such instabilities, often not having the citizenship of either two countries, life is experienced as always transitory, uncertain, and on the move—even if they have never physically moved. Based on more than twenty months of ethnographic fieldwork and follow-up research from 2015 till now, my doctoral dissertation entitled “Fugitive Territories: The Hazara Refugees’ Life at the Threshold in Iran” investigates textures of ordinary life in a situation in which conditions of prolonged waiting and uncertainty are experienced as a form of life rather than a temporary break from the otherwise secure routines of the everyday. By attending to everyday life of residents in Golshahr, a mixed urban slum neighbourhood in Mashhad, conducting interviews, and collecting life histories, my dissertation explores how long-standing forms of mutuality and obligation formed in the urban space are informing ordinary circumstances of precarious protection available to refugees in Iran. It aims to reconceptualize the category of refugee and its teleological rendering as a temporary status that would eventually get resolved through the regaining of citizenship by either return or reintegration.

As of July 2022, I have drafted and received my advisors’ feedback on four of my chapters. The first chapter argues that the proper genealogy of the present-day refugee in Iran could be seen in the figure of *basti*, the one taking refuge at the shrines and other sites of sanctuary seeking. Investigating the history of sanctuaries in Iran, this chapter approaches shrines as fugitive territories. Fugitive carries two different senses here. First, it is a place to which those seeking protection can turn temporarily in order to negotiate with those in power through the mediation of *shafi’*, an intercessor. Second, a delimited territory with alternative sovereignty. One that continuously escapes from and refuses to be entirely overtaken by the state’s sovereignty, challenging its legal regime of border control, inclusion, and exclusion. In this chapter, I show how the fugitive quality of the shrine sanctuaries, as embedded exteriorities, help refugees as the ones pushed to the most precarious margins of society, to yet avoid a relationship of total violence and exploitation and to be able to establish a negotiable bond with those holding power over their lives. This chapter discusses how the shrine in Mashhad is used as a medium both by the refugees and the state in their attempts to negotiate with one another.

Drawing on my interlocutors’ life histories steeped in conditions of prolonged indeterminacy, my second chapter seeks to understand the temporality of suspension in the experiences of refugees. Unlike the previous chapter in which the concept of the threshold was employed in terms of practices of skilled coping and affiliation, here, through discussing a single woman’s story of falling in and out of madness, I show how living in the shadow of a threshold would also require gestures of disaffiliation as means of inhabiting a suspended life. I explore various instances and figures of disaffiliation and evasion in the life of my interlocutors—exceptionally common in the Golshahr neighbourhood— as ways of struggling to inhabit a time of forced immobility. They vary from losing oneself in the lure of art and literature to escaping into forbidden love, attempts at fleeing to Europe, and fighting in Syria. I discuss how these states of disaffiliation can release forces that could bring about an environment in which norms could be established anew, opening ways for the emergence of new forms of danger and possibility.

My third chapter discusses the issue of perpetual migrations and its connection with forces of kinship. While displacement has often been discussed in terms of an event, a rupture from an otherwise secure sedentary life, as something that state and media could easily point out to and narrativize as a consequence of war and violence—often imagined to have fixed temporal and spatial delimitations—prolonged ethnography with perpetual refugees proves it otherwise. By attending to the daily life-circumstances of one particular family and how they were eventually led to their attempt at clandestinely crossing the border to Turkey—and their subsequent movements back and forth between Iran and Afghanistan after their deportation from Turkey—this chapter discusses the slow grind, quasi-event side of migration that is often not captured in such meta-narratives of war and crude violence. It explores displacement as it originates from and gets absorbed in the deteriorating everyday relations one has with her or his kin and neighbor, relations that render living in a place (im)possible. My fourth chapter engages with the issue of shifting names, documentary politics, bureaucracy, and indeterminacy within immigration law in Iran, discussing various ways through which law and community engage in a series of partnerships that maintain, challenge, and mutually create each of them.

If awarded Elahe Omidyar Mir-Djalali Fellowship, I will have the time to finalize my drafted introduction and conclusion chapters. From September till the end of October, I will work on these two sections. From November to December, I will continue to revise all my previously circulated chapters and prepare myself for the defence. With this Fellowship, I would have the support to complete my dissertation and defend my thesis by January 2023.

1. One of the ethnic and religious minority groups of Afghanistan, Hazaras have suffered a long history of persecution against them in modern Afghanistan. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)