

**THE ARMONIA EFFECT: A GLOBAL HISTORY OF CANADA'S STATE AND
CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONSES TO AFGHAN REFUGEES**

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Abstract

This dissertation examines Canada's response to Afghan displacement between 1979 and 2024. Despite constituting one of the world's largest and most protracted displaced populations, Afghan refugees long occupied a marginal place within Canadian refugee governance, overshadowed by other humanitarian priorities and filtered through the geopolitical imaginaries of the Cold War and the War on Terror. NATO's withdrawal and the collapse of the Afghan state in 2021 altered this landscape. Over the following three years Canada resettled more Afghan refugees than at any previous point in its history, seemingly reaffirming its reputation as a humanitarian leader. Yet the federal response also faced intense scrutiny as actors across state and civil society pointed to delays, restrictive eligibility criteria, complex application procedures, and extensive security vetting that obstructed access to protection. Canada's response thus presents a paradox: an unprecedented expansion of Afghan admissions alongside heightened contestation. To account for this paradox, I advance the concept of the *armonia* effect in refugee governance. Drawing on the metaphor of the *armonia*—a hand-pumped instrument whose sound depends on both airflow and the configuration of stops and reeds—the concept theorizes how advocacy generates policy openings when it resonates with existing discourses of obligation, institutional precedents, and reputational commitments through which states imagine themselves in the international order. Protection expands when moral claims align with an inherited architecture of law, security, and political identity that renders certain demands legible to the state. Yet this configuration also produces dissonance. Competing interests, narratives of deservingness, and structural constraints introduce friction into the governance landscape even as pathways to protection emerge. Through a global-historical approach grounded in critical policy discourse analysis, the study traces three developments. First, it reconstructs the Cold War and post-9/11 institutional landscape that marginalized Afghan displacement while embedding refugee governance within a global counterterrorism regime shaped by racialized and civilizational logics. Second, it examines how Canada's military engagement produced narratives of Afghan deservingness through frames of allyship, gendered rescue, and securitized suspicion. Third, it analyzes post-2021 advocacy by veterans and diaspora organizations, showing how these actors translated crisis into policy-legible demands that expanded protection in stratified and uneven ways.

Dedication

*For my father and my mother, whose own journeys across place, loss, and beginning again made
this one possible.*

*And for my هموطنان — for the many peoples who have carried Afghanistan in memory, grief,
struggle, and hope — beyond exile, beyond war, and toward the unfinished promise of a more
just world.*

Acknowledgements

This dissertation was written across many years, institutions, conversations, doubts, revisions, and returns. And like all work that emerges from a life lived in relation to others, it carries the traces of those who taught me, challenged me, sustained me, and reminded me that scholarship is never a solitary act. It is also a form of inheritance, a labour of companionship, and, at its best, a small gesture toward worlds not yet made.

First and foremost, I thank my supervisor, Dr. Ethel Tungohan, for her guidance, encouragement, and steady confidence in this project. Her supervision helped me hold together the intellectual and political commitments of this dissertation, especially when the project felt too large, too uneven, or too difficult to bring into its final form. I am grateful not only for her careful readings and generous support, but also for the example she offers of scholarship that remains attentive to the world beyond the university.

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To the many friends, colleagues, teachers, and staff at York University and Toronto Metropolitan University whose names I cannot fully list here, I offer my sincere gratitude. Please forgive the omissions. So much of a dissertation is sustained by conversations that may seem brief at the time, but later become part of the life of the work.

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before the language of academic life takes hold. I am grateful for that continuity, and for a friendship that has endured across so many years.

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List of Acronyms

ACI	Afghan-Canadian Interpreters
ANSF	Afghan National Security Forces
AFGH	Special Committee on Afghanistan, Canada
AWO	Afghan Women's Organization
AYEDI	Afghan Youth Engagement and Development Initiative
CCAP	Canadian Campaign for Afghan Peace
CCR	Canadian Council for Refugees
CHF	Canadian Heroes Foundation
CIMM	Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, Canada
CMBC	Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization
CPC	Conservative Party of Canada
CW4WA	Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan
DND	Department of National Defense, Canada
GAC	Global Affairs Canada
H2H	Helmet to Hardhats
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IRCC	Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada
JHR	Journalists for Human Rights
MSBF	Manmeet Singh Bhullar Foundation
MoRR	Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation, Afghanistan
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDDN	Standing Committee on National Defence, Canada
NDP	New Democratic Party of Canada
PSC	Public Safety Canada
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
US	United States of America
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VTN	Veterans Transition Network

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Preface

This dissertation did not begin where it eventually arrived. Like many intellectual journeys worth undertaking, it began elsewhere, in partial questions, in unfinished conversations, in intuitions that preceded argument. During my undergraduate and master's studies in the Niagara region, I found myself drawn not only to research in the formal academic sense, but also to community work, political discussion, and the everyday labour of trying to think and engage with others about the conditions of justice. I became interested in social movements across the world, in the long and uneven histories by which ordinary people had confronted subjugation and domination, and in the possibility that genuine ties of solidarity might be forged across distinct spaces, peoples, and times. What compelled me was more than just the fact of struggle. It was the question of relation, how one history speaks to another, how one community's claim on justice is heard by another, and how political affinities are made, frayed, or denied.

Yet I was also puzzled, and increasingly so, by the disconnects that often appeared between those projects that, at least in principle, seemed oriented toward overlapping horizons of justice, inclusion, and equality. I saw moments when decolonial critique, antiracist politics, migrant justice, and other emancipatory traditions spoke past one another, as if proximity in language or aspiration did not necessarily yield a deeper political intimacy. There were solidarities that seemed possible but remained unmade, and there were gestures toward coalition that sometimes sat uneasily atop unresolved tensions. I did not yet know how to think these tensions through with the care they required, but I knew they mattered. They signalled, for me, not the failure of collective struggle as such, but one of its constitutive difficulties.

Over time, these concerns became more concrete. My interests and commitments evolved through involvement in migrant justice efforts, community organizing, and relationships with Indigenous communities. These experiences did not offer easy answers, nor did they permit the comfort of abstraction. They instead pressed upon me the political, ethical, and historical density of the questions I was asking. By the time I entered my PhD program in Toronto, I did so wanting to understand more fully the political, normative, and theoretical contours of relationships between racialized, migrant, refugee, settler, and Indigenous peoples in what is now called Canada. I was interested in how these relations were structured by power, by history, by law, and by uneven forms of recognition. But, like many of the scholars and activists I have

encountered along my journey, I was also interested in whether more difficult and honest forms of solidarity might still be thought and practiced within a settler-colonial present.

Then came the events of 2021. The withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan, the collapse of the Afghan state, the return of Taliban rule, and the scenes of panic, abandonment, and displacement that followed. Like many others, I watched those events with grief and alarm. But I also came to understand, at a more visceral level, something I had already learned through my studies years earlier—that the personal is political, and that there is a ghost in everyone’s research—even if one does not immediately know how to name it or even realize it is there.

Afghanistan was not, for me, a distant object of study that suddenly entered the field of vision through geopolitical crisis. My father’s homelands had been in turmoil since at least 1979, and that turmoil formed part of the background against which his own resettlement in Canada in the late 1980s became possible. My family lived a modest life. My parents worked six and often seven days a week to support us and to help sponsor others, continuing to do so until I was in high school. And so, the language of refugee governance, policy pathways, sponsorship, admission, and resettlement was not just institutional vocabulary to be encountered in documents, parliamentary debates, or academic texts. It had already structured the everyday fabric of my life, if not always in those exact terms. It helped organize the conditions of our family’s existence, our relation to labour, to uncertainty, to obligation, and to hope. In this sense, refugee governance in Canada did not simply become my topic. It had already, in profound ways, been one of the conditions under which my upbringing unfolded. It continues to inform how I understand life, relation, and justice in my communities and on these lands.

This recognition complicated my research agenda as much as it illuminated it. I had entered doctoral study with a broad theoretical interest in the relations among distinct peoples within a settler-colonial state and society. I imagined a project that would contribute to the growing body of scholarship examining how differently positioned peoples are drawn into, and made by, the same political order, even as they inhabit it unevenly. I wanted to think through how Afghan refugees and immigrants might also be situated within this field of relations, how their journeys, political histories, and colonial entanglements with Western powers, including Canada, might bear upon their arrival to Turtle Island and upon the terms of their incorporation and integration into Canadian life.

But the events of 2021 forced another task to the foreground. Before I could adequately theorize Afghan resettlement within the context of Canadian settler colonialism, I needed first to understand, far more deeply than I then did, the empirical history of Afghan displacement, the Canadian policy field that had governed Afghan refugee admissions over time, and the broader Afghan social and political histories from which these contemporary crises had emerged. I needed to strengthen my grasp of policy analysis, deepen my knowledge of Afghan refugee migration to Canada, and immerse myself more seriously in the historical literature on Afghanistan, a country whose cycles of conflict and displacement had by then extended across decades and yet remained strikingly underexamined in Canadian refugee studies. The result was not a departure from my initial concerns so much as a necessary reorientation. To ask the larger question responsibly, I first had to build the ground beneath it.

This dissertation is the product of that reorientation. It offers a historical and analytical account of Canada's governance of Afghan refugees from the late Cold War onward, tracing the changing configurations of state policy, advocacy, recognition, and exclusion that structured this field long before 2021, even if that year gave it unprecedented visibility. It asks why Afghan displacement, despite its scale and duration, so often occupied a marginal place in Canadian public discourse and policy, and why more expansive responses emerged only belatedly and unevenly. It follows the development of a policy landscape that was once sparse and hesitant, then gradually more populated by state and civil society actors pressing competing claims about obligation, deservingness, and protection. In trying to make sense of this dynamic, I developed the concept of the *armonia effect* in refugee governance, to name those moments when advocacy, political opportunity, moral pressure, and institutional receptivity aligned sufficiently to produce new openings in the field of protection.

Yet this dissertation also bears traces of the question from which I began, even where it does not pursue that question as fully as I once imagined. It touches upon settler-colonial dynamics, but it does not exhaust them. Indeed, one of the lessons of this project has been that the emerging state, civil society, and academic engagements with Afghan refugees in Canada have too rarely confronted, in a sustained way, the settler-colonial order within which refugee admission, resettlement, and belonging are governed. If this dissertation establishes the historical architecture of Canada's Afghan refugee governance, then the work that remains is to think more fully about how that architecture operates within an ongoing structure of settler sovereignty—

one rooted in the dispossession of Indigenous peoples and lands, and in the state's continuing claim to regulate mobility, membership, and political belonging on occupied territory.

That work, I hope, lies ahead. I continue to be interested in how the dispossession of Afghan lands and peoples, shaped by imperial war, foreign intervention, and forced migration, may be read in relation to the dispossession that anchors colonial settlement on Turtle Island. I remain compelled by the question of how Afghan resettlement in Canada is implicated in that wider field of power and relationality. These are difficult questions, and they permit neither sentimentality nor easy analogy. They require historical discipline, conceptual care, and political and epistemic humility. But they also seem to me necessary, especially if refugee studies in Canada is to continue pressing beyond narrow institutional accounts of admission and integration, and increasingly toward a fuller reckoning with the lands, sovereignties, and colonial histories upon which such processes unfold.

If this dissertation is, in one sense, an account of Canada's governance of Afghan refugees, it is also, in another, a record of my own attempt to arrive at the question properly, to learn what had to be learned, to study what had to be studied, and to situate a personal inheritance within a more demanding historical and political frame. The journey from Kabul to Turtle Island is therefore not only the journey I analyze here. It is also, in a quieter way, the path by which this project came into being.

Chapter One: Introduction

[The] war in Afghanistan... will be remembered... for its failures, unfulfilled promises, and a chaotic evacuation effort that cost the lives of innocent Afghans, including women and children... The Afghan-Canadian community is disappointed because we know that Canada could have done more to fulfil its moral obligation to Canadians, to Afghans who risked their lives to support and stand by us, and to those seeking refuge in Canada.

— *Canadian Campaign for Afghan Peace*, Press Release, August 31, 2021¹

What we are seeing is government policy that is very risk averse to the point of being selfish, and it is affecting organizations like ours... We are connecting with really hard-working individuals who really want to help, but... are hog-tied by policy that is just not aligned with the real needs of this evacuation.

— Oliver Thorne, Executive Director of *Veterans Transition Network*, April 18, 2022²

I have been living in a state of constant anxiety... due to risks of being followed and arrested by the Taliban for my key role in implementing Canada's education programming for girls and gender equity. I am worried for the future of my children, especially my three-year-old daughter.

— Unnamed individual, in hiding for 10 months awaiting IRCC decision, June 15, 2022³

Canada has a longstanding and proud tradition of welcoming [refugees]... Ours is one of the largest Afghan resettlement programs in the world, and our work continues.

— *Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada*, News Release, October 30, 2023⁴

Canada has become a global role model for effectively bringing vulnerable Afghans and other refugees to safety.

— Amy Pope, Director General of *International Organization for Migration*, October 30, 2023⁵

¹ CCAP, "Afghan-Canadian Community Expresses Dismay over Evacuations and Calls on Afghanistan to Be Discussed at Leaders' Debate."

² Fife, "Canadian Veterans Group Gives up Afghan Rescue Efforts, Citing Burnout and Ottawa's Bureaucratic Roadblocks."

³ CCAP, "Joint Statement on the Closure of the Special Immigration Measures Program for Afghan Nationals."

⁴ IRCC, "Canada Meets Commitment to Welcome 40,000 Vulnerable Afghans."

⁵ IRCC, "Canada Meets Commitment to Welcome 40,000 Vulnerable Afghans."

Between 2021 and 2024 Canada’s response to the mass displacement of Afghan nationals was described in sharply divergent terms. As the above quotations indicate, officials from *Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada* (IRCC) and representatives of international organizations such as the *International Organization for Migration* (IOM) praised Canada’s efforts as among the most ambitious Afghan resettlement initiatives in the world. At the same time, the federal government faced sustained pressures from a broad constellation of actors across both state and civil society. Journalists, scholars, legal experts, veterans, and diaspora-led groups publicly challenged official narratives, criticizing government (in)action in a moment defined by urgency and loss. Eligibility criteria were narrowly defined, application processes were complex, and extensive security vetting frequently delayed or prevented access to protections.⁶ These competing narratives circulated simultaneously, shaping public debate and policy discourse in ways that were difficult to reconcile, even as Canada went on to resettle more Afghan refugees over the next three years than at any other point in its history (see Figure 1).

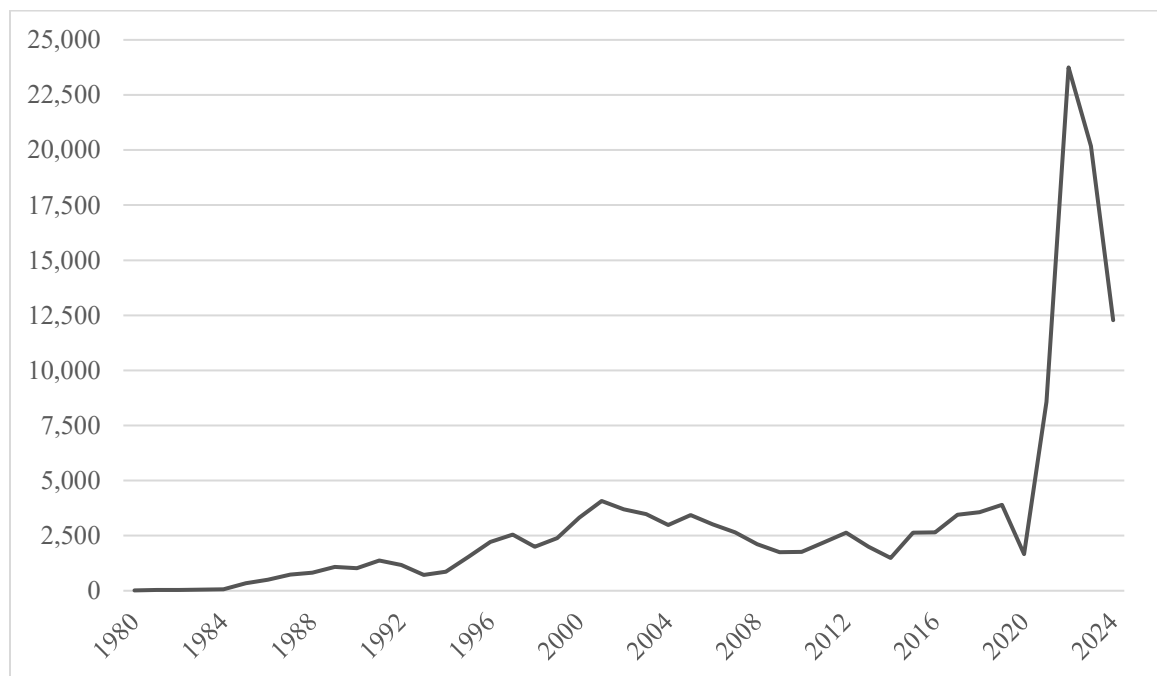


Figure 1. Immigration intake to Canada from Afghanistan, 1980-2024.⁷

What renders the post-2021 moment particularly striking is the longer historical trajectory against which it unfolded. For more than four decades, Afghan nationals have

⁶ Azadah, “The Necropolitics of Canada’s Afghan Resettlement Programmes.”

⁷ Adapted from data in IRCC, “Admissions of Permanent Residents by Country of Citizenship”; IRCC, “Permanent Residents by Country of Citizenship.”

constituted one of the largest and most protracted refugee populations in the world, yet Canada's response, until very recently, remained notably limited—an apparent tension with its national self-image and international reputation as a humanitarian leader and champion of refugee protection. When Afghanistan's crisis first emerged in 1979, for instance, Canada's initial response was notably modest, with only 212 Afghan nationals admitted between 1980 and 1984.⁸ Although humanitarian rhetoric featured prominently in the statements of government officials, it coexisted with an “apparent anomaly” in Ottawa's refusal to grant individuals from Afghanistan with special refugee status,⁹ even as they constituted the world's largest displaced population, with more than 4.4 million registered by UNHCR.¹⁰

Equally notable was what Jane Thomas characterized in 1989 as the “severely abnormal” silence of Canadian non-governmental organizations (NGOs), whose advocacy had long been central to cultivating Canada's reputation for addressing both humanitarian emergencies and long-term development needs.¹¹ The only consistent voices at the time were those of the *Afghan Association of Ontario* (AAO), representing a small yet emerging Afghan-Canadian community, and *Human Concern International* (HCI), Canada's first Muslim relief organization. Both intervened in public and political forums at a time when broader civil society engagement with Afghan displacement remained strikingly muted.¹² For much of the ensuing period, Afghan displacement persisted on the margins of Canadian refugee politics despite its scale and duration.

This historical reticence cannot be attributed to generalized anti-immigrant sentiment in Canada, nor to an indifference toward refugees as such. In the very same year that Afghanistan's displacement crisis began, Canada launched one of its largest humanitarian initiatives, resettling over 60,000 Indochinese refugees between 1979 and 1980 through its new Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) program—a program that would later garner Canada international praise and widespread acclaim, becoming a cornerstone of its humanitarian legacy.¹³ The discrepancy thus points not to a lack of capacity, but to a longstanding marginalization of Afghan displacement

⁸ IRCC, “Admissions of Permanent Residents by Country of Citizenship.”

⁹ The Globe and Mail, “Canada Not Assisting Afghans' Resettlement.”

¹⁰ *The Gazette*, “Kabul Ignores Anniversary of Soviet Takeover.”

¹¹ Thomas, “The Canadian Response to Afghanistan.”

¹² Thomas, “The Canadian Response to Afghanistan.”

¹³ Casasola, “The Indochinese Refugee Movement and the Subsequent Evolution of UNHCR and Canadian Resettlement Selection Policies and Practices”; IRCC, “Indochinese Refugees”; Molloy et al., *Running on Empty*.

within the moral and political economy through which Canadian refugee governance has been selectively imagined and administered.

It was not until 2021 that this pattern of marginalization appeared to shift. From the onset of NATO’s withdrawal through the collapse of the Afghan state and the consolidation of Taliban rule, Canada announced a series of new policy measures between May 2021 and October 2023, facilitating the resettlement of more than 55,000 Afghan nationals by the end of 2024. In numerical terms, these admissions placed Afghan refugees alongside other groups—Indochinese, Syrians, Hungarians, Ukrainians—historically associated with Canada’s largest resettlement initiatives since the Second World War (see Figure 2). At face value, these figures appeared to affirm that Canada was acting in accordance with its humanitarian reputation and professed obligations.

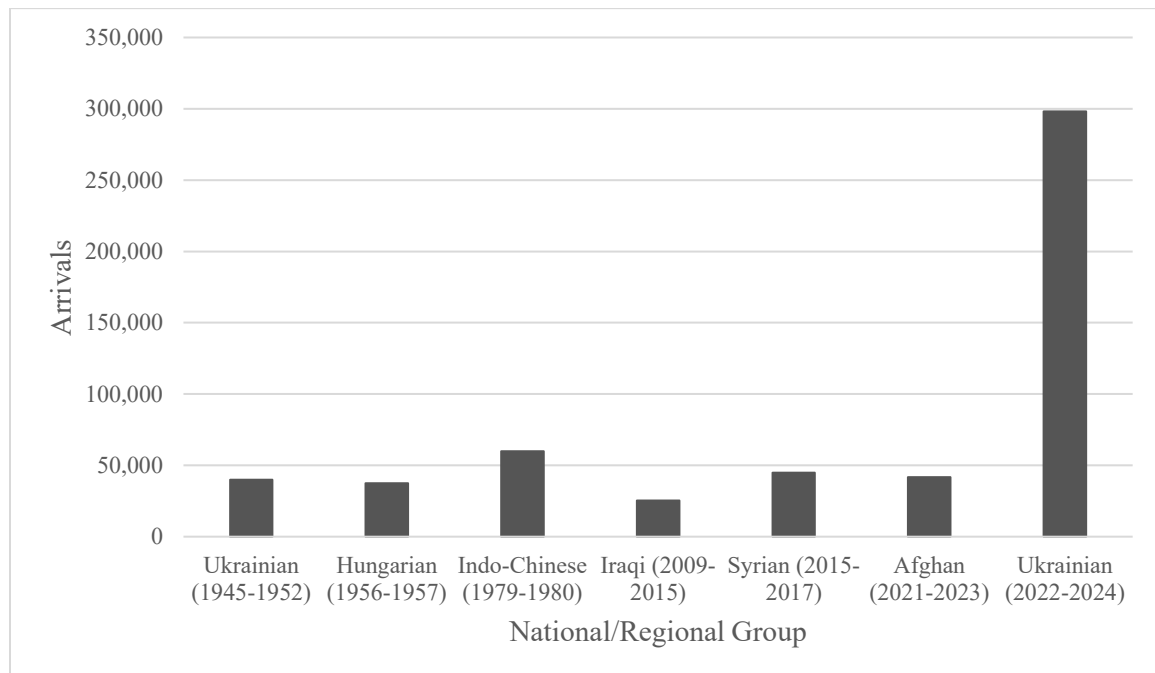


Figure 2. High-volume Refugee Arrivals to Canada Since 1945.¹⁴

¹⁴ Notes: Numbers have been rounded to the nearest hundred. For Afghan arrivals, data includes only individuals arriving under programs specific to Afghan nationals, including: (1) the program for individuals who assisted the Government of Canada, (2) the humanitarian program targeting certain vulnerable groups, and (3) the permanent residence pathway for family members of former interpreters. While Canada fulfilled its commitment in October 2023, additional arrivals continued under these Special Immigration Measures (SIMs), extending the date range accordingly. Data on Ukrainian refugees includes arrivals under the Canada-Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel (CUAET). Although smaller numbers of Ukrainian nationals arrived through other non-CUAET streams, the chart is limited to data from the program specifically designated for Ukrainian nationals and their family members.

Such claims take on a distinctive character, however, when situated within a broader global context. Canada’s assertion that it has “one of the largest Afghan resettlement programs in the world” refers specifically to permanent resettlement, a category that excludes temporary protection, undocumented populations, and most asylum seekers. Globally, more than ten million Afghan nationals remain displaced within Afghanistan or in neighbouring countries such as Iran and Pakistan.¹⁵ Viewed from a wider global-historical perspective, Canada has never resettled even half of one percent of the global Afghan refugee population (see Figure 3). The scale of its response, while significant in domestic political terms, appears far more modest when set against the uneven distribution of responsibility within the international refugee regime.

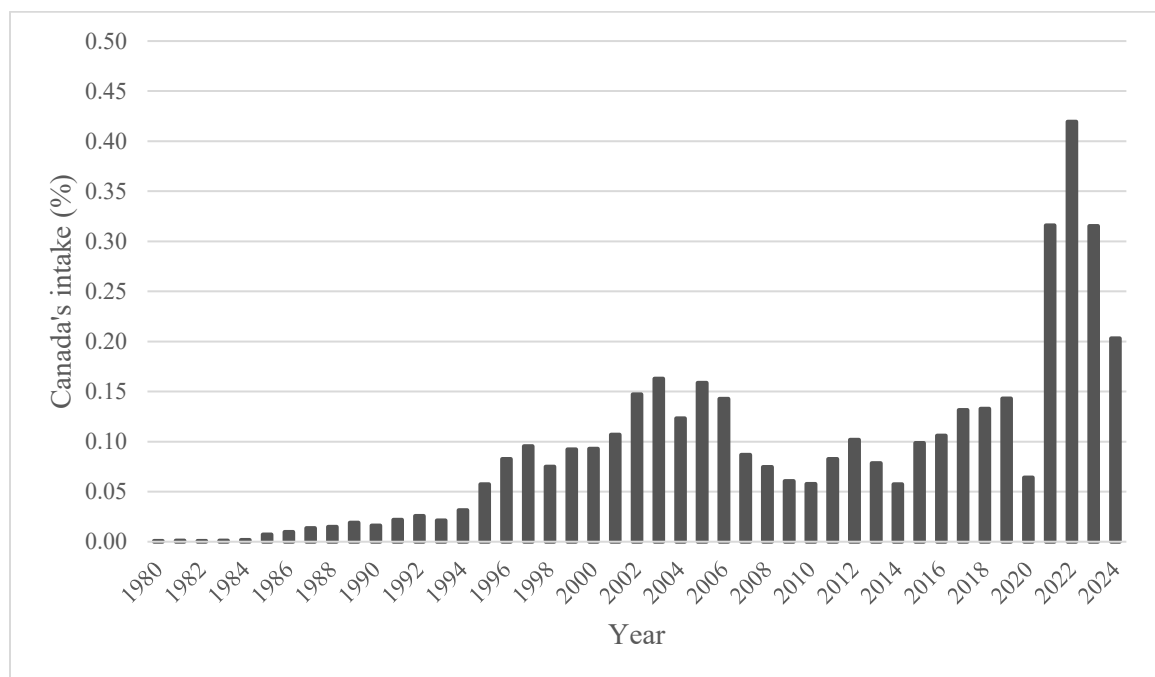


Figure 3. Canada’s intake of displaced Afghan nationals, 1980-2024.¹⁶

What distinguished the post-2021 moment, however, was not only the relative scale or limits of resettlement, but the nature of the contestation it provoked. Some of the most vocal

¹⁵ UNHCR, “Afghanistan Refugee Crisis Explained.”

¹⁶ Canada’s intake of the world’s forcibly displaced population was calculated based on the number of immigrants admitted through Canada’s Humanitarian Class, compared to UNHCR’s records of forcibly displaced people worldwide. The Humanitarian Class is defined here as including refugees, protected persons, and Humanitarian & Compassionate (H&C) admissions. The UNHCR’s definition of “forcibly displaced” includes refugees (under UNHCR’s mandate), Palestine refugees (under UNRWA’s mandate), asylum-seekers, other people in need of international protection, and internally displaced persons. Data was adapted from UNHCR and the Canadian immigration ministry’s annual reports to parliament. See, Citizenship and Immigration Canada and Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, “Annual Report to Parliament on Immigration”; UNHCR, “Figures at a Glance.”

critiques emerged from actors long engaged in Canadian refugee politics, such as humanitarian NGOs, diaspora-led civil society groups, scholars, and activists. Their interventions, often grounded in sustained engagement with refugee policy and practice, form an important part of this dissertation's broader analysis. Alongside them, however, appeared a set of actors whose prominence in this field was far less expected: veterans of the *Canadian Armed Forces* (CAF).

Former members of the CAF do not ordinarily occupy a principal place in refugee advocacy, nor are they typically associated with pressing governments to expand evacuation and resettlement initiatives. Yet in the context of Afghanistan's collapse, veterans-led organizations became among the most visible and persistent challengers of official accounts. In some cases, their interventions extended beyond advocacy altogether. Drawing on personal networks, institutional familiarity, and private resources, they undertook direct efforts to address perceived gaps in protection and mobility, facilitating evacuations, maintaining safehouses, and coordinating routes through third countries. Their actions unsettled conventional distinctions between state and civil society, advocacy and operation, loyalty and critique.

What made these tensions still more revealing was the contrast that soon followed. In response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Canadian state adopted a far more flexible and expansive model of emergency entry through the *Canada-Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel* (CUAET), bypassing many of the procedural requirements and restrictions that had remained central to the Afghan response. The comparison is instructive for at least two reasons. On one hand, it exposes a racialized and geopolitical hierarchy of compassion. On the other, it demonstrates that where mobility is framed as temporary, lower-risk, and more readily absorbable, the state has shown itself capable of moving with far greater speed and elasticity. The Afghan case must therefore be read not only through the languages of humanitarianism and securitization, but also through the political economy of mobility through which some displaced populations are rendered more governable, more admissible, and more immediately usable than others.

These overlapping developments pointed to a deeper contradiction that could not be resolved through policy metrics alone. Here was a state publicly committed to refugee protection; a refugee population that had remained peripheral to Canadian policy attention despite decades of displacement; and a group of actors strongly associated with state authority emerging as some of the most prominent critics of government practice. The convergence of

selective inclusion, securitized delay, and unexpected forms of advocacy suggested that the Afghan case was not just an instance of policy failure or success, but a window into the conditions under which refugee protection becomes politically imaginable—and to the limits within which it remains contained.

1.1 Thesis and Research Questions

Like people... ideas and theories travel – from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another... the movement of ideas and theories from one place to another is both a fact of life and a usefully enabling condition of intellectual activity.

— Edward W. Said, 1983¹⁷

If ideas and theories travel, they also transform, taking on new textures as they move across contexts, political landscapes, and historical moments. The same is true for the policies and practices of refugee governance, which migrate from one conjuncture to another, refracted through shifting interests and interpretations. It is within this movement that the questions guiding this study take shape:

1. If Canada's response to Afghan displacement had remained limited for decades, what accounts for the expansion of protection after 2021, and why did it require a crisis marked by state collapse to bring it about?
2. Second, if this period marked the largest Afghan resettlement initiative in Canadian history, why did it nonetheless generate sustained criticism, contestation, and institutional resistance?
3. Why did CAF veterans—actors not traditionally associated with refugee advocacy—emerge as such visible and influential figures in this moment, and how did their interventions intersect with those of diaspora-led and humanitarian civil society organizations?
4. Why had Canadian humanitarian NGOs been largely silent on Afghan displacement for much of the preceding decades, and what was it about the 2021 crisis that rendered Afghan displacement newly resonant in ways it had not been before?

¹⁷ Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, 226.

To address these questions, I advance the concept of the *armonia effect* in refugee governance. The concept names those conjunctural moments in which a crisis of mass displacement acquires unusual resonance across state institutions and civil society, such that protection is not only spoken of as urgent but rendered exceptionally actionable. It emerges when advocacy claims, public sentiment, and institutional vocabularies align strongly enough to widen the field of what is politically imaginable and administratively governable. In such moments, resettlement pathways and policy measures may expand beyond what routine governance would ordinarily permit. Yet the *armonia effect* does not denote openness as such, nor does it presume consensus. It names a selective and unstable amplification—one in which some claims are made audible, legitimate, and urgent, while others remain muted, displaced, or dissonant. This form of advocacy becomes most effective when it is translated into idioms the state can hear—allyship, women and girls, minority persecution, humanitarian obligation—but that very translation can also reaffirm the state’s authority to decide which claims are intelligible, urgent, and deserving in the first place. What is at stake, then, is not only institutional action, but the uneven production of resonance itself—how and why certain crises come to matter, how they are taken up by different audiences, and how this circulation of concern conditions the scope and form of protection that becomes politically imaginable.

Much like the *armonia*—a portable hand-pumped organ widely used by Afghan musicians (see Figure 4)—responses to refugee crises are shaped not only by the force of pressure brought to bear upon institutions, but by whether that pressure can be articulated in ways that register with the notes already available to the political ear. Advocacy becomes most potent when it generates both a sustained public and political presence and a degree of harmonization with existing legal, policy, and discursive frameworks. When such elements converge, their effect can be amplified, widening access to protections even within broadly restrictive and exclusionary environments. At the same time, entrenched logics of neoliberalism and securitization delimit what may be heard and acted upon,¹⁸ functioning much like the stops

¹⁸ Over the past several decades, Canadian immigration and refugee policies have increasingly been shaped by the dual forces of neoliberalism and securitization. Neoliberal logics have emphasized market-oriented rationalities, prioritizing the economic utility of migrants and refugees while subjecting them to administrative forms of gatekeeping and conditional inclusion. At the same time, securitization discourses have become more pronounced, framing mobility in relation to terrorism, border control, and national security threats. The intersection of these trends has produced restrictive and uneven access to protection, even as states continue to invoke humanitarian commitments. For a more extensive discussion of these dynamics, see Abu-Laban et al., *Containing Diversity*.

and drones of the instrument, regulating airflow to the reeds and thereby the range, depth, and texture of sound. This is also why claims framed through civilizational and/or gendered rescue do not resonate evenly across crises. They acquire force not by virtue of their signifiers alone, but where they can attach themselves to historically sedimented narratives, institutional memories, and geopolitical commitments that render them newly audible.



Figure 4. The armonia, as played by Zahra Elham.¹⁹

No single actor, however, plays alone. Advocacy rarely proceeds in a uniform register, and the field itself is seldom sonically coherent. Different actors enter with different instruments, repertoires, and degrees of institutional proximity. Some advance their claims through lobbying, media pressure, parliamentary testimony, and public protest, while others, finding those conventional channels muffled, delayed, or altogether blocked, begin to improvise more direct interventions of their own. In the Afghan case, this movement could extend beyond claim-making into what I later conceptualize as *civil society keyword*, wherein non-state actors marshalled ad hoc operational capacities to facilitate shelter, movement, and protection at those moments when formal pathways remained authorized in principle yet inhibited in practice. Multiple actors thus pursued distinct policy positions, each anchored in its own discursive framing, with veterans' organizations stressing obligations to those bound most directly to

¹⁹ Zahra Elham, a Hazara singer from Ghazni Province, was the first woman to win Afghan Star – Afghanistan's leading televised singing competition until the Taliban once again outlawed music after their return to power in 2021. Photograph taken by Reza Bagheri, see: Story, "Hazara Singer Zahra Elham Escaped the Taliban. A Year on, She's Restarting Her Career in Australia."

Canada's wartime mission, and certain diaspora-based mobilizations, by contrast, framing Afghan Sikhs and Hindus through the idioms of religious persecution and minority vulnerability.

At times, these different interventions produced something akin to sympathetic vibration, reinforcing one another and enlarging the pressure brought to bear on policymakers. At other times, they diverged into dissonance, rivalry, and open contestation, as when some CAF members and veterans criticized then-Minister of National Defence Harjit Sajjan for allegedly privileging the evacuation of Afghan Sikhs.²⁰ Hence, even when public attention and political pressure are at their peak—the equivalent of strong airflow through the instrument—the result is not always coherent in policymaking terms. It could just as readily assume the form of a crowded and uneven soundscape, in which some notes were amplified while others interfered with one another, constraining the emergence of measures capable of contesting the more exclusionary tendencies of international refugee and asylum governance.

In the same breath, nor is the state understood here as a seamless or unitary actor. Canada's response to Afghan displacement emerged through frictions and tensions among humanitarian, diplomatic, military, and security institutions whose priorities did not always align, even when they were publicly articulated under the same national commitment to protection. The tension between urgency and vetting, evacuation and admissibility, reputational management and administrative control, was therefore both external to the state in the form of pressure from civil society but also internal to the governing field itself.

The instrument, which itself is an artifact of colonial diffusion, offers a further dimension to the metaphor. Introduced by Europeans to India in the nineteenth century as the *harmonium*, it was initially associated with colonial cultural imposition and carried contentious politics from the outset.²¹ Over time, however, it was indigenized, adapted, and contested within South Asian musical traditions, becoming at once widely played and widely criticized.²² From India, the harmonium travelled to Afghanistan in the early twentieth century, where it became known as

²⁰ Fife and Chase, "Sajjan Instructed Special Forces to Rescue Afghan Sikhs during Fall of Kabul."

²¹ Rahaim, "That Ban(e) of Indian Music."

²² Rahaim, "That Ban(e) of Indian Music."

the *armonia*.²³ It was performed in distinctive ways that reflected local aesthetics and customs, influencing the music culture of major cities like Herat and Kabul.²⁴

In this respect, the instrument's global history mirrors the highly politicized, multi-scalar, and often contested dynamics of Afghan refugee governance. Just as the *armonia*'s trajectory spans imperial and colonial contexts, cross-border exchanges, and local (re-)interpretations, Afghan displacement has too been shaped by overlapping entanglements across the Global North-South divide, in which forced migration flows are enmeshed in international hierarchies, regional rivalries, and localized struggles for survival and recognition. In both cases, the legacies of contestation are not erased but reconfigured across time and space, producing new practices and meanings while carrying forward earlier traces of contention and adaptation. For the purposes of this study, such an approach confutes the notion of Afghanistan as a "hermit kingdom" or "graveyard of empires," and instead situates it as a site of continuous circulation, negotiation, and transformation.

As such, the approach adopted in this dissertation is both global and historical. It follows in the intellectual lineage of scholars such as Robert Crews, Elisabeth Leake, and others who demonstrate that Afghanistan cannot be reduced to isolationist or exceptionalist narratives but must be understood as an expansive site consisting of multiple and varying networks that crisscrossed the region and the globe, rather than as the byproduct of a static collection of tribes or ethnic groups. The protracted challenges of conflict and displacement in Afghanistan are thus neither novel nor episodic, nor can they be attributed solely to either internal conflict or external impositions. Instead, they form part of a decades-long continuum co-constituted by foreign interventionism, domestic development, and shifting regional geopolitics. Applying this lens to refugee governance elucidates how Afghan actors—whether in Afghanistan, in transit, or among the diaspora—have long been more than passive victims or beneficiaries of state-driven asylum policies. They have frequently acted as agents in their own right, mobilizing discursive, legal, and institutional tools across transnational circuits in ways that garnered support from non-Afghan allies and, at times, even resonated in policymaking terms.

²³ The ancient Persian name for the organ is *arghanun* (ارغنون) which is derived from its Greek name *organon* (ὄργανον). See Nasehpour, "Musical Instruments Popular in Afghanistan"; Natif, *Mughal Occidentalism*, 137–43.

²⁴ Baily, *Music of Afghanistan*, 27–29.

Concomitantly, this dissertation brings the global history of Afghan displacement into sustained conversation with scholarship on Canadian refugee policy, politics, and law, and with broader work on the unequal international ordering of asylum. Since the late 1970s, Afghan nationals have constituted one of the largest refugee populations in the world, with the vast majority hosted in neighbouring Pakistan and Iran.²⁵ Canada's own encounter with this history has been far more intermittent and comparatively limited, shaped less by the scale of Afghan displacement as such than by shifting imperatives of alliance, geopolitics, and, in time, the securitized logics of international asylum and counterterrorism. A substantial body of scholarship has shown how these regimes have concentrated responsibility in the Global South even as they preserve for Global North states the prerogative of selective, discretionary, and uneven protection.²⁶ It has further demonstrated how such asymmetries have deepened through border externalization, regionalized containment, and the crisis-laden language through which asylum is increasingly narrated and administered.²⁷ In the Canadian case, scholars such as Sharry Aiken have shown that national security discourse does more than just intrude upon refugee policy from the outside, but is already implicated in the very interpretive frameworks through which refugee claims are read, sorted, and governed.²⁸ Yet while this scholarship clarifies the broader architectures within which Afghan displacement has been managed, its insights have not been fully extended to Canada's historical and contemporary responses to Afghan refugees as a distinct object of analysis.

The dissertation also enters, though only partially, into the terrain Sedef Arat-Koç identifies in her call to decolonize refugee studies.²⁹ At issue, in her account, is an “elephant in the room,” a parallax gap between refugee studies and international politics that permits powerful states within the Global North to appear as managers of refugee crises far more readily than as participants in the histories that produce them. Much of what follows can be read as an effort to narrow that gap in the Afghan case by situating Canada's response not within the self-enclosed language of humanitarian protection alone, but within the longer afterlives of

²⁵ Auntu and Promee, “Repatriation as a Solution of Afghan Refugee Crisis”; Siavoshi, “Afghans in Iran”; UNHCR, “Afghanistan Situation: Global Report 2021.”

²⁶ Hyndman et al., *The State of Private Refugee Sponsorship in Canada: Trends, Issues, and Impacts*; Kneebone et al., *Refugee Protection and the Role of Law*; Parekh, *No Refuge*.

²⁷ Abu-Laban et al., *Containing Diversity*; Mountz and Hiemstra, “Chaos and Crisis”; Sahin-Mencutek et al., “A Crisis Mode in Migration Governance.”

²⁸ Aiken, “Of Gods and Monsters.”

²⁹ Arat-Koç, “Decolonizing Refugee Studies, Standing up for Indigenous Justice.”

intervention, securitization, and the unequal geographies of asylum. Yet Arat-Koç's challenge does not end there. A fuller decolonizing move, she suggests, would require a place-based episteme attentive to Indigenous justice, to land, and to the unsettled grounds on which refugee protection is offered and received. The present study gestures toward that terrain without exhausting it. Its more immediate task is to reconstruct, with historical and analytic coherence, Canada's responses to Afghan refugees since 1979 and to show how Afghan peoples were differentially rendered admissible, inadmissible, or conditionally protectable within Canadian governance. Only on that basis can one more fully ask what it is, precisely, that Afghan refugees are being admitted into, and what implications that entry carries within the ongoing settler-colonial ordering of these lands.

In pursuit of the more immediate endeavour, I turn to scholarship that theorizes refugee and migration governance through the idioms of containment, contestation, care, crisis, and diaspora politics. Yasmeen Abu-Laban, Ethel Tungohan, and Christina Gabriel's concept of "containing diversity" is especially instructive here, not least because it apprehends Canadian migration politics as a field in which difference is not simply admitted or excluded, but managed through selective, segmented, and hierarchized forms of inclusion.³⁰ Tungohan's work elsewhere, on "care activism," in turn, directs attention to those forms of migrant organizing sustained not only by formal political claims, but by communities of care, affective labour, and obligations carried across time and space.³¹ Maurizio Ambrosini's formulation of asylum politics as a "battleground" further situates these processes within a contentious arena in which state and non-state actors cooperate, compete, and seek to mould policy outcomes,³² while Zeynep Sahin-Mencutek and her co-authors show how crisis governance proceeds through a dense and fractured landscape of actors, legal arrangements, and renationalizing narratives of restored state control.³³ Jennifer Hyndman's analyses of "humanitarian nationalism" and "diaspora geopolitics," finally, help clarify why some displaced populations acquire wider public and governmental support than others, particularly where diaspora infrastructures are stronger and securitization concerns less pronounced.³⁴ In reading these works together, an analytic

³⁰ Abu-Laban et al., *Containing Diversity*.

³¹ Tungohan, *Care Activism*.

³² Ambrosini, "The Battleground of Asylum and Immigration Policies."

³³ Sahin-Mencutek et al., "A Crisis Mode in Migration Governance."

³⁴ Hyndman, "The Russian Invasion of Ukraine and Humanitarian Nationalism in Canada."

vocabulary can be developed for apprehending how Afghan displacement has been governed in Canada as a site where care and control, solidarity and selection, crisis and hierarchy are not mutually exclusive categories, but complex and constitutive elements of the same political field.

The armonia effect builds on these insights but turns to a more specific conjunctural problem: how advocacy on behalf of refugees in moments of crisis is itself heterogeneous, uneven, and at times contradictory; how a category such as “Afghan refugees,” so often invoked as though it were internally coherent, is in practice composed of differently situated subgroups whose claims become variably legible through unequal discursive, legal, institutional, and policy precedents; and how these pressures resonate unevenly across civil society and the state, producing selective openings in protection that are politically imaginable, morally charged, and only provisionally actionable. In this respect, the concept remains consonant with critical scholarship that understands refugee governance as a highly politicized, fragmented, and layered field, structured across multiple scales through overlapping legal instruments, policy mechanisms, and discursive frameworks that delimit the terms of both state and civil society engagement.³⁵

Yet the armonia effect also presses this literature in new directions. The concept is less a theory of openness than an analytic of differential amplification. It directs attention to the conditions under which certain claims become audible across the governing field, while others remain muted, deferred, or displaced. In this respect, it moves beyond methodological nationalism not by abandoning the state as a central site of analysis, but by refusing to treat “advocates,” “diaspora,” or “refugees” as internally unified categories bound by an assumed shared national origin, and by tracing instead the differentiated alignments through which some claims to protection acquire force while others remain attenuated, deferred, or unheard.

From this vantage point, the dissertation’s central argument is that Canada’s response to Afghan displacement between 2021 and 2023 constituted an instance of the armonia effect operating not outside an inherited architecture of refugee governance, but through it. The relative expansiveness of protection during this period did not emerge because the deeper structures that had long constrained Afghan refugee claims were suspended or overcome. It emerged because a

³⁵ Ambrosini, “The Battleground of Asylum and Immigration Policies”; Canefe, “The Fragmented Nature of the International Refugee Regime and Its Consequences: A Comparative Analysis of the Applications of the 1951 Convention”; Sahin-Mencutek et al., “A Crisis Mode in Migration Governance.”

distinctive and historically conditioned set of pressures came, however unevenly, into resonance: the afterlives of Canada's military intervention in Afghanistan; the remilitarization of national identity and values under the Harper government; the humanitarian branding and rhetorical expansion associated with Trudeau-era neoliberal multiculturalism; and the sustained, though internally differentiated, engagement of Afghan diaspora actors, most recently led by Afghan Canadian women and youth. These pressures widened the scope of what could be demanded, heard, and, for a time, acted upon. Yet the openings they produced remained bounded, selective, and stratified in their distribution, dependent throughout on forms of legibility that rendered some Afghan claims more actionable than others. The Afghan case, then, was neither a straightforward humanitarian exception nor merely another episode of policy failure. It was a conjuncture in which resonance became politically consequential without ceasing to be selective.

Through this case study, my research makes three principal contributions. First, it advances critical migration and refugee studies by theorizing the *armonia* effect as a way of explaining how selective openings in protection emerge when heterogeneous advocacy claims resonate across civil society and state institutions while aligning, however provisionally, with dominant moral, legal, and political vocabularies. Second, it makes an empirical and historical contribution by reconstructing Canada's responses to Afghan displacement from 1979 onward, showing how a fragmented policy field took shape across distinct geopolitical moments and how the post-2021 expansion of protection was conditioned by a much longer history of intervention, containment, securitization, and selective recognition. Third, it extends Critical Policy Discourse Analysis (CPDA) by showing that discourse does not merely justify refugee governance after the fact, but helps constitute the very conditions under which advocacy becomes legible, actionable, and politically effective. By examining how different actors invoked, contested, and reworked the terms of obligation, deservingness, vulnerability, and risk, I clarify how policy openings can be produced through discursive struggle even as the broader architecture of exclusion remains intact.

1.2 Methodology

1.2.1 Overview and Research Orientation

This study adopts a multi-scalar and conjunctural approach to research. It employs a CPDA of publicly available texts from across government and civil society. While the primary focus remains on Canada's governance of Afghan refugees between 2021 and 2023, the analysis is situated within a longer global history extending from the late-1970s onward. This broader temporal frame traces how successive waves of Afghan conflict and displacement have intersected with wider transformations in Canada's refugee and immigration system, helping to explain why the country admitted its largest volume of Afghan refugees after 2021. Understanding the rupture that characterizes Canada's response therefore requires an analytical lens attentive to how refugees in general, and Afghanistan and its peoples in particular, have been rendered legible to Canadian policymakers, stakeholders, and the broader public across time and space.

In pursuit of this endeavour, I examine over 880 documents drawn from 28 Canadian and international organizations and institutional sources. These include texts produced across nine institutional sites of governance within the Canadian state, encompassing executive departments, legislative chambers, and both standing and special parliamentary committees. The corpus also includes materials from two major non-governing federal political parties; five veteran-led or veteran-affiliated civil society organizations (CSO); four diaspora-led CSOs; and four Canadian humanitarian and human rights CSOs. Additionally, the analysis draws on documents produced by the UNHCR, as well as by foreign state actors, including agencies, ministries, and departments of the governments of Afghanistan, the United States, and the former Soviet Union. The texts—comprising policies, reports, speeches, meeting transcripts, press releases, open-letters, petitions, campaign updates, memorandums, and statements reported in news media—constitute the primary corpus for my research. Collectively, they illuminate the political terrain in which Canada's governance of Afghan refugees was articulated, contested, and operationalized across national, regional, and international scales.

In terms of data collection, I selected texts for their relevance to Afghan resettlement, evacuation, and related questions of refugee governance, including deservingness, eligibility, vulnerability, and security risk. Where organizational search functions were available, documents were located using combinations of keywords such as “Afghan,” “Afghanistan,” “refugee,” “evacuation,” and “resettlement,” supplemented as needed by terms including “human rights,” “humanitarian,” “women,” “minority,” “religious,” “ethnic,” “Hazara,” “Sikh,” “Hindu,”

“LGBTQ,” “interpreter,” “locally engaged staff,” and “ally” or “allies.” For sources without effective internal search tools, I manually reviewed archival materials and selected items that met the inclusion criteria. The resulting collection offers a longitudinal and cross-institutional record of how obligation, protection, and inclusion were narrated, contested, and operationalized across governmental, parliamentary, partisan, and civil society sites.

The process of data collection and analysis is iterative in character, proceeding within a CPDA framework that adapts methodological tools to the questions under investigation rather than imposing a single, fixed analytical template.³⁶ As such, my analysis combines deductive and inductive thematic strategies, informed by prior critical discourse scholarship on Afghan conflict and displacement and on Canadian refugee and immigration debates.³⁷ These bodies of work offered an initial set of concepts, while leaving open space for new themes, framings, and discursive tensions to emerge throughout the process of analyzing the empirical material.

The analysis focuses on identifying the policy positions, justificatory logics, and representations of persecuted and persecuting bodies articulated by different actors across sites of governance. For this reason, primary sources consist principally of materials produced by these actors and accessed through their official channels, supplemented by their public statements and interventions reported in news media. This approach enabled close attention to how refugee protection, responsibility, and deservingness were articulated, contested, and negotiated across institutional and political contexts.

1.2.2 Discourse Analysis

In recent decades, discourse analysis has gained significant traction across disciplines concerned with migration, asylum, war, and international relations,³⁸ reflecting a shared

³⁶ Montesano Montessori et al., *Critical Policy Discourse Analysis*, 265–66.

³⁷ Carlaw and Azadah, “Pathways to Permanence and Immigration Levels: A Critical Policy Discourse Analysis (CPDA) of Struggles and Limits to Societal Membership for Migrants Amidst and Emerging from COVID-19 (2020-2022) in Canada”; Tungohan and Careless, “Tolerated, Threatening and Celebrated”; Ibrahimi and Farasoo, “Understanding Shifts in US Policies towards the Taliban”; van Houte, *Return Migration to Afghanistan*.

³⁸ Berger, “Production and Reproduction of Gender and Sexuality in Legal Discourses of Asylum in the United States”; Carlaw and Azadah, “Pathways to Permanence and Immigration Levels: A Critical Policy Discourse Analysis (CPDA) of Struggles and Limits to Societal Membership for Migrants Amidst and Emerging from COVID-

commitment to interrogating the relationship between knowledge and power. These approaches, though varied, generally derive from a social constructionist orientation inspired by Foucault and Derrida, emphasizing how meanings are produced through linguistic and symbolic systems.³⁹ Some scholars adopt a purely constructivist lens, focusing primarily on the constitutive power of language in shaping social reality, while others draw on critical realism, which attends to the interplay between discursive constructions and the underlying social structures that condition them.⁴⁰ Despite these ontological differences, both traditions converge on a key insight, insofar as discourses are seen not as passive reflections of reality but active forces in defining identities, legitimizing authority, and structuring possibilities for political action.

Proponents of discourse analysis view discourse not as a neutral medium of communication, but as a social practice through which power circulates, legitimizes, and renders particular worldviews intelligible. As such, they function as “systems of signification” that organize social reality through processes of categorization and differentiation, often giving rise to problematic and simplified binaries such as “us” and “them,” “moderate” and “radical,” or “deserving” and “undeserving.”⁴¹ Power is not only exercised through the actors and institutions that reproduce such significations but is also embedded within discourse itself, working through its “ideological effects” to make particular assumptions, hierarchies, and exclusions appear natural or self-evident.⁴² This is not to say that discourses remain fixed, however. As Jennifer Milliken points out, discourse has often been historically contingent and politically contested, continually subject to revision, reinterpretation, and struggle.⁴³ Studies informed by this perspective therefore entail close attention to the operation of discourse as a deeply unstable and

19 (2020-2022) in Canada”; Clark et al., “The ‘Good Refugee’ Ideal”; Ibrahimi and Farasoo, “Understanding Shifts in US Policies towards the Taliban”; Larsen, *Foreign Policy and Discourse Analysis*; Mutimer, “The Road to Afghanistan”; Tungohan and Careless, “Tolerated, Threatening and Celebrated.”

³⁹ Aydin-Düzgit, “Critical Discourse Analysis in Analysing European Union Foreign Policy”; Ibrahimi and Farasoo, “Understanding Shifts in US Policies towards the Taliban.”

⁴⁰ Fiaz, “Constructivism Meets Critical Realism”; Ibrahimi and Farasoo, “Understanding Shifts in US Policies towards the Taliban”; Patomaki and Wight, “After Postpositivism?”; Williams, *Social Theory and Language*.

⁴¹ Milliken, “The Study of Discourse in International Relations.”

⁴² Parker, “Discourse.”

⁴³ Milliken, “The Study of Discourse in International Relations.”

contested field of practice, within which meanings, identities, and forms of knowledge are repeatedly articulated and rearticulated in order to sustain claims to “truth.”⁴⁴

Such an analysis also involves thematic, interpretive, and textual qualitative analysis to explore both manifest and latent content.⁴⁵ Manifest refers to overt and explicit themes, such as direct policy goals or legislative objectives, while latent content captures underlying meanings, silences, and assumptions. Thematic analysis, frequently integrated with discourse analysis, enables the systematic categorization and interpretation of these patterns across texts, facilitating a nuanced coding process that highlights recurring patterns across actors.⁴⁶

CPDA offers a policy-oriented adaptation of discourse analysis, emphasizing the constitutive role of discourse in the making, implementation, and legitimation of policy. As such, CPDA views policies as emerging from within, and in turn reshaping specific social, political, and institutional contexts.⁴⁷ A core component of this approach is its emphasis on relational analyses that are attentive to questions of power and hegemony.⁴⁸

For the purposes of this study, I employ CPDA to examine how Canada’s response to Afghan refugees is constituted through interactions and contestations among policymakers, CSOs, and refugees themselves. By tracing changes in policy and discourse, the dissertation interrogates how the dominant processes of categorization and differentiation within Canadian refugee governance are maintained, challenged, and reconfigured over time. This approach enables analysis of how different actors construct meanings around refugees, the crises they are situated within, and Canada’s responsibilities to offer protection and pathways for resettlement. In so doing, CPDA allows for the identification of:

- Discursive framings (e.g., humanitarianism, security, loyalty, obligation)

⁴⁴ Milliken, “The Study of Discourse in International Relations.”

⁴⁵ Joffe and Yardley, “Content and Thematic Analysis”; Tungohan and Careless, “Tolerated, Threatening and Celebrated.”

⁴⁶ Tungohan and Careless, “Tolerated, Threatening and Celebrated.”

⁴⁷ Carlaw and Azadah, “Pathways to Permanence and Immigration Levels: A Critical Policy Discourse Analysis (CPDA) of Struggles and Limits to Societal Membership for Migrants Amidst and Emerging from COVID-19 (2020-2022) in Canada”; Montesano Montessori et al., *Critical Policy Discourse Analysis*.

⁴⁸ Carlaw and Azadah, “Pathways to Permanence and Immigration Levels: A Critical Policy Discourse Analysis (CPDA) of Struggles and Limits to Societal Membership for Migrants Amidst and Emerging from COVID-19 (2020-2022) in Canada”; Montesano Montessori et al., *Critical Policy Discourse Analysis*.

- Subject positions (e.g., “deserving” refugees, “at-risk” interpreters, “vulnerable women”)
- Institutional rationalities (e.g., crisis management, sovereignty, deterrence, bureaucratic containment)

It reveals not only how Afghan refugees were positioned within Canadian political and policy debates, but also how those debates reflected, and at times unsettled, the broader ideological architecture of crisis-driven governance. By focusing on how discourse and power co-produce refugee governance, CPDA facilitates a critical interrogation of Canada’s policy decisions during and after the NATO withdrawal. It also illuminates how different actors mobilized alternative framings to influence state behaviour and public sentiment.

1.2.3 Actors Selected for Examination

I compiled a corpus of publicly available texts produced by key actors across state and civil society⁴⁹ (see Table 1). These materials were drawn from nine institutional sites of governance within the Canadian state, including executive departments and ministries, legislative chambers, and standing and special parliamentary committees. The corpus also includes texts produced by two major non-governing federal political parties; five veteran-led or veteran-affiliated CSOs; four diaspora-led CSOs; and four Canadian humanitarian and human rights CSOs. Additionally, the analysis draws on selected documents produced by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as well as by foreign state actors, including agencies and ministries of the governments of Afghanistan, the United States, and the former Soviet Union.

⁴⁹ It should be noted that, while often associated with humanitarianism, civil society also encompasses actors that may oppose refugee inclusion. As Milner and Klassen observe, the boundaries of civil society are context-dependent and shaped by state-defined conditions of access, raising important questions about which actors are deemed legitimate and how the “public interest” is constituted within contested policy spaces. Although this dissertation does not examine actors that advance a wholesale rejection of refugee inclusion, it does analyze actors who negotiate inclusion through exclusion—that is, those who draw the boundaries of who is deserving of protection by defining who is not or is less deserving. For a deeper explanation of civil society politics within refugee governance, see Milner and Klassen, “Civil Society and the Politics of the Global Refugee Regime.”

The analysis centres primarily on three sets of Canadian actors: (1) policymakers; (2) veterans-linked advocates; and (3) diaspora-led advocates. These actors were selected because they were most directly involved in shaping the formulation, justification, and contestation of Afghan refugee pathways during the study period. At the same time, because the dissertation adopts a global-history approach to refugee governance, the analysis also incorporates texts produced by a set of secondary actors in order to situate these primary interventions within their broader historical, political, and institutional context. These secondary sources—including Canadian humanitarian and human rights CSOs, international organizations such as the UNHCR, and key foreign governments—provide essential background on evolving norms of protection, responsibility-sharing, and security that structured the field in which Canadian actors operated.

Within the Canadian state, refugee governance is organized through a segmented institutional architecture that distributes responsibility for protection across security, diplomatic, and humanitarian domains. Executive ministries and departments were therefore central to the design and implementation of Canada's response. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), Global Affairs Canada (GAC), the Department of National Defence (DND), and Public Safety Canada (PSC) each played distinct roles in configuring the security, diplomatic, and humanitarian dimensions of refugee governance. IRCC was responsible for the design and administration of resettlement pathways, while DND and GAC coordinated evacuation efforts and international cooperation. PSC, which is modelled in part on the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, oversaw national security infrastructure affecting migration governance through agencies such as the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS). Parliamentary and legislative bodies, including the House of Commons, the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration (CIMM), and the Special Committee on Afghanistan (AFGH), served as important sites of debate and scrutiny, revealing points of convergence and contestation among state actors, political parties, and CSOs. To supplement these records, I also examined official press releases issued by the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) and the New Democratic Party (NDP), the two major federal parties outside the governing Liberal Party of Canada (LPC).

Together, these institutional sites contributed to a wide array of policies related to Afghan resettlement that were considerably more fragmented in practice than state narratives suggest. While the considerable number of pathways appeared to signal responsiveness to the diversity of

Afghan refugees at risk, it functioned primarily to manage and contain this diversity through selective, segmented forms of inclusion. Protection was distributed across administratively bounded categories defined by affiliation, risk, and perceived deservingness, absorbing difference into governable forms rather than facilitating expansive or equal inclusion. This mode of “containing diversity” is not confined to particular governments or moments of crisis, but reflects longer trajectories in Canadian political development, rooted in the country’s formation and evolution as a settler colony.⁵⁰

Veterans’ groups occupy a distinct place within civil society, often blurring the line between state and non-state actors due to their members’ prior affiliation with Canada’s military institutions. Drawing on institutional memory, moral authority, and professional networks, these groups mobilized resources and shaped public and political discourse around the evacuation and resettlement of Afghan interpreters and other LES who had supported Canadian missions. In several instances, veterans’ groups operated alongside, or even in advance of, state action, funding private evacuations and coordinating safehouses through forms of military-style organization and transnational networking. As my research shows, these interventions conferred a particular legitimacy on veterans’ advocacy, especially within public and parliamentary debates. By framing refugee protection as a moral obligation owed to Canada’s “allies,” veterans’ groups nuanced the terms of debate with appeals grounded in militarized discourses of obligation, loyalty, and the state’s wartime commitments. At the same time, however, this framing narrowed the scope of protection for others by prioritizing individuals with direct ties to the Canadian mission, thereby elevating them above other vulnerable populations. In this sense, veterans’ advocacy simultaneously contested governmental inaction and reinforced an exceptional and selective politics of deservingness within the state’s securitization framework.

Among these groups, particular attention is given to the Veterans Transition Network (VTN) and Aman Lara. These organizations produced the most sustained volume of public-facing texts during the study period and were distinctive in that their advocacy extended beyond policy engagement to include independently coordinated rescue missions and protection efforts. As such, they offer a particularly rich site for examining how veterans’ moral authority, operational experience, and proximity to the Canadian state translated into both discursive influence and direct intervention within Canadian refugee governance.

⁵⁰ Abu-Laban et al., *Containing Diversity*.

Diaspora-led organizations also occupied a consequential, though unevenly structured, position within Canada's refugee governance landscape, combining grassroots mobilization with formal political engagement. Acting as intermediaries between displaced populations and the Canadian state, these groups translated refugee claims into policy-legible demands, drawing on differentiated forms of political capital, institutional access, and moral authority. Their influence did not derive from a unified or coherent "diaspora" voice, but from their varied capacities to align advocacy claims with dominant Canadian discourses of liberal humanitarianism, religious persecution, and securitized governance. In this way, the divergent strategies and discourses employed by these groups complicate homogenizing notions of "the diaspora," underscoring the fragmented and internally differentiated politics of belonging and deservingness that are often obscured by methodological nationalism. The contrast between the Afghan case and Canada's comparatively robust and unified response to Ukrainian displacement is particularly instructive, as the well-established diaspora infrastructures and less racialized and lower perceived security risks of the latter enabled what Jennifer Hyndman characterizes as a more politically resonant form of "humanitarian nationalism,"⁵¹ largely unencumbered by the stratifying and diversity-containing logics that shaped Afghan refugee admissions.

Among these groups, focused attention is given to the Afghan Youth Empowerment and Development Initiative (AYEDI), the Canadian Campaign for Afghan Peace (CCAP), and the Manpreet Singh Bhullar Foundation (MSBF). AYEDI was the most consistently active Afghan diaspora organization during the study period and played a central coordinating role through the CCAP coalition.⁵² Often drawing on lived experience and transnational connections, its advocacy articulated an expansive politics of deservingness grounded in liberal-humanitarian scripts of universal human rights, women's education and gender equality, ethnic and religious minority protection, LGBTQ rights, and even obligations toward those who assisted Canada during the war in Afghanistan. MSBF, by contrast, is a Sikh-Canadian organization with strong ties to government actors and was the primary civil society advocate for Afghan Sikh and Hindu refugees. Its interventions relied heavily on discourses of religious minority persecution within a

⁵¹ Hyndman, "The Russian Invasion of Ukraine and Humanitarian Nationalism in Canada."

⁵² The AYEDI-led campaign includes a diverse range of groups, including international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), humanitarian CSOs, diaspora-based CSOs, cultural associations, student groups, and professional networks. For a full list of organizations, see CCAP, "Canadian Campaign for Afghan Peace."

Muslim-majority context, illustrating how differentiated moral and political claims were mobilized across non-Afghan diaspora formations.

Across veterans-linked and diaspora-led CSOs, actors engaged with and contested refugee policies and legislation in ways that variously reflected, reinforced, and negotiated broader Canadian frameworks of securitization, neoliberalism, and humanitarianism. Advocates frequently advanced overlapping yet, at times, competing claims about which Afghan populations should be prioritized, producing moments of friction as well as coalition. Many veterans focused their efforts on military-affiliated refugees, and some openly criticized what they perceived as the preferential evacuation of Afghan Sikh and Hindu communities, while other actors concentrated their advocacy on women and girls, LGBTQ individuals, or ethnic and religious minorities, each mobilizing distinct moral and political justifications for inclusion. Women-led Afghan-Canadian organizations articulated the most expansive calls for protection, pressing for broad-based humanitarian admission across multiple subgroups. Yet even these interventions were necessarily translated into institutionally recognizable categories—such as women’s rights violations or minority persecution—in ways that at times risked simplifying and decontextualizing portrayals of Afghan society as uniformly unruly or culturally “backward.”

Collectively, these dynamics help clarify why the actors selected for this study are analytically revealing. Fragmentation in Canada’s response to Afghan displacement did not arise from state design alone, nor can it be attributed solely to the differentiated interventions of civil society actors. Rather, it emerged through their encounter, as advocacy claims moved across institutional terrains already structured by bureaucratic divisions, securitized assessments of risk, and uneven administrative authority. Veterans’ organizations, diaspora-led groups, and humanitarian actors engaged the state from distinct positionalities, at times reinforcing official priorities, at times pressing against their limits, and at times coming into tension with one another as they navigated the constrained space of policy legibility. Attending to these actors through a relational analysis attuned to questions of power and hegemony makes it possible to trace how policy outcomes were produced less through coherence or consensus than through contingent alignments across a fractured field of governance. It is within these partial and often unstable moments of convergence—where advocacy, institutional constraint, and political opportunity briefly coincide—that the *armonia* effect becomes empirically visible. The choice of actors examined here thus reflects an effort to capture the relational conditions under which

selective openings in refugee protection were made possible, even as fragmentation and hierarchy remained durable features of Canada's refugee regime.

Table 1. Actors and Documents Selected for Analysis

Actor Name	Texts Selected from 2020-2024	Number of Texts
Canadian Government		
Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC)	Press Releases, Policies, Reports, Statements	46
Global Affairs Canada (GAC)	Press Releases, Statements	29
Department of National Defense (DND)	Press Releases, Reports, Statements	30
Public Safety Canada (PSC)	Press Releases, Statements	5
House of Commons Canada	Debates, Petitions	151
The Senate of Canada	Debates	47
Standing Committees: on Citizenship and Immigration (CImm) & on National Defence (NDDN)	Notes, Meeting Transcripts	33
Special Committee on Afghanistan (AFGH)	Notes, Meeting Transcripts, Reports	40
Canadian Political Parties		
Conservative Party (CPC)	News Releases	9
New Democratic Party (NDP)	News Releases	8
Veteran-linked CSOs in Canada		
Afghan-Canadian Interpreters (ACI)	News Statements, Press Releases	5
Aman Lara	Campaign Updates, News Statements, Press Releases	31
Canadian Heroes Foundation (CHF)	News Statements, Webpage	6
Helmet to Hardhats (H2H)	News Statements, Press Releases	4
Veterans Transition Network (VTN)	Campaign Updates, Individual Stories, News Statements, Press Releases, Reports	35

Diaspora-led CSOs in Canada		
Canadian Campaign for Afghan Peace (CCAP)	Campaign Updates, News Statements, Open-letters, Petitions, Press Releases	26
Afghan Youth Engagement and Development Initiative (AYEDI)	Blog Posts, Campaign Updates, News Statements, Open-letters, Press Releases	8
Afghan Women's Organization (AWO)	News Statements, Press Releases	6
Manmeet Singh Bhullar Foundation (MSBF)	Campaign Updates, News Statements	8
Canadian Humanitarian and Human-rights CSOs		
Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR)	Press Releases, News Statements	7
Canadian Red Cross	Press Releases, Statements	6
Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan (CW4WA)	Annual Reports, News Statements	8
Journalists for Human Rights (JHR)	Press Releases, News Statements, Open Letters	33
Foreign Governments and Ministries		
Afghanistan	Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR) Press Releases, Reports	67
Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)	Politburo Transcripts, Notes, and Memos	6
United States of America (US)	Congressional Hearing Transcripts, Departmental Notes and Transcripts, Presidential Addresses, and White House Memorandums	206
International Organizations		
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)	Articles, Handbook, Press Releases, Reports, Statements	26

1.2.4 Policy Pathways

In its official communications, the Government of Canada retrospectively presents its response to Afghan displacement as a coherent resettlement initiative, organized around three ostensibly stable streams: (1) Special Immigration Measures (SIM) for those who assisted Canada; (2) family-based pathways for extended family members of former interpreters, and language and cultural advisors; and (3) a humanitarian program directed toward designated “vulnerable” groups, including women leaders, LGBTQI+ individuals, human rights defenders, journalists, and members of religious and ethnic minorities such as Sikhs, Hindus, and Hazaras.⁵³ This ordering, however, imposes coherence on what was, in practice, a far more uneven and contested governance process.

My research suggests that this framing gathers together a heterogeneous set of policy instruments—introduced at different moments, under distinct political pressures, and according to uneven institutional rationales—and renders them legible as elements of a unified and purposive design. Yet a closer reading of the policy record between 2009 and 2023 points to a less settled terrain, one characterized by provisional measures, *ad hoc* amendments, and narrowly calibrated interventions that emerged in response to specific demands and operational constraints rather than from a singular governing logic. The appearance of coherence, then, does not arise from the internal consistency of the policies themselves, but from a *post hoc* narrative practice that smooths discontinuity, absorbs contingency into cumulative outcomes, and recasts selective and conditional openings as components of a bounded initiative. Fragmentation, as such, is discursively reordered in a manner that affirms state capacity and intentionality, even as it delimits the conditions under which protection becomes intelligible and administrable—despite sustained and varied advocacy pressures that repeatedly tested the limits of this architecture.

Across Canada’s history of engagement with Afghan displacement, at least fourteen distinct policy pathways have been established (see Table 2). The first emerged under the Harper Conservative government in 2009, and the remaining thirteen were introduced under the Trudeau Liberal government between May 2021 and October 2023. Each pathway was defined by its own eligibility criteria, procedural requirements, and intake limits, and many were subsequently amended or expanded to accommodate evolving circumstances, extend deadlines, or refine the

⁵³ NDDN, “Parliamentary Committee Notes.”

terms of access. Notably, only four of these pathways were in place prior to the collapse of the Afghan government and the Taliban's return to power on August 15, 2021.

I systematically review and code the full set of Afghan resettlement pathways not to construct a policy typology for its own sake, but to interrogate the discursive and practical fragmentation underpinning Canada's crisis response. This fragmentation was evident not only among policymakers, but also among the diverse and unevenly positioned advocates mobilizing on behalf of different subgroups of Afghan refugees. My research finds that the official categorization of these measures functions to obscure this fragmented governance landscape, including its differentiated pressures, power relations, and sequencing of advocacy that shaped the opening of specific pathways. For example, the first "humanitarian" pathway introduced in May 2021 emerged in large part through the mobilization of influential members of Canada's Indian, Sikh, and Hindu diasporas. Although limited in intake, this pathway facilitated resettlement and evacuation months earlier than comparable measures for other Afghan minority groups, many of whom were not afforded a designated pathway until August 2021. Collapsing these distinct openings into a unified humanitarian stream retrospectively erases the uneven temporalities and hierarchies through which protection was made available. Similarly, the category of those who "assisted Canada" masks policy differentiation among NATO locally engaged staff (LES), Canadian embassy LES, and other former employees, each of whom faced distinct eligibility criteria and administrative hurdles.

This framing further fails to account for measures that do not sit comfortably within the government's tripartite schema. These include pathways for Afghan nationals already present in Canada—including those who arrived through emergency airlifts—who required status regularization or transitions from Temporary Resident (TR) Permits to permanent residence (PR). Introduced on the grounds that return to Afghanistan was unsafe and would violate the principle of *non-refoulement* under international refugee law,⁵⁴ these measures granted permanent status and access to settlement supports through exemptions and waivers rather than through conventional resettlement channels.

⁵⁴ *Non-refoulement* is a foundational principle of international refugee law that prohibits states from returning or expelling individuals to a country where they would face a real risk of persecution, torture, or other serious harm. It is codified in Article 33(1) of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and is widely understood to apply not only to recognized refugees but also to asylum seekers and others in need of international protection. See, Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, art. 33.

Through a critical review and coding of the full set of pathways, I treat policy measures as outcomes of interaction and contention among state institutions, advocacy campaigns, legal constraints, and context-specific and crisis-driven political pressures. Attending to both what is included within the state's policy narrative and what falls outside it makes visible the uneven temporalities, hierarchies of access, and differentiated logics of deservingness that structured Canada's response. This methodological approach provides the foundation for the chapters that follow, which examine how these fragmented pathways were produced, contested, and selectively expanded through interactions between policymakers, veterans' groups, diaspora-led advocates, and other civil society actors.

Table 2. Special Measures and Policies for Afghan Refugees (2009-2023)

Policy #	Policy Measure	Start Date	End Date	# of Amendments/ Replacements	Amendment/ Replacement Date	Eligibility Criteria	Resettlement Cap & Outcome
1	Individuals who assisted Canada in Kandahar ⁵⁵	9 Oct 2009	12 Sep 2011	—	—	Employment in direct support of Canadian government in Kandahar for at least 12 months since October 9, 2007	Approximately 500 resettled
			2012 (exact date unspecified)	1 (reopened)	20 Apr 2012	—	Additional 300 resettled
2	Afghan Sikhs and Hindus ⁵⁶	28 May 2021	30 Jun 2022	—	—	Afghan nationals identifying as Sikh or Hindu; pre-June 30, 2020, PR applications; privately sponsored through MSBF	Cap: 36
—	—	—	—	1	6 Aug 2021	—	Cap raised to 45
—	—	—	31 Dec 2023 (extended)	2	8 Apr 2022	Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR)-led resettlement explicitly integrated into	Cap raised to 300

⁵⁵ IRCC, “Government of Canada Creates Special Immigration Measures to Recognize Contribution of Afghan Staff in Kandahar.”

⁵⁶ IRCC, “Temporary Public Policy to Facilitate the Resettlement of Afghan Sikhs and Hindus”; IRCC, “Temporary Public Policy to Facilitate the Resettlement of Afghan Sikhs and Hindus – Principal Applicant”; IRCC, “Temporary Public Policy to Facilitate the Resettlement of Afghan Sikhs and Hindus as Part of Operation Afghan Safety.”

3	Individuals who assisted Canada ⁵⁷	22 Jul 2021	31 Jan 2022	—	—	Operation Afghan Safety Significant and/or enduring relationship to Canada, identified on DND or GAC referral lists, and physically present in Afghanistan	Cap: 2,500
—	—	—	—	1	9 Aug 2021	Clarified temporal scope: must have been in Afghanistan on or after 22 Jul 2021	Cap raised to 5,700
—	—	—	—	2	22 Aug 2021	Expanded household scope includes “other household members”	Cap raised to 9,500
—	—	—	—	3	10 Nov 2021	—	Cap raised to 14,000
—	—	—	31 Mar 2023 (extended)	4	8 Jun 2022	Shift to IRCC Invitation-to-Apply intake; eligibility narrowed to principal, family,	New intake cap of 5,000, to help reach 18,000 total admissions

⁵⁷ IRCC, “Temporary Public Policy for the Resettlement of Afghan Nationals in Afghanistan”; IRCC, “Temporary Public Policy for the Resettlement of Afghan Nationals with a Significant and/or Enduring Relationship to Canada”; IRCC, “Temporary Public Policy for the Resettlement of Afghan Nationals with a Significant and/or Enduring Relationship to Canada (Updated August 22, 2021)”; IRCC, “Temporary Public Policy for the Resettlement of Afghan Nationals with a Significant and/or Enduring Relationship to Canada (Updated November 10, 2021)”; IRCC, “Temporary Public Policy for the Resettlement of Additional Afghan Nationals with a Significant and/or Enduring Relationship to Canada”; IRCC, “Temporary Public Policy for the Resettlement of Additional Afghan Nationals with a Significant and/or Enduring Relationship to Canada – Update and Clarification”; IRCC, “Temporary Public Policy for the Resettlement of Additional Afghan Nationals with a Significant and/or Enduring Relationship to Canada – Extension.”

						and <i>de facto</i> dependents (no new household entrants)	
—	—	—	30 Sep 2023 (extended)	5	29 Mar 2023	—	Program cap replaced with single consolidated cap of 20,600 across all programs dedicated to Afghan nationals with a significant relationship to Canada
—	—	—	31 Dec 2023 (extended)	6	1 Oct 2023	—	—
4	Canadian Embassy Locally Engaged Staff (LES) ⁵⁸	22 Jul 2021	31 Jan 2022	—	—	LES of Canadian Embassy & accompanying family/household members	No fixed numerical cap
5	Afghan nationals in Canada and outside Canada ⁵⁹	25 Aug 2021	28 Feb 2022	—	—	Afghan nationals: (1) immediate family members of Canadian citizens/PRs evacuated from Afghanistan; (2) approved PR holders abroad	No numerical cap; facilitative policy enabling evacuation, entry, and lawful stay through temporary or permanent residence

⁵⁸ IRCC, “Temporary Public Policy for the Resettlement of Locally Engaged Staff of the Embassy of Canada to Afghanistan.”

⁵⁹ IRCC, “Temporary Public Policy for Afghan Nationals in Canada and Outside Canada”; IRCC, “Temporary Public Policy for Afghan Nationals in Canada Applying for a Work or Study Permit”; IRCC, “Temporary Public Policy for Afghan Nationals Applying for Temporary Resident Status,” February 28, 2022; IRCC, “Temporary Public Policy for Afghan Nationals Applying for Temporary Resident Status,” December 19, 2022.

						unable to obtain travel documents; (3) temporary residents in Canada seeking status extension or restoration	
—	—	—	31 Dec 2022	1 (supplements previous policy)	23 Dec 2021	Afghan nationals in Canada with valid TR status applying for initial work or study permits	No cap; expanded fee exemptions for work/study access
—	—	—	—	2 (replaces/ consolidates previous policies)	28 Feb 2022	Afghan nationals in Canada extending/restoring TR status or applying for work/study permits; evacuated Afghan family members accompanying Canadians/PRs	No cap; consolidated temporary-status and fee-exemption regime
—	—	—	31 Dec 2023 (extended)	3	19 Dec 2022	—	No cap; renewed consolidated TR facilitation
6	Foreign nationals airlifted from Afghanistan ⁶⁰	25 Aug 2021	—	—	—	Airlifted by Canada or allies from HKIA or transit countries	5,000 Temporary Resident Permits (TRP)

⁶⁰ IRCC, “Amended Temporary Public Policy to Facilitate Permanent Residence for Certain Citizens of Afghanistan Issued Temporary Resident Permits”; IRCC, “Temporary Public Policy for Foreign Nationals Being Airlifted from Afghanistan.”

—	—	—	25 Oct 2023	1	25 Oct 2021	Evacuees holding TRPs in Canada; in-Canada family	TRP to Permanent Residency (PR)
7	NATO Locally Engaged Staff ⁶¹	19 Sep 2021	31 Jan 2022	—	—	NATO-listed Afghan local staff & family	Cap: 150
—	—	—	—	1	18 Oct 2021	Contractors added to NATO staff	Cap raised to 472
8	Afghan nationals identified by Frontline Defenders and Protect Defenders ⁶²	30 Sep 2021	31 Dec 2023	—	—	living in Afghanistan when application submitted; referred by Front Line Defenders or Protect Defenders. eu.	Cap: 900 Exempts: “outside country” requirement; office-of-residence submission; and temporary travel document conditions
9	Certain Afghan nationals selected by the IRCC Minister under Operation Afghan Safety ⁶³	9 Oct 2021	—	—	—	Individuals personally identified by the IRCC Minister as highly vulnerable (women leaders, journalists, persecuted religious minorities)	No explicit numeric cap stated; discretionary ministerial selection; direct overseas PR

⁶¹ IRCC, “Temporary Public Policy for the Resettlement of Certain Locally Engaged Staff of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization”; IRCC, “Expanded Temporary Public Policy for the Resettlement of Certain Locally Engaged Staff of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.”

⁶² IRCC, “Temporary Public Policy for the Resettlement of Afghan Nationals from within Afghanistan Identified by Frontline Defenders and Protect Defenders.”

⁶³ IRCC, “Temporary Public Policy for the Resettlement of Certain Afghan Nationals Selected by the Minister of IRCC under Operation Afghan Safety”; IRCC, “Temporary Public Policy for the Resettlement of Certain Afghan Nationals”; IRCC, “Temporary Public Policy for the Resettlement of Certain Afghan Nationals Selected by the Minister of IRCC – Hazara Afghan Nationals.”

						including Afghan Sikhs, ethnic minorities including. Hazara, LGBTQI individuals), plus immediate family members, resettled as Convention Refugee Abroad Class with broad eligibility exemptions	
—	—	—	—	1	22 Nov 2021	Clarifies scope: only individuals named on government provided list are eligible (removes/limits any broader interpretation)	—
—	—	—	—	2	23 Dec 2021	Addition: Hazara women, including orphans, chaperones, and chaperones' family members, named on ministerial list; exempted from Convention Refugee Abroad eligibility and processing fees	—

10	Families of Individuals who came under previous SIMs ⁶⁴	25 Oct 2021	—	—	—	Extended family of individuals resettled under SIMs in 2009-2012	Cap: 1,000
—	—	—	—	1	23 Jun 2022	—	Cap raised to 5,000
—	—	—	—	2	12 Oct 2022	—	Cap raised to 6,100
—	—	—	—	3	28 Oct 2023	—	Cap raised to 7,200
11	Temporary Residency to Permanent Residency for certain Afghan nationals ⁶⁵	7 Apr 2022	31 Dec 2022	—	—	Individuals or family members on government list; have TR permit; and physically present in Canada	No public numerical cap; finite, closed list of eligible applicants
12	Certain vulnerable Afghan nationals (organization-referred) ⁶⁶	20 Sep 2022	— (revocable)	—	—	Individuals and their family members identified by trusted organizations (e.g. Rainbow Railroad, UN agencies,	Government-assisted refugees, direct overseas PR; no explicit cap stated

⁶⁴ IRCC, “Temporary Public Policy for the Issuance of Permanent Resident Visas for Families of Afghan Nationals Who Came to Canada under Previous Public Policies”; IRCC, “Updated Temporary Public Policy for the Issuance of Permanent Resident Visas for Families of Afghan Nationals Who Came to Canada under Previous Public Policies”; IRCC, “Temporary Public Policy for the Issuance of Permanent Resident Visas for Families of Afghan Nationals Who Came to Canada under Previous Public Policies – Intake Cap Increase”; IRCC, “Temporary Public Policy for the Issuance of Permanent Resident Visas for Families of Afghan Nationals Who Came to Canada under Previous Public Policies – Additional Intake Cap Increase.”

⁶⁵ IRCC, “Temporary Public Policy to Facilitate Permanent Residence for Certain Citizens of Afghanistan.”

⁶⁶ IRCC, “Temporary Public Policy for the Resettlement of Certain Vulnerable Afghan Nationals.”

						Journalists for Human Rights), named on government list	
13	Sponsorship of Afghan refugees by Groups of Five and Community Sponsors ⁶⁷	17 Oct 2022	17 Oct 2023	—	—	Applicants sponsored by Groups of Five or Community Sponsors who completed IRCC-specified training; waiver of UNHCR/foreign state refugee status document requirement under PSR program.	Cap: 3,000
14	Extended families of former language and cultural advisors (LCAs) ⁶⁸	11 Mar 2023	11 Sep 2023	—	—	Individuals outside Canada; present in Afghanistan on/after 22 July 2021; extended family of a Canadian citizen or PR former LCA employed by DND	Cap: 380 principal applicants (plus accompanying family)
—	—	—	31 Dec 2023 (extended)	1	11 Sep 2023	—	—

⁶⁷ IRCC, “Temporary Public Policy to Facilitate the Sponsorship of Afghan Refugees by Groups of Five and Community Sponsors.”

⁶⁸ IRCC, “Temporary Public Policy for Extended Families of Former Language and Cultural Advisors – Extension”; IRCC, “Temporary Public Policy for Extended Families of Former Language and Cultural Advisors.”

1.3 Chapter Outline

The chapters that follow examine how the Afghan refugee crisis of 2021 took shape through a global history in which sovereign priorities, institutional arrangements, and discursive formations gradually reorganized the conditions under which protection could be claimed and granted. Across these chapters, the *armonia* effect provides the central analytic for understanding not simply the expansion of resettlement pathways, but the uneven process through which certain advocacy claims became resonant, governable, and politically actionable while others remained muted or constrained. Some chapters trace the historical and institutional conditions under which such resonance failed to emerge; others examine the discursive and political preconditions that later made it possible; still others follow the selective openings and durable limits that appeared once it did. Advocacy efforts become politically consequential where their moral claims are able to align with state vocabularies, institutional precedents, and reputational commitments. Where such alignment is absent, partial, or unstable, resonance weakens and access to protection narrows.

Chapter Two returns to the Cold War to establish the conditions under which Afghan displacement failed to generate a comparable field of advocacy in Canada. Afghanistan occupied a prominent place in the humanitarian rhetoric of the Canadian state, yet its refugees remained peripheral to durable commitments of protection. Regional containment, foreign patronage, and the politicization of humanitarian spaces limited the possibilities for resonance and mobilization, while a small diaspora, limited civil society engagement, and the absence of influential intermediaries produced a muted advocacy landscape. The chapter situates this absence within crisis governance rather than a supposed public or political indifference, identifying the demographic, institutional, and discursive conditions that were not yet in place for an *armonia* effect to take hold.

Chapter Three traces the consolidation of Canada's post-9/11 governance architecture and the institutional limits it imposed on protection and advocacy. Situated within an emerging global counterterrorism regime, refugee policy became increasingly structured by deterrence, externalization, and expanded executive discretions. Humanitarian commitments persisted rhetorically, yet access to protection narrowed in practice. This chapter thus establishes the

institutional terrain within which later advocacy would operate, clarifying the limits of what could become legible, actionable, and politically viable.

Chapter Four examines the discursive field that rendered some Afghan refugee claims intelligible in Canada during the wartime period. Security and compassion were bounded together within a narrative of liberal interventionism that linked national identity to sacrifice, allyship, and gendered rescue. Afghan subjects were differentiated as partners, victims, or potential threats through militarized narratives of loyalty, vulnerability, and civilizational defence. These representations shaped which claims later appeared credible and urgent, demonstrating that the armonia effect depended not only on institutional openings but on the prior formation of a discursive terrain receptive to particular appeals.

Chapter Five situates the 2021 crisis within the politics of withdrawal rather than treating it as an unforeseen rupture. Migration diplomacy, negotiations with the Taliban, and a broader rhetoric of fatigue and futility reoriented international engagement toward new forms of containment and reputational management. Financial restrictions, non-recognition, and counterterrorism frameworks constrained the humanitarian response and mobility at the moment of state collapse. This chapter clarifies the immediate structural and discursive environment within which Canada's response unfolded and within which advocacy would seek to generate resonance.

Chapter Six examines veterans-based advocacy as a distinctive form of civil society intervention grounded in the afterlives of Canada's war. Veterans mobilized a moral economy of obligation that framed Afghan interpreters and locally engaged staff as uniquely deserving because their vulnerability was tied to wartime relationships of loyalty and reciprocity. This proximity to state institutions generated political traction and selective policy openings. Yet recognition did not consistently translate into mobility. Through the concept of non-sortie, the chapter shows how exit was formally authorized yet practically constrained, and how civil society keywork—a field of coordinated interventions through which CSOs mobilized their own resources and organizational capacities to advance protection, evacuation, and resettlement in the absence or delay of state action—emerged in response to these implementation gaps, even as such efforts prompted the state to reassert authority through legal and procedural containment. The armonia effect is visible here in one of its clearest and most bounded forms: advocacy

generated movement within sovereign structures, but could not dissolve the constraints that made such movement selective, delayed, and unequal.

Chapter Seven turns to diaspora-based advocacy as a fragmented field of intermediation. Advocacy outcomes varied according to political capital, institutional access, and the ability to translate claims into policy-legible forms aligned with humanitarian and security discourses. Religious minority advocacy and women-led Afghan-Canadian mobilizations produced different pathways to protection, each mediated by distinct configurations of legitimacy and perceived risk. Diaspora actors functioned as translators between displaced populations and the state, expanding access while varyingly reproducing the selective logics that structure refugee governance. The *armonia* effect appears in these differentiated instances of resonance, where alignment yields openings that remain partial, fragmented, and uneven.

The dissertation as a whole shows that refugee governance operates across a dispersed architecture of law, diplomacy, advocacy, and narrative. Crises reorganize sovereign power rather than suspend it, redistributing authority across institutional and discursive domains. The *armonia* effect names the mechanism through which advocacy acquires traction within this landscape by harmonizing claims with state priorities and public vocabularies. Its outcomes are consequential yet bounded, producing expansions of protection that remain selective, provisional, and conditioned by the enduring structures that govern mobility, recognition, and belonging.

Chapter Two: A Muted Armonia: The Cold War Politics of Afghan Refugee Advocacy

Our policy... has not just been to take stands of our own, and in this matter I have indicated... to [the] President [of the United States] that we would support him in the measures he announced and that we would join him in those measures. However, it is also important for us to bring other countries along so that we maintain this front of... as many nations as possible to continue in our condemnation of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

— Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau, April 15, 1980⁶⁹

The federal Government is not granting special refugee status to Afghans... I'd agree that this is an apparent anomaly... But anomalies like that occur here on a daily basis that I don't pretend to understand... We are contributing to their maintenance in places such as Pakistan, but we hope for their eventual return to Afghanistan.

— Ian Hamilton, CO at *Canadian Employment & Immigration Commission*, June 10, 1980⁷⁰

Given the international humanitarian image which Canadians have, and our track-record demonstrating our capability and willingness to help in crises as well as in longer term development, the non-government organization (NGO) response to Afghanistan is severely abnormal - less than half of one per cent of all financial assistance... Less than two per cent of Canada's intake of refugees is Afghan... How can this happen when most Canadians know there is a major war and a superpower had invaded? The Afghans are the largest refugee population in the world! How can such an obvious need go unaddressed?

— Jane Thomas, former Public Education Director at *Human Concern International*, 1989⁷¹

The statements that open this chapter illuminate, in different registers, a constitutive contradiction in Canada's early engagement with Afghan displacement. In April 1980, Prime Minister Trudeau situated Afghanistan firmly within the theatre of Cold War geopolitics, aligning Canada with the U.S. in condemning the Soviet invasion and calling for a unified international response. Two months later, a senior immigration official acknowledged what he termed an "apparent anomaly" in the federal government's refusal to extend special refugee status to Afghan nationals, only to normalize that anomaly by observing that such inconsistencies

⁶⁹ *House of Commons Debates*, No. 15.

⁷⁰ The Globe and Mail, "Canada Not Assisting Afghans' Resettlement."

⁷¹ Thomas, "The Canadian Response to Afghanistan."

occurred “on a daily basis,” effectively rendering the exceptional as routine, and by redirecting attention toward Canada’s support for refugee “maintenance” in Pakistan and the prospect of eventual return. Nearly a decade on, Jane Thomas would describe the relative silence of Canadian humanitarian organizations as “severely abnormal,” pointing to minimal funding, weak public engagement, and the absence of sustained advocacy on behalf of what had by then become the largest refugee population in the world. Read together, these statements do not merely register divergence. They trace the contours of a governance logic in which public condemnation, administrative pragmatism, and humanitarian absence could coexist without resolution.

When Afghanistan’s displacement crisis first emerged during the late Cold War period, it was an issue that was at once both hypervisible and marginalized in Canadian politics. It occupied a key discursive site of superpower confrontation while remaining peripheral to durable commitments of protection in the Global North. Its refugees were invoked as symbols of a violated small-state sovereignty, as testaments to Soviet imperial aggression, as figures in a theatre of war staged between Moscow and Washington. Yet beyond the spectacle of Western denunciations and moral proclamation lay a quieter architecture of governance that regionalized responsibility, instrumentalized humanitarian language, and circumscribed the political horizons within which Afghan mobility could be addressed.

Seen against Canada’s responses to other refugee crises, this mutedness becomes more legible. The reception of Hungarians, Indochinese, Afghans, and later Syrians was never governed by suffering alone, nor even by geopolitics in any simple sense, but by historically specific arrangements of race, strategic interest, legal category, labour demand, and public legibility. Vietnam is especially instructive here. As Anh Ngo argues, what later appeared as a humanitarian success story was inseparable from a Cold War remaking of anti-colonial struggle into anti-communist morality, from Canada’s self-fashioning as peacekeeper and refuge, and from the production of Vietnamese refugees as unusually legible subjects of gratitude, productivity, and national redemption.⁷² Canada could inhabit the consoling posture of peacekeeper and refuge even as its relation to war was more implicated than innocent. Afghanistan, by contrast, did not generate this same compact between state narration, civil-

⁷² Ngo, “The Entanglements of Canada’s National Identity Building and Vietnamese Canadian Community Conflicts.”

society identification, and public affect during the late Cold War. Its crisis was visible, but only weakly resonant, failing to become similarly available as a scene of national self-redemption.

This chapter examines that architecture in order to clarify not only how Afghan displacement was governed during the Soviet-Afghan War and its aftermath, but more importantly, why it failed to generate an *armonia effect* in Canada comparable to the one seen between 2021 and 2023. Whereas Afghanistan's contemporary crisis resonated strongly among Canadian CSOs—producing advocacy and lobbying efforts that harmonized with state and public discourses, generated fault lines across the nation's diverse actor landscape, and pressured the federal government to implement expansive and streamlined pathways for protection and resettlement—the Cold War period presents a much less inspired story.

I argue that this muted armonia was not simply the product of indifference, but of a failure of harmonization across the key elements that would later make Afghan displacement politically resonant in Canada. Humanitarian rhetoric featured prominently in official statements, yet it coexisted with Ottawa's refusal to extend special refugee status to Afghan nationals and with a broader governing preference for regional containment over resettlement. During the same period, Canada coordinated one of its largest humanitarian initiatives by resettling more than 60,000 Indochinese refugees between 1979 and 1980 through the newly established Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) program, a program that would later garner Canada international praise and acclaim, and become central to its humanitarian self-image.⁷³ Afghanistan, by contrast, was rapidly becoming the world's largest displacement crisis, with more than 4.4 million refugees registered by UNHCR,⁷⁴ yet it was met with a "severely abnormal" silence among Canadian humanitarian CSOs.⁷⁵ What was absent, in other words, was not the recognition of crisis as such, but the convergence of conditions through which that recognition might be translated into political and institutional traction: a sufficient demographic presence, receptive institutional channels, effective forms of political intermediation, and sustained civil society mobilization. Without this alignment, the armonia effect could not fully take hold, and the crisis, though widely acknowledged, remained only weakly resonant within the Canadian field of refugee governance.

⁷³ Casasola, "The Indochinese Refugee Movement and the Subsequent Evolution of UNHCR and Canadian Resettlement Selection Policies and Practices"; IRCC, "Indochinese Refugees"; Molloy et al., *Running on Empty*.

⁷⁴ *The Gazette*, "Kabul Ignores Anniversary of Soviet Takeover."

⁷⁵ Thomas, "The Canadian Response to Afghanistan."

To situate this absence, the chapter proceeds in four movements. First, it traces the consolidation of Cold War crisis governance, showing how both the Soviet Union and the U.S. articulated Afghanistan's instability through competing discourses of legality, freedom, and security, while converging in practice on strategies that prioritized regional containment over large-scale resettlement in the West. Second, it shows how this same crisis architecture politicized humanitarian spaces in ways that began to seed an enduring association between Afghan refugees and terrorism, even before that linkage materialized into an explicit post-9/11 discourse. Third, it turns to Canada's position within this geopolitical order, demonstrating how Ottawa's denunciations of Soviet aggression and its cultivation of a humanitarian national identity coexisted with a limited and selective approach to Afghan admissions. Fourth, it examines the muted landscape of civil society during this period, characterized by a small and recently established Afghan diaspora, humanitarian CSOs that were largely disengaged from the issue, media framings that cast Afghan refugees in suspect or marginal terms, and the absence of institutionally-affiliated actors—such as veterans' groups—whose later interventions would alter the terrain of Afghan refugee advocacy. Finally, it considers the modest rise in Afghan immigration during the 1990s, arguing that these increases reflected structural spillovers from domestic legal reforms and shifting geopolitical alignments rather than an *armonia* effect emanating from concerned Canadian actors

Read in this way, the Cold War period does not represent a simple prelude to later, more resonant, developments. It establishes the structural baseline against which subsequent transformations must be understood. By foregrounding the conditions under which the *armonia* effect was unable to occur, my analysis identifies the political, demographic, and institutional factors that were missing—factors whose later emergence would fundamentally reshape the politics of Afghan refugee governance in Canada.

2.1 Crisis Governance and Regionalized Containment

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 ushered in a new grammar through which Afghan migration and mobility would be rendered intelligible for decades to come. Crisis was declared in the language of a sovereignty violated, of ideological aggression, of

small nations imperiled by empire. Yet the recognition of crisis did not centre Afghan civilians as rights-bearing subjects. Rather, it repositioned them as pieces within a chessboard of geopolitics in which mobility, humanitarian aid, and refugee governance became instruments of foreign policy and diplomacy.⁷⁶ Refugees were at once invoked and displaced. They were named in speeches, counted in reports, mourned in rhetoric. Yet their protection was continually subordinated to the broader imperatives of Cold War competition.

For Moscow, instability in Kabul signified the erosion of revolutionary gains and a potential threat to its national security. Far from an act of imperial aggression or small-state sovereign transgression, the Soviet intervention was portrayed as a treaty-bound obligation to support a socialist ally, restore political order, and preserve revolutionary continuity.⁷⁷ For Washington, by contrast, the Soviet occupation itself was identified as the crisis. It was framed as a violation of international law, an attempt by a powerful atheistic state to subjugate an independent Islamic population, and a strategic expansion toward critical energy corridors and regional influence.⁷⁸ The two superpowers diverged in their narrative emphases, yet converged in practice insofar as both cast Afghanistan's upheaval as a crisis requiring external stewardship by ostensibly benevolent powers, each invoking the language of supporting Afghan sovereignty and interests even as they pursued their own geopolitical agendas. Displacement, as such, became consequential to international governance approaches—an issue to be managed in ways that could leverage a strategic advantage.

Take, for instance, U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski's recommendations in his memorandum to then-U.S. President Jimmy Carter just two days after the Soviet intervention:

As I mentioned to you a week or so ago, we are now facing a regional crisis... the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan poses for us an extremely grave challenge, both internationally and domestically...

⁷⁶ There has been a rich volume of emerging literature over the past few decades that discuss the relationship between foreign policy and international migration. See, for instance, Adamson and Tsourapas, "Migration Diplomacy in World Politics"; Aras and Mencutek, "The International Migration and Foreign Policy Nexus"; Atak et al., "Canada's Implementation of the UN Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees"; Jacobsen, "Factors Influencing the Policy Responses of Host Governments to Mass Refugee Influxes"; Milner, "Canada and the UN Global Compact on Refugees."

⁷⁷ Andropov et al., *Regarding Events in Afghanistan during 27-28 December 1979*.

⁷⁸ Carter, "Address to the Nation on the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan."

... Certainly, Moslem [sic] countries will be concerned, and we might be in a position to exploit this...

There are already 300,000 refugees from Afghanistan in Pakistan, and we will be in a position to indict the Soviets for causing massive human suffering. That figure will certainly grow...

It is essential that Afghanistani resistance continues. This means more money as well as arms shipments to the rebels, and some technical advice;

... we must both reassure Pakistan and encourage it to help the rebels...

We should concert with Islamic countries both in a propaganda campaign and in a covert action campaign to help the rebels...

Finally, we should consider taking Soviet actions in Afghanistan to the UN as a threat to peace.⁷⁹

The approach combined overt and covert measures designed to rally international support for U.S. objectives while simultaneously undermining Soviet legitimacy.

It is here that a decades long emphasis on regionalized modes of Afghan refugee control and containment first took shape. Rather than translating moral denunciations into expansive resettlement commitments in the Global North, Western states channelled resources toward regional hosts, most notably neighbouring Pakistan and to a far lesser extent Iran. Millions of Afghan nationals were granted *prima facie* recognition as they crossed borders under “open-door” policies that were themselves deeply political.⁸⁰ Pakistan aligned with Washington, becoming the principal conduit for financial, military, and humanitarian flows.⁸¹ Consequently, refugee camps along its frontier were transformed into sites where aid distribution intersected with militant Islamist recruitment.⁸² Iran, emerging from revolution and estranged from the West,⁸³ adopted its own framework of refugee reception, framing hospitality in Islamic terms

⁷⁹ Brzezinski, *Reflection on Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan*, 2.

⁸⁰ Esfahani and Hosseini, “Afghan Refugees and Iran’s Open Door Policy in the 1980s”; Langenkamp, “The Victory of Expediency Afghan Refugees and Pakistan in the 1990s.”

⁸¹ Nojumi, “The Rise and Fall of the Taliban.”

⁸² By the mid 1980s there were more than 300 ARVs throughout the country, and virtually all were located in either Khyber Pukhtunkhwa or Balochistan. Refugees were not confined to ARVs but those who chose to live outside them did not receive any assistance and were mostly unregistered. See Ghufuran, “The Role of UNHCR and Afghan Refugees in Pakistan,” 947–48.

⁸³ Under the Shah, Iran had been a key U.S. ally for countering Soviet influence in the region. The 1979 revolution, however, was a turning point in regional politics, repositioning Iran as an independent actor and severing its ties with the United States. See, Howard, *FRUS 1977-1980, Vol. XII: Afghanistan*, 12:433, 480–82.

while preserving discretionary control over status and rights.⁸⁴ In both contexts, protection was extended but heavily politicized, generous in appearance yet embedded within ideological and strategic interests.

This arrangement enabled the consolidation of armed political networks and the recruitment of refugees into insurgent ranks, transforming camps from spaces of humanitarian aid into hubs of political and military activity that exploited displaced people's heightened vulnerabilities. Islamist leaders that were previously unknown had been granted considerable autonomy over the millions of refugees residing near Pakistan's border.⁸⁵ Consequently, refugee camps soon became the targets of Soviet and Afghan government airstrikes in efforts to undermine nearby supply routes, training sites, and arms depots,⁸⁶ leaving refugees in conditions of chronic insecurity. Allegations of cross-border shelling⁸⁷ and Islamabad's periodic consideration of relocating refugees to ease diplomatic tensions with Moscow⁸⁸ further illustrate how the endangerment of Afghan lives was viewed less as a humanitarian concern than as a matter of geopolitical liability. In this way, the politicized nature of international humanitarian aid and assistance did not insulate refugees from harm but often intensified their exposure to it, despite the abundant humanitarian rhetoric used by world leaders to justify their interventions.

In Iran as well, refugee governance was deeply politicized, though articulated through a different rhetorical and institutional register. Tehran publicly grounded its approach in Islamic principles of hospitality enshrined in the Qur'an, presenting the hosting of refugees as a religious duty.⁸⁹ Yet, as in Pakistan, these discourses operated alongside domestic and foreign policy objectives. Afghan Shia Islamist groups, and to a lesser extent Sunni Islamists, received military and financial backing from the Iranian state, with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) playing a central role in training and equipping groups aligned with Ayatollah Khomeini's revolutionary vision of an Islamic state as an alternative to both communism and liberal capitalism.⁹⁰ Some of these groups recruited refugees to fight in the Iran-Iraq War,

⁸⁴ Esfahani and Hosseini, "Afghan Refugees and Iran's Open Door Policy in the 1980s"; Hugo et al., "Refugee Movement and Development – Afghan Refugees in Iran"; Moghadam and Jadali, "Immigration and Revolution in Iran."

⁸⁵ Nojumi, "The Rise and Fall of the Taliban," 92.

⁸⁶ Directorate of Intelligence, *Soviet Airstrikes in Pakistan: Options and Effectiveness*; Howard, *FRUS 1977-1980, Vol. XII: Afghanistan*, vol. 12.

⁸⁷ Howard, *FRUS 1977-1980, Vol. XII: Afghanistan*, 12:116, 119.

⁸⁸ Howard, *FRUS 1977-1980, Vol. XII: Afghanistan*, 12:255, 667–68.

⁸⁹ Hugo et al., "Refugee Movement and Development – Afghan Refugees in Iran," 267.

⁹⁰ Nojumi, "The Rise and Fall of the Taliban," 93.

offering resources, military aid, and the ability to transport captured Iraqi weapons back to Afghanistan.⁹¹ Afghan Islamists in Iran also enjoyed privileges unavailable to most refugees, such as access to office space, food stamps, and business permits,⁹² while the broader refugee population was often absorbed into the country's low-wage labour force in agriculture, construction, and manufacturing at a time when many young Iranian men were conscripted for the war.⁹³ In this way, even in the absence of the international patronage networks that sustained Pakistan's role, Iran's refugee governance was no less political, subordinating humanitarian protections to strategic, ideological, and economic ends.

Thus emerged a mode of international crisis governance in which rhetorical gestures of compassion and strategic practices of containment worked hand in hand. It was structured not to resolve mass displacement, but to manage and instrumentalize it. For Western states, refugees were to be supported *over there*, in the Global South, contained near the theatre of war, and implicitly positioned as potential returnees once geopolitical objectives had been secured. Large-scale resettlements *over here* in North America or Western Europe would have undermined the very narratives of resistance that supported U.S.-led strategy. Humanitarian language furnished a moral legitimacy for interventions, while regionalized hosting provided an avenue for pursuing foreign policy interests. Afghan displacement was rendered visible enough to indict Soviet occupation, yet contained enough to avoid communicating strong needs for large resettlements in the West. The camps in Peshawar and Mashhad became emblematic of suffering and solidarity alike, while the admissions into the Global North remained modest and highly selective. Refugees' presence in neighbouring countries served political ends that their departure might have otherwise complicated.

Humanitarianism, in this sense, did not displace geopolitics; it was one of its modalities. By funding relief operations in Pakistan and, to a far lesser extent, Iran, Western states could present themselves as humanitarian benefactors without opening their own asylum systems. As Elisabeth Leake observes, "the performance of giving was as important as what was given."⁹⁴ It

⁹¹ Nojumi, "The Rise and Fall of the Taliban," 93.

⁹² Nojumi, "The Rise and Fall of the Taliban," 93.

⁹³ Esfahani and Hosseini, "Afghan Refugees and Iran's Open Door Policy in the 1980s"; Hugo et al., "Refugee Movement and Development – Afghan Refugees in Iran."

⁹⁴ Leake, *Afghan Crucible*, 185.

was inseparable from a tacit understanding that displacement would be managed at a distance. Responsibility was to be shared rhetorically, but spatially contained.

It would be mistaken, however, to interpret this arrangement as purely coercive or unidirectional. Refugees navigated, negotiated, and at times resisted the constraints imposed upon them. Some leveraged camp networks to secure educational opportunities or mobility pathways, while others migrated onward through informal channels, seeking asylum beyond the region.⁹⁵ Yet these trajectories were fragmented and unfolded within a broader structure that limited collective exit.

By the late 1980s, as Soviet withdrawal approached and the Geneva Accords were signed,⁹⁶ the limits of this architecture became increasingly visible. The accords formalized troop withdrawal yet excluded key Afghan factions from negotiations, leaving the internal conflict unresolved. Western and Soviet support for their respective proxies persisted, and displacement continued.⁹⁷ The Soviet withdrawal in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 was heralded in the West as vindications of strategic persistence. Yet the expectation that peace would follow proved premature. The collapse of Afghanistan's communist government in 1992 gave way to a civil war among Mujahideen factions, and later to the emergence of the Taliban.⁹⁸ What had once been framed as resistance to a foreign Soviet occupation was now narrated in civilizational terms as civil war, factionalism, or religious extremism. The moral clarity of anti-Soviet solidarity dissipated, and with it the limited symbolic centrality of Afghan refugees in Western discourse.

It is against this backdrop that Canada's restrained admissions and carefully calibrated rhetoric must be understood, not as anomalies, but as expressions of a wider governing order. The absence of large-scale Western resettlement during the 1980s and early 1990s did not signal a failure of humanitarian commitment so much as the logical extension of a paradigm that aligned humanitarian language with geopolitical containment. For Canada, situated within this Western orbit, Afghan displacement was managed at a distance where it was affirmed rhetorically, funded regionally, and admitted selectively. The muted character of Canadian

⁹⁵ Monsutti, *War and Migration*, 31–39.

⁹⁶ Afghanistan et al., "The Geneva Accords"; Howard, "Ottawa Calls Afghan Peace Prospect Dim."

⁹⁷ *Toronto Star*, "Week in Review: Afghan Accord."

⁹⁸ Crews and Tarzi, "Introduction"; Nojumi, "The Rise and Fall of the Taliban."

engagement was thus not merely domestic in origin but produced through participation in a transnational architecture that rendered refugee mobility an instrument within Cold War strategy.

This architecture also altered the meanings attached to displacement itself. As refugee spaces became entangled with networks of militant patronage, the conditions were set for a more durable association between refugees and terrorism—an association that would, in time, crystallize into a more explicit and institutionalized discourse through which mobility could be further regulated and constrained.

2.2 The Origins of a Refugee-Terrorism Association

Although the explicit discursive conflation of “refugee” and “terrorist” had not yet hardened into policy orthodoxy, its material preconditions were already taking shape during the late Cold War period. Humanitarian governance was militarized. Aid was politicized. And displacement was rendered useful to Western foreign policy interests. As existing scholarship has documented, however, the origins of this problematic linkage lies not in Afghan society itself but in the ways Western states and their international partners fuelled, supported, and emboldened select Islamist groups in the region.⁹⁹ During this time, refugee camps along the Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier became sites where sovereignty, ideology, and patronage converged.

In Pakistan, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), bolstered by U.S. and Saudi funding and intelligence, assumed a decisive role in determining which factions within the Afghan Mujahideen coalition would gain access to resources, weapons, and institutional legitimacy.¹⁰⁰ Refugee camps that might otherwise have functioned as sites for humanitarian relief and shelter were transformed into recruitment grounds and training hubs for select Islamist factions. The majority of assistance flowed to *Hezb-e Islami*, led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a faction marked by radical Qutbist influences and internecine conflict with other Mujahideen groups.¹⁰¹ In these

⁹⁹ Crews and Tarzi, *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan*; Leake, *Afghan Crucible*; Manchanda, *Imagining Afghanistan*; Sahill, *Turbulent Afghanistan*; Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan*.

¹⁰⁰ See Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way*, 390; Leake, *Afghan Crucible*, 150, 164–67; Howard, *FRUS 1977-1980, Vol. XII: Afghanistan*, 12:256, 316, 469, 477, 630, 700, 866–67.

¹⁰¹ The ISI’s preference for the more radically oriented Islamist factions reflected the ideological vision of Pakistan’s then-President, General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq. After seizing power in 1977, Zia advanced a program of state Islamization that extended into foreign policy. In Afghanistan, support for groups such as *Hezb-e Islami* was intended to secure an ideologically aligned Islamist government that would provide Pakistan with “strategic depth” against India and neutralize Afghan claims along the Durand Line. By privileging a certain vision of pan-Islamism

spaces, relief distribution, political socialization, and military training became overlapping domains and practices. Even educational materials, including U.S.-funded textbooks for school children, bore the imprint of a radically militant orientation (see Figure 5). What later appeared to some as the spontaneous radicalization of a displaced population, or to others as the inherent disposition of a tribal society, was, in significant ways, structured through external sponsorship and selective empowerment.



Figure 5. Pages from U.S.-funded grade 1 Pashto and Dari textbooks, 1986-1994.¹⁰²

The genealogy of later terrorist narratives must therefore be read against this earlier pattern of international patronage and selective visibility. As extremist networks consolidated under the shelter of foreign sponsorship, alternative Afghan political formations—from comparatively more moderate Islamist factions within the Mujahideen to the explicitly feminist and revolutionary politics of groups like the *Revolutionary Association of the Women of*

over Pashtun nationalism, this strategy reoriented Pakistan's regional posture and contributed to the longer-term consolidation of militant networks in the region. See: Crews, *Afghan Modern*; Inukonda, "The 'Great Game' and the Long Arc of Imperialism"; Leake, *Afghan Crucible*; Rashid, *Taliban*; Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan*.

¹⁰²102 Under a grant from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), these textbooks were printed and distributed by the University of Nebraska at Omaha's Center for Afghanistan Studies (CAS). They were intended for early-grade students and included strong depictions of violence promoting jihad against Soviet forces. Both USAID and CAS maintain that the content was provided by Afghan mujahideen resistance groups, not authored by U.S. institutions. Although official production ceased by the early 1990s, unauthorized reprints continued to circulate for years. Accessed from Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska at Omaha. See "Pashto and Math, Grade 1."

Afghanistan (RAWA)—were increasingly marginalized from the dominant frame through which Afghanistan was made legible in Western policy discourse, as were the political sensibilities of the majority of Afghan refugees. Far from constituting a homogeneous social base for radical extremism and terrorist activity, displaced communities exhibited ambivalence, skepticism, and in many cases clear preference for alternative political futures. Yet in the prevailing representational economy of Western discourse, such nuance found little purchase.

What emerged instead was a flattened vision of Afghan culture and society. From the noble “freedom fighter,” to the later irredeemable “terrorist,” there was, hovering indistinctly behind both figures, a presumed population whose political will was imagined to align seamlessly with whichever archetype had dominated the moment. In this parochial and oscillating vision, a densely layered field of competing visions for Afghanistan modernity—Islamist, monarchist, communist, feminist, nationalist, secular—was reduced to a binary grammar of civilizational or ideologically driven patronage or threat.

Many of the comparatively more moderate Mujahideen leaders, though themselves products of foreign patronage,¹⁰³ occupied an increasingly ambiguous position in the U.S.-geopolitical orbit, especially in the aftermath of Soviet withdrawal. In 1990, for instance, proposals for free elections were dismissed by Washington on the grounds that they might permit the participation of Afghanistan’s Soviet-backed incumbent, Mohammad Najibullah. The U.S. Secretary of State, James Baker, defended this position by asserting that “not one leader of the Mujahaddin is going to accept free elections. They all have a dictatorial persuasion—Hekmatiyar, Khalis—you name it; they are not interested in elections.”¹⁰⁴ His remarks reflect the flattening logic within Western political discourse. It collapsed factional distinctions among Afghan actors into a single authoritarian type, even as it continued to privilege particular factions within that very field. Hekmatiyar and Khalis, whom Baker cited, were both affiliated with the same *Hezb-i Islami* faction—the very group consistently privileged by Washington and its

¹⁰³ U.S. and Pakistani support were disproportionately channelled to more radical and extremist factions of the Mujahideen, while more moderate or traditional groups, including those with stronger tribal or nationalist bases, received comparatively limited assistance. Many of these less-favoured groups would eventually seek out relationships with other regional and international actors, including Iran, India, Saudi Arabia, and Russia, to secure funding and military support. Although a deeper analysis goes beyond the scope of my dissertation, this dynamic is well documented by existing scholarship. See, for example, Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way*; Crews, *Afghan Modern*; Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan*; Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan*.

¹⁰⁴ Baker and Shevardnadze, “Memorandum of Conversation between Secretary Baker and Eduard Shevardnadze.”

international partners. The discursive homogenization thus worked to both generalize Afghan Islamism as uniformly undemocratic, while also rationalizing continued alignment with its preferred proxy, which was ironically one of the least conducive to prospects for political inclusion or democratic transition.¹⁰⁵ What is striking here is not simply inconsistency, but selectivity, where the U.S.-led crisis mode of governance was less about principled adherence to liberal-democratic and humanitarian values than about their selective invocation to rationalize its foreign policy interests.¹⁰⁶

As the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and regional patronage networks began to change, the composition of Afghanistan's Islamist actors was reordered once again. Yet even amid these realignments, many factions did not conform neatly to either proxy or pariah status in U.S. foreign policy discourse and remained marginal to its priorities. Even while they opposed both Taliban rule and the consolidation of transnational networks of global jihad that targeted Western states, their calls for support and assistance rarely reoriented policy attention. After the Taliban's capture of Kabul in 1996, for example, Islamist factions associated with what became the Northern Alliance repeatedly cautioned the international community about the growing presence and threat of al-Qaeda within Afghanistan.¹⁰⁷ Ahmad Shah Massoud's April 2001 address to the European Parliament stands as one such moment of an attempted intervention, in which he spoke about the scale of this threat, a concern echoed in a subsequently declassified, though heavily redacted, intelligence reports noting that the Alliance had gained knowledge of Osama bin Laden's intent to carry out an attack against the U.S. "on a scale larger than the 1998 bombing of

¹⁰⁵ *Hizb-i Islami* was the only major Mujahideen faction to refuse the 1992 Peshawar Accords, which sought to establish a power-sharing interim government after the fall of the Afghan communist government. Hekmatyar's rejection of the agreement disrupted the fragile transition and contributed to Afghanistan's descent into civil war. That the faction most resistant to political compromise was also the principal recipient of U.S.-led international support highlights how foreign patronage reinforced the conditions for protracted conflict and displacement. Leake, *Afghan Crucible*, 264–65; Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan*, 214–15.

¹⁰⁶ My analysis of presidential addresses across the Carter and Reagan administrations finds that the Soviet invasion was framed as a violation of international law and Afghan sovereignty, while Afghan resistance and refugee displacement were coded within the liberal-democratic vocabulary of freedom, justice, and security that, as David Campbell argues, underpins the American national self-image. By depicting the occupation as "a deliberate effort of a powerful atheistic government to subjugate an independent Islamic people," U.S. leaders narratively aligned Afghan affairs with a moralized defense of legality and liberty, thereby legitimating intervention and the patronage of Islamist factions under the idiom of humanitarian and legal obligation. See, Campbell, *Writing Security*; For a sample of the U.S. presidential texts analyzed in my study, see Carter, "Address to the Nation on the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan"; Carter, "Remarks at the Annual Conference of the Consumer Federation of America"; Reagan, "Proclamation 4908—Afghanistan Day"; Reagan, "Statement on the Situation in Afghanistan."

¹⁰⁷ European Parliament, "Visit by Ahmed Shah Massoud, Commander of the Anti-Taliban Forces in Afghanistan to the European Parliament in Strasbourg."

the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.”¹⁰⁸ Yet these warnings, voiced by actors who did not fit neatly within the prevailing binary of a compliant proxy or irredeemable extremist, remained peripheral to dominant policy concerns. It was only in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11 that the U.S. would change its position and work directly with the Northern Alliance to oust the Taliban in late 2001.¹⁰⁹

Women-led organizations such as RAWA articulated their critiques with even sharper clarity, refusing both the romanticization of earlier Mujahideen patronage and the later demonization of Afghanistan as an incubator of terrorism. In a 1998 statement, RAWA argued that Washington, while posturing as a defender of democracy, had merely replaced its Mujahideen “chessmen” with the Taliban in pursuit of a regional advantage.¹¹⁰ Contending that “foreign interference is not the cause but the effect” of growing extremist networks, RAWA foregrounded the entanglement of international sponsorship and domestic elite opportunism in the reproduction of protracted conflict and displacement.¹¹¹ It denounced American air strikes in Afghanistan and Sudan,¹¹² and called the U.S. “terrorism-sponsoring,” arguing that even if such strikes were to eliminate their target, they would not prevent the emergence of “hundreds of other Afghan or non-Afghan Osamas” so long as the underlying structures of militarized patronage remained intact.¹¹³ Such interventions do more than register dissent. They unsettle the epistemic frame through which Afghanistan is rendered legible, refusing the reduction of a complex political field to either a proxy battleground or a breeding ground of terrorism.

The attitudes of Afghan refugees further unsettle the dominant narrative, revealing a political landscape far more plural and frequently at odds with the ideological projects of the factions empowered through foreign patronage. Where Islamist groups did gain traction, it was

¹⁰⁸ Defense Intelligence Agency, *IIR [Excised]/The Assassination of Massoud Related to 11 September 2001 Attack*.

¹⁰⁹ Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan*, 229–30.

¹¹⁰ As cited in Crews, *Afghan Modern*, 276.

¹¹¹ As cited in Crews, *Afghan Modern*, 276.

¹¹² In August 1998, following the bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, the U.S. launched air strikes on alleged al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan and a pharmaceutical plant in Sudan. The attacks were framed as acts of counterterrorism and deterrence, though the evidentiary basis for the Sudan strike was later widely disputed. In the months that followed, the UN Security Council adopted binding sanctions regimes targeting al-Qaeda for the embassy attacks and the Taliban for permitting Afghan territory to be used as a base for such operations, thereby institutionalizing a global counterterrorism framework that would have enduring implications for refugee governance. Casey, “Missile Attacks on Afghanistan and Sudan (1998)”; Federal Bureau of Investigation, “East African Embassy Bombings”; UN Security Council Resolution 1267 (1999); UN Security Council Resolution 1333 (2000).

¹¹³ As cited in Crews, *Afghan Modern*, 276.

less the result of cultural affinity than of coercion, manipulation, or necessity, as access to humanitarian aid and camp infrastructure was often monopolized by internationally backed parties. As Robert Crews notes, there was a significant disjuncture between the outlook of U.S.- and ISI-supported Mujahideen leaders and the preferences of displaced communities themselves. One of the few available surveys of Afghan refugees in Pakistan indicated that over 70 percent of the men and roughly half of the women who responded had viewed the exiled monarch, Muhammad Zahir Shah, as the most suitable national leader.¹¹⁴ By contrast, support for Mujahideen commanders was negligible. Fewer than 2 percent of men expressed any preference for Islamist leaders, and only small fractions of women supported even the comparatively more moderate figures like Burhanuddin Rabbani (5 percent) or Ishaq Gailani (4 percent), let alone the more radical figures like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (2.5 percent).¹¹⁵ These findings complicate any assumptions that Afghan society is naturally predisposed to extremism, highlighting instead a profound divergence between the political imaginaries of displaced civilians and the militant networks that have been empowered in the name of their national resistance.

By the end of the Cold War and into the 1990s, Afghan displacement occupied an ambivalent place within Western political imagination. Refugees were invoked as evidence of Soviet brutality, yet the infrastructures governing their lives had already been entangled with militant patronage and selective sponsorship. When, in later decades, Afghan mobility was read through the lens of terrorism, that reading did not emerge *ex nihilo*, as a sudden discovery of a new civilizational threat to Western modernity. It drew upon globally and historically rooted associations, selectively remembered alliances, and obscured accounts of state complicity. The refugee-terrorism linkage thus emerged as an afterlife of Cold War crisis governance. It is precisely within this genealogy, where humanitarian rhetoric coexisted with containment, patronage, and difference contributed to a growing vocabulary of securitized suspicion, that the muted character of Canada's own engagement can be situated.

2.3 Canada's Dependent Alignment and Selective Humanitarianism

¹¹⁴ Crews, *Afghan Modern*, 257.

¹¹⁵ Crews, *Afghan Modern*, 257.

The wholesale destruction of a people is being carried out by the Soviet Union and its puppet regime in Kabul for no other reason than crude geopolitical ambition... [with] the longer-term objective of reducing Afghanistan to a Soviet colony. As has happened so often in the history of colonialism, the imperial power failed to reckon with the national spirit and independence of the people. Despite the terrible slaughter, the Afghan people have not been subjugated. They are continuing to fight.

— *Special Joint Committee on Canada's International Relations*, June 1986¹¹⁶

The Special Joint Committee's depiction of Afghanistan as a people resisting "crude geopolitical ambition" and colonial subjugation captures the moral register through which Ottawa publicly narrated the Soviet invasion. Afghanistan was framed as a small-state sovereignty confronting imperial aggression. Its resistance was cast as the expression of a national spirit unwilling to be subjugated. The language was strikingly anti-colonial. It condemned foreign domination, invoked the historical failures of imperial powers to extinguish local autonomy, and positioned Canada within a coalition defending sovereignty and self-determination. That such rhetoric emerged from a settler-colonial state whose own political formation rested upon the dispossession of Indigenous peoples introduces an irony left unmarked in parliamentary proceedings, yet is an uncanny spectre difficult to ignore.¹¹⁷

If the Cold War established an international architecture of Afghan refugee control and containment, Canada occupied within it a position that was at once aligned and dependent. Ottawa's public response closely echoed U.S.-led rhetoric. Parliamentary debates and ministerial statements depicted Afghanistan as the victim of Soviet aggression and cast anti-Soviet resistance as the authentic expression of Afghan sovereignty. Soviet intervention, by contrast, was presented as a crude violation of international law. In these proclamations, Canada fashioned itself as a principled defender of legality and humanitarian norms.

Yet this rhetorical alignment was accompanied by limited material contribution, a pattern consistent with what some scholars in economics and international relations describe as a "free

¹¹⁶ Simard and Hockin, *Independence and Internationalism: Report of the Special Joint Committee on Canada's International Relations*, 108.

¹¹⁷ The irony is sharpened by Canada's own record of denying Indigenous claims to sovereignty. In 1923, for instance, Deskaheh (Levi General), representing the Six Nations of the Grand River, appealed to the League of Nations against Canadian encroachment and asserted a political autonomy that preceded and exceeded the authority Canada claimed over Haudenosaunee life. Yet Ottawa cast the matter as domestic rather than colonial, refusing the very grammar of nationhood and self-determination it would later invoke abroad. Alba Reeve, "Between Empire and State."

ride”¹¹⁸ and others in political economy, more sharply, as a form of “military parasitism”¹¹⁹—a reliance on the U.S. security umbrella that enabled Canada to prioritize domestic social and economic development over the fiscal burdens of militarization.

While the U.S. relied on heightened coordination with international partners such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, more symbolic gestures and selective cooperation with Western allies like Canada sufficed. Covert cooperation, such as Ottawa’s quiet transfer of surplus rifles to the Mujahideen,¹²⁰ could therefore coexist with public expressions of doubt about Canada’s capacity to offer meaningful military support.¹²¹ In this way, Canada could preserve the image of the humane “middle power” even while operating comfortably within the strategic orbit of its southern neighbour.¹²²

Importantly, the performance of this kind of solidarity did not require expansive resettlement commitments. Admissions of Afghan refugees remained modest throughout the 1980s, even as Afghanistan constituted the single largest displacement crisis in the world.¹²³ The disjuncture between rhetoric and practice was striking, and particularly so when contextualized against the backdrop of the country’s progressive reforms throughout the 1970s and 80s, which had supplied Canada with a substantive vocabulary of rights and protection—including the 1976 *Immigration Act*,¹²⁴ the adoption of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*,¹²⁵ and the expansion of procedural protections through the 1985 *Singh v. Canada* decision.¹²⁶

¹¹⁸ Gompert and Kugler, “Free-Rider Redux NATO Needs to Project Power (And Europe Can Help).”

¹¹⁹ Kellogg, “From the Avro Arrow to Afghanistan: The Political Economy of Canadian Militarism.”

¹²⁰ MacGuigan, *An Inside Look at External Affairs During the Trudeau Years*, 179.

¹²¹ Globe Mail, “We Can’t Aid Afghanistan, Trudeau Says”; Thompson, “The Truth About Canada’s Involvement in Afghanistan.”

¹²² On debates surrounding Canada’s “middle power” identity, see Bhal, “Rethinking ‘Middle Powers’ as a Category of Practice”; Chapnick, “The Canadian Middle Power Myth Essays”; Cooper, “Challenging Contemporary Notions of Middle Power Influence.”

¹²³ Colville, “The Biggest Caseload in the World”; IRCC, “Admissions of Permanent Residents by Country of Citizenship.”

¹²⁴ The new *Immigration Act* allowed for the PSR program to emerge, introducing a “one-to-one matching formula,” through which each privately sponsored refugee was matched by a government-sponsored refugee. This arrangement enabled civil society to assume a central role in the resettlement of tens of thousands of Indochinese refugees. See, Neuwirth and Clark, “Indochinese Refugees in Canada.”

¹²⁵ The Charter provided a crucial legal foundation for contesting restrictive immigration policies and offered advocacy groups new tools to press for greater inclusiveness and justice. See, Gélinas-Faucher and Nakache, “Canadian Immigration and Refugee Policies since 1945.”

¹²⁶ This landmark decision exemplified the normative possibilities enabled through the Charter, as the Supreme Court recognized that refugee claimants were entitled to Charter protections and oral hearings. See, Gélinas-Faucher and Nakache, “Canadian Immigration and Refugee Policies since 1945.”

Comparative analyses of Canada's responses to other crises are instructive, as they highlight the contingency and inconsistencies of its refugee governance landscape.¹²⁷ Large-scale resettlements from Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Chile, for instance, demonstrate that where the Western bloc had limited capacity or willingness to influence regime change directly, admissions policy operated as a substitute form of migration diplomacy. In the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, for instance, as Soviet forces suppressed the uprising and Washington avoided military confrontation, Canada's admission of approximately 37,000 Hungarian refugees served as a strategic humanitarian gesture.¹²⁸ It helped reconcile the gap between Western liberation rhetoric and restraint, reaffirming moral leadership while sidestepping direct tensions with Moscow.¹²⁹

Vietnam illuminates a related but distinct pattern. What later became the exemplary humanitarian narrative of Indochinese resettlement followed not the moment of anti-colonial struggle itself, but the defeat of a U.S.-aligned order and the production of refugees who could be read, with unusual ease, as victims of communism, grateful recipients of Western rescue, and eventually as model minorities whose incorporation ratified Canada's benevolence. In that sense, the Indochinese case was never simply a story of humanitarian response to suffering, but was also a story about which forms of suffering could be absorbed into Canada's preferred narrative and image of itself. As Ngo's research makes clear, that image rested uneasily beside Canada's peacekeeping posture, its material complicity in the war, and the longer erasure of the decolonial Vietnam that preceded Cold War simplification.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ The differences among Hungarian, Indochinese, Afghan, and later Syrian admissions cannot be reduced to humanitarian need or even to Cold War migration diplomacy alone. They were also shaped by the racial legibility of refugee subjects, by domestic labour demand and absorptive calculations, and by the unequal legal architecture through which refugeehood was historically recognized. The 1951 Convention's original temporal and geographic limits, prior to the 1967 Protocol, for instance, already inscribed refugee protection within a Eurocentric frame. Later admissions unfolded through that inheritance rather than outside it. What matters, then, is not merely that Canada responded differently, but that these differences emerged within a hierarchy of crises, populations, and political uses.

¹²⁸ The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 was a mass uprising against Soviet-backed communist rule, beginning on October 23, 1956, and lasting until November 10, 1956. In its wake, approximately 200,000 refugees left Hungary, 37,500 of whom resettled in Canada. Canada's swift and large-scale resettlement initiative demonstrated the flexibility of executive decision-making while highlighting the *ad hoc* and reactive nature of Canada's refugee governance. For a more detailed study on the events surrounding these resettlement efforts, and its broader significance, see Parks Canada Directory of Federal Heritage Designations, "Refugees of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution"; CCR, "Brief History of Canada's Responses to Refugees."

¹²⁹ Borhi, "Rollback, Liberation, Containment, or Inaction?"

¹³⁰ Ngo, "The Entanglements of Canada's National Identity Building and Vietnamese Canadian Community Conflicts."

Indeed, where sustaining anti-communist resistance was made narratively possible and deemed strategically viable, as in Afghanistan during the 1980s or Indochina prior to 1975, Western states maintained comparatively limited refugee intake. Only once the conflicts had ended, or at least when international interests in them had, had refugee admission numbers in the Global North seen growth. In the case of Vietnam, for instance, the language of “boat people” emerged after 1975 as visible embodiments of communist repression. Especially following the Hai Hong incident of 1978, their narratives resonated powerfully within Cold War binaries and were amplified by dense coalitions of churches, NGOs, and civic groups.¹³¹ In the Afghan case, however, admissions remained comparatively low. Even as numbers rose modestly in the late 1980s and reached nearly 12,000 by the end of the 1990s (see Figure 6), these increases were limited and occurred after the peak years of displacement (see Figure 7), when Soviet withdrawal had already altered geopolitical priorities.

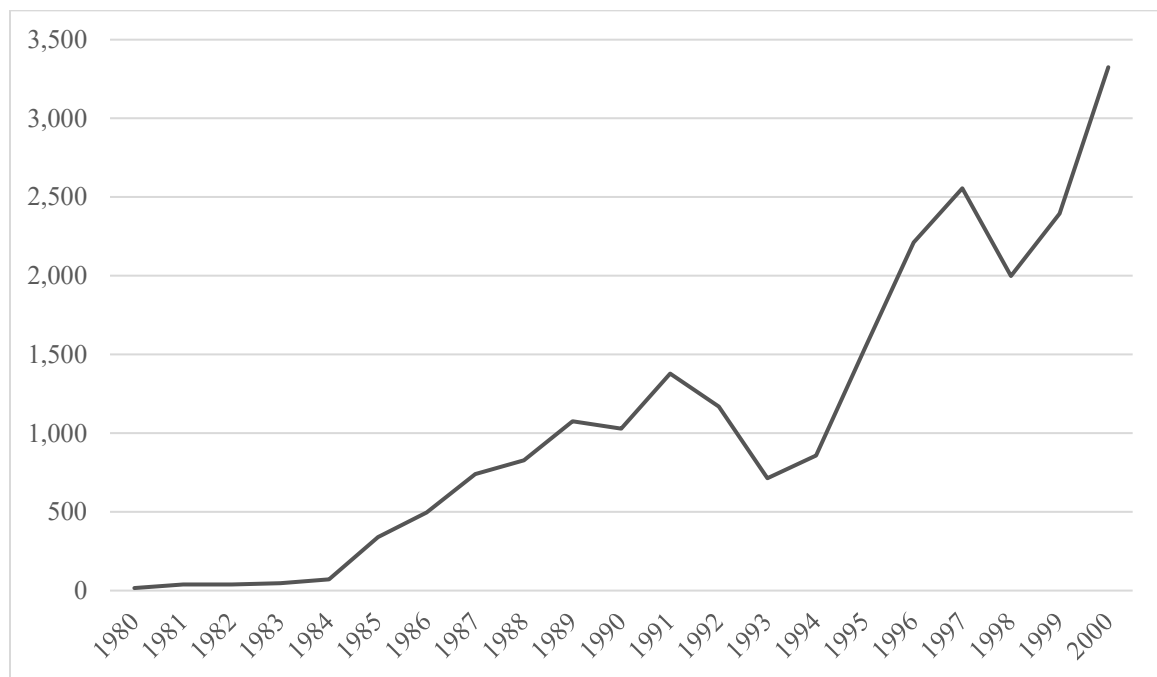


Figure 6. Immigration intake to Canada from Afghanistan, 1980-2000.¹³²

¹³¹ Gingrich and Enns, “A Reflexive View of Refugee Integration and Inclusion”; Labman, *Crossing Law’s Border*; Labman and Cameron, *Strangers to Neighbours*; Madokoro, *Elusive Refuge*.

¹³² Adapted from data in IRCC, “Admissions of Permanent Residents by Country of Citizenship.”

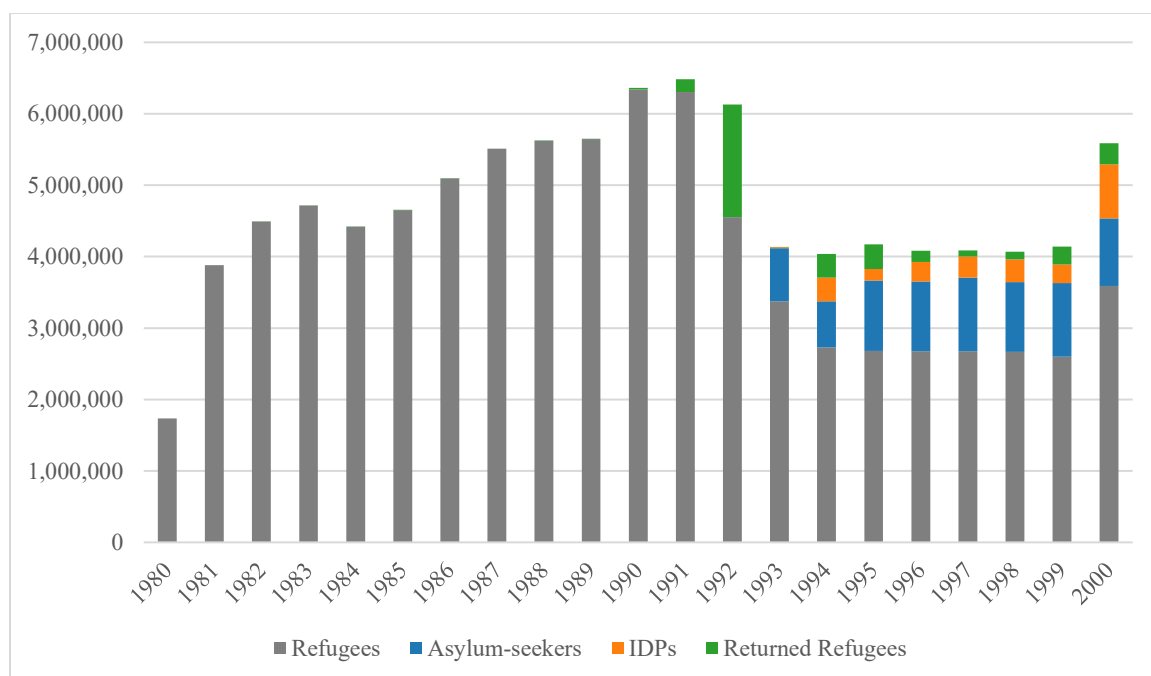


Figure 7. Afghan refugees, asylum-seekers, IDPs, and returnees, 1980–2000.¹³³

The relative restraint suggests that factors beyond domestic trends and migration diplomacy were at work. The next two sections examine these additional dynamics. First, a weak and fragmented advocacy landscape surrounding Afghan displacement, and second, structural openings within Canada’s refugee regime produced incremental gains, even as they unfolded alongside racialized “bogus claimant” discourses and tightening border controls.

2.4 A Weak Advocacy Landscape

Unlike in the response to the Indochinese crisis, where churches, sponsorship groups, legal advocates, and media campaigns in Canada converged to press for expansive admissions, the Afghan case unfolded in a far thinner field of advocacy. There were voices of protest, certainly, and moments of public dissent, but these did not materialize into a durable landscape of actors capable of transforming humanitarian rhetoric into sustained political pressure and concrete policy outcomes. My research shows that there was an absence of a similarly mobilized advocacy infrastructure for Afghan refugees, as Canadian NGOs were largely disengaged, civil

¹³³ Adapted from data in UNHCR, “UNHCR Refugee Statistics Dataset.”

society was fragmented on the issue, and political cues were insufficient to galvanize a robust armonia effect. Combined with pervasive anti-Muslim sentiment¹³⁴ and an emerging securitization discourse that often cast Afghan civilians in suspect or threatening terms,¹³⁵ I argue that these dynamics rendered Afghan displacement peripheral to Canada's humanitarian project and illustrated the contingent and uneven character of refugee recognition during this period.

Geopolitics had some influence on this advocacy infrastructure. For the Indochinese crisis, the collapse of the Republic of Vietnam, which had been a Western ally, generated a displaced population widely legible as pro-Western victims of communist persecution. In Afghanistan, the state that collapsed in 1992 was that of the Soviet-backed Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, succeeded not by a clear Western ally but by fragmented Islamist factions whose supposedly internecine violence undermined any straightforward and legible narrative of "victimhood" in the Global North. Afghan refugees were thus framed not as liberal allies abandoned by the West but as Muslims caught within a conflict often portrayed as their own making. Without a compelling domestic coalition to serve as intermediaries and translate displacement into political urgency, Canada's engagement remained limited.

Another key reason for the lack of resonance was that the Afghan diaspora in Canada during the 1980s was comparatively small, recently established, and unevenly networked. Many had arrived through student visas, professional migration streams, or individual asylum claims rather than through coordinated resettlement initiatives. Without dense institutional ties to established religious organizations or large civic networks, their capacity to mobilize public sentiment remained constrained. Emerging groups such as the *Afghan Association of Ontario* (AAO) sought to challenge Ottawa's restrictive posture, highlighting barriers to family reunification and the inaccessibility of embassies abroad.¹³⁶ While acknowledging that those resettled in Canada had been treated well, AAO expressed their grievances over a consistent lack of access to Canadian immigration channels:

For whatever reason, and we don't know why, Afghan refugees have not benefitted from Canada's generous refugee programs... Our people are turned away from the Canadian embassies... We can't get applications to apply to come to Canada. The receptionists hang up on us when we call. Our letters are not answered. We cannot understand why we are

¹³⁴ Thomas, "The Canadian Response to Afghanistan."

¹³⁵ Gélinas-Faucher and Nakache, "Canadian Immigration and Refugee Policies since 1945"; Crépeau and Nakache, "Controlling Irregular Migration in Canada."

¹³⁶ *The Gazette*, "Kabul Ignores Anniversary of Soviet Takeover."

treated like this... For more than two years, our letters, our phone calls, and our meetings with Immigration officials have ended with smiles, handshakes and promises for action, but so far we have seen nothing. Not one person here has been united with his family.¹³⁷

Their interventions, however, unfolded within a political environment that neither amplified nor meaningfully incorporated their demands.

Mainstream humanitarian organizations exhibited a conspicuous silence on the issue that Jane Thomas of *Human Concern International* (HCI) had characterized as “severely abnormal.”¹³⁸ Educational programming, fundraising campaigns, and public awareness initiatives that had flourished during the Indochinese crisis did not materialize at comparable scale. Thomas attributed Canada’s failures to minimal financial aid from Canadian NGOs, an exceptionally low refugee intake, and a pervasive anti-Muslim bias that shaped perceptions of the conflict. She noted that only two Canadian NGOs had been actively engaged in the issue. One was *Afghan Association of Ontario* (AAO), representing a small yet emerging Afghan-Canadian community, and the other was HCI, Canada’s first Muslim relief organization. For much of the ensuing period, Afghan displacement persisted on the margins of Canadian refugee politics despite its scale and duration.

Media portrayals further complicated the terrain. Afghan refugees who sought asylum in Canada were often framed within discourses of irregularity or suspicion. Take for instance, one article’s portrayal of AAO member Najib Tahiri:

He said he graduated in engineering in Afghanistan and now works as a mechanical technician in a Toronto factory. Although he was a “freedom fighter” in Afghanistan, the Canadian office in Islamabad refused to give him an application to apply for refugee status. He came into Canada with false documentation and now has landed immigrant status.¹³⁹

The figure of the “freedom fighter,” which had frequently been valorized in Western geopolitical rhetoric, was recoded when articulated by refugee claimants themselves. No longer was it emblematic of resistance, but of illegality. Such framing did not uniformly condemn Afghan applicants, yet it introduced a note of ambivalence that effectively circumscribed sympathy. The humanitarian subject was rendered less legible, and its moral clarity was blurred by the shifting optics of a Cold War and post-Cold War discourse of criminality.

¹³⁷ Malarek, “Afghan Anguish.”

¹³⁸ Thomas, “The Canadian Response to Afghanistan.”

¹³⁹ Matas, “Afghan Refugees Burn Soviet Flag, Call for Broader Immigration Policy.”

In another case, a report included Tahiri's explanation that such measures were often the only means of securing asylum, given the structural barrier preventing claims from being made. Yet even here, the explanation was accompanied by a large crosshead that read, "Afghans entering Canada on forged documents" (see Figure 8). This choice of framing placed illegality at the center of the narrative and eclipsed the structural obstacles refugees faced in accessing protection. Such language strongly aligned with the "bogus claimants" and "queue jumping" tropes that had been gaining traction in Canadian public discourse at the time.¹⁴⁰



Figure 8. Crosshead of a Canadian news article in December 1985.¹⁴¹

Compounding these structural and discursive limitations were broader currents of racialization and religious suspicion. By the late 1980s and into the 1990s, representations of Afghanistan increasingly shifted from Cold War battleground to site of factional violence and Islamist brutality. The rise of the Taliban reframed Afghan society within Western discourse through tropes of extremism and cultural otherness.¹⁴² Such representations did not eliminate sympathy, per se, but they did complicate it. The Afghan refugee became a figure that was at once deserving of protection and shrouded in securitized imaginaries, in a duality that limited the capacity for humanitarian mobilizations. An article in *The Globe and Mail*, for example, quoted a spokesperson from the Soviet Embassy in Ottawa who minimized the scale of refugee flows, depicted anti-Soviet fighters as mercenaries and extremists, and claimed that "many people have been forced to leave [Afghanistan] by those who are also blowing up mosques and killing women who refuse to wear veils."¹⁴³ Although such inclusions could be defended as efforts at balanced reporting, their frequent juxtaposition with refugee testimony effectively casts doubt on the credibility of refugee accounts, while also working to preserve Canada's humanitarian self-image at moments when its limited admissions and critiques from diaspora groups risked appearing at odds with its national identity and international reputation.

¹⁴⁰ Aiken, "Of Gods and Monsters"; Chimni, "The Geopolitics of Refugee Studies"; G  linas-Faucher and Nakache, "Canadian Immigration and Refugee Policies since 1945."

¹⁴¹ Malarek, "Afghan Anguish."

¹⁴² Crews and Tarzi, *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan*; Manchanda, *Imagining Afghanistan*.

¹⁴³ Matas, "Afghan Refugees Burn Soviet Flag, Call for Broader Immigration Policy."

The advocacy field was thus a much thinner version of what was seen after 2021. This was certainly not because the suffering of Afghan civilians was less severe, but because the channels through which it might be translated into Canadian public and political urgency had yet to materialize. The Afghan diaspora lacked the generational depth, political capital, and networking capacities that had enabled other communities to exert influence within Canadian politics. There were no dedicated sponsorship streams for Afghan arrivals, no large-CSO mobilizations framing Afghan displacement as a defining test of Canadian compassion. Absent, too, were the institutional actors that would later reshape the politics of Afghan refugee governance. During the 1980s and 1990s, Canada had no substantial military presence in Afghanistan. There were no veteran networks articulating relational obligations grounded in shared service, no parliamentary fractures animated by the lived experiences of soldiers deployed abroad, and no electoral constituencies mobilized around wartime promises to Canada's allies. Where advocacy surface, it was frequently filtered through discourses of suspicion and illegality, in ways foreshadowing the racialized civilizational narratives that would gain traction after 9/11. In this way, Afghanistan's representation as a distant theatre of ideological struggle, mediated through Cold War binaries and later through emerging tropes of Islamic extremism, did not readily lend itself to the sentimental narratives that had animated other refugee crises.

2.5 Structural Openings Without Harmonization

Afghan immigration admissions to Canada showed some modest growth from the late 1980s through the 1990s. Between 1980 and 1984, Canada admitted only 212 Afghan immigrants in total.¹⁴⁴ In 1985 alone that figure rose to 340, and from 1985 to 1989 admissions reached roughly 3,500. The upward trajectory continued into the 1990s, during which approximately 15,800 Afghans immigrated to Canada.

At first glance, this modest rise might suggest that diaspora activism and legal advocacy had successfully pressed Ottawa to expand its commitments. Yet no new pathways were introduced during this period, and the government continued to deny Afghan nationals of special refugee status. Rather, a closer reading of the broader institutional and political context suggests

¹⁴⁴ IRCC, "Admissions of Permanent Residents by Country of Citizenship."

that these increases were less the result of a substantive shift in attitudes toward Afghan refugees across state and civil society than the by-product of structural reforms that generated some modest, incremental gains, even as they unfolded alongside racialized “bogus claimant” discourses, tightening border controls, and evolving global refugee and asylum norms.

The Supreme Court’s decision in *Singh v. Minister of Employment and Immigration* in April 1985, followed by the 1986 amnesty for claimants already in Canada, generated structural openings that Afghan nationals, alongside other groups, were able to access.¹⁴⁵ The landmark decision affirmed claimants’ Charter right to a full oral hearing, and in doing so quickly highlighted the inadequacies of existing procedures as there was now a significant administrative backlog of over 63 thousand claimants who were now legally entitled to a hearing.¹⁴⁶ To avoid the costly process of granting each of these cases a hearing, the government granted amnesty to all claimants who entered Canada before May 21, 1986, provided they were not deemed a security risk, did not have a criminal record, and had passed their medical examinations.¹⁴⁷

Rather than treating this moment as an opportunity to expand humanitarian capacity or streamline refugee determination, however, officials reframed it as a crisis of “system abuse.”¹⁴⁸ The government began to portray many refugee claimants as “queue jumpers” seeking to take advantage of lenient measures intended to address the backlog of applications.¹⁴⁹ Public opinion mirrored these trends, accusing claimants of exploiting loopholes or attempting to bypass regular immigration channels.¹⁵⁰

This framing cultivated support for restrictive reforms that entrenched deterrence logics and introduced a more punitive border regime. In 1987, Immigration Minister Benoit Bouchard announced a major “crackdown” on Canada’s refugee system, ending automatic residence permits for claimants from 18 countries (including Afghanistan), requiring case-by-case inquiries instead.¹⁵¹ Refugee claimants arriving via the U.S. would no longer be automatically admitted, and citizens from 98 countries now needed transit visas to pass through Canada.¹⁵² This initial

¹⁴⁵ Raska, “Entrenching Refugee Rights in Canada: The 1985 Singh Decision.”

¹⁴⁶ Raska, “Entrenching Refugee Rights in Canada: The 1985 Singh Decision.”

¹⁴⁷ Raska, “Entrenching Refugee Rights in Canada: The 1985 Singh Decision.”

¹⁴⁸ Gélinas-Faucher and Nakache, “Canadian Immigration and Refugee Policies since 1945.”

¹⁴⁹ *New York Times*, “Canada Seizes Freighter Believed To Have Put 174 Sikhs on Shore”; Cox, “The New Arrivals 18 Months After Wading Ashore, Claimants Still Awaiting Decision”; Gélinas-Faucher and Nakache, “Canadian Immigration and Refugee Policies since 1945,” 123.

¹⁵⁰ Gélinas-Faucher and Nakache, “Canadian Immigration and Refugee Policies since 1945.”

¹⁵¹ Ruimy, “Ottawa Will Turn Away More Foreigners Refugee Loopholes Tightened.”

¹⁵² Ruimy, “Ottawa Will Turn Away More Foreigners Refugee Loopholes Tightened.”

move foreshadowed significant legislative efforts, detailed in Bills C-55 and C-84, which aimed to significantly alter the system by erecting new barriers to entry and determination.¹⁵³ These restrictions erected new barriers to access, introduced safe third country provisions, and criminalized assistance to refugees.¹⁵⁴

These reactionary measures and the alarmist tone in which they were enacted foreshadowed what B. S. Chimni later identified as a “paradigm shift” in international refugee policy and law in the post-Cold War era,¹⁵⁵ and what James Hathaway has termed the *non-entrée regime*,¹⁵⁶ a system through which states restrict refugee access to territory in order to limit their obligations under international law, particularly the principle of *non-refoulement*. In essence, the West’s Cold War strategy of welcoming refugees from many communist states was quickly eroding, giving way to a notion of the “new asylum seeker” from the Global South. These individuals were increasingly portrayed as “bogus claimants,” economic migrants, or even criminals or terrorists, who were masquerading as asylum seekers.¹⁵⁷

The pattern of limited structural openings alongside increasing securitization continued with the creation of the *Undocumented Convention Refugees in Canada Class* (UCRCC) in 1997. While notable, the UCRCC was less a proactive response to the conditions in Afghanistan than an *ad hoc* measure to address a backlog of refugees already residing in Canada who were unable to obtain permanent residence due to missing or inadequate documentation.¹⁵⁸ *Citizenship and Immigration Canada* estimated at the time that approximately 13,000 individuals, primarily from Afghanistan and Somalia, fell into this category, having been recognized as Convention refugees but lacking the documents required for permanent residency.¹⁵⁹ The precise number of

¹⁵³ Segal, “Restructuring Canada’s Refugee Determination Process.”

¹⁵⁴ Segal, “Restructuring Canada’s Refugee Determination Process.”

¹⁵⁵ For further explanation of Chimni’s discussion of the “new paradigm” in refugee policy and law, see Chimni, “The Geopolitics of Refugee Studies,” 351; For scholarly discussion of the discourses of “bogus claimants” and “queue jumpers,” see, for example, Carlaw, “Authoritarian Populism and Canada’s Conservative Decade (2006–2015) in Citizenship and Immigration”; Cr  peau and Nakache, “Controlling Irregular Migration in Canada”; G  linas-Faucher and Nakache, “Canadian Immigration and Refugee Policies since 1945,” 123; Molnar, “The Boy on the Beach.”

¹⁵⁶ Castles, “The International Politics of Forced Migration”; Chimni, “The Geopolitics of Refugee Studies”; Gammeltoft-Hansen and Hathaway, “Non-Refoulement in a World of Cooperative Deterrence.”

¹⁵⁷ Aiken, “Of Gods and Monsters.”

¹⁵⁸ CCR, “Refugees in Limbo - a Human Rights Issue”; Dryer, “The Undocumented Convention Refugees in Canada Class”; *Committee Evidence*.

¹⁵⁹ Initial government estimates in 1997 placed the number at 7,500, but this figure was revised upward to 13,000 in 1998. See CCR, “Refugees in Limbo - a Human Rights Issue”; United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, “U.S. Committee for Refugees World Refugee Survey 1997 - Canada.”

Afghan nationals who ultimately regularized their status in Canada through the *UCRCC* remains unknown.¹⁶⁰

What is clear, however, is that the program imposed a mandatory five-year waiting period from the date of a positive refugee determination before individuals could apply for permanent residence.¹⁶¹ This delay was officially justified on grounds of national security (to detect and apprehend criminals) and social integration (to assess willingness to conform to Canadian “laws and norms”).¹⁶² Many of those affected had already been in Canada since the 1980s, living in a state of “limbo,” or as Cecilia Menjívar would refer to as “liminal legality.”¹⁶³ Hence, while statistics record 3,485 Afghan nationals admitting as refugees between 1980 and 1990 and 11,780 between 1991 and 2000, such figures capture when individuals acquired permanent resident status rather than when they actually arrived. This raises interpretive questions about the meaning of Afghan refugee “arrivals” in official records across these periods, since a portion of those counted as new immigrants may in fact have been long-term residents whose status was only regularized at this time, let alone the unknown amount whose applications were rejected and were thus subject to deportation.

These institutional reforms unfolded alongside profound changes within Afghanistan itself. The collapse of the Soviet-backed regime in 1992, followed by conflict among Mujahideen factions, and then the emergence of the Taliban in 1994 which rose to power in 1996, generated new waves of displacement. Yet in Canada, these developments did not catalyze a coordinated

¹⁶⁰ United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, “U.S. Committee for Refugees World Refugee Survey 1998 - Canada.”

¹⁶¹ CCR, “Refugees in Limbo - a Human Rights Issue”; Dryer, “The Undocumented Convention Refugees in Canada Class”; *Committee Evidence*.

¹⁶² Julia Dryer’s study on the UCRCC critiques the government’s reliance on security and cultural rationales to justify the five-year waiting period, arguing that both were implausible in practice and discriminatory in their effect. See Dryer, “The Undocumented Convention Refugees in Canada Class.”

¹⁶³ Liminal legality describes a prolonged, unstable state of “in-betweenness” where migrants are neither fully documented nor undocumented, but instead live with temporary or partial recognition that produces deep uncertainty in their everyday lives. Applied to Convention refugees in Canada awaiting permanent residency, the concept helps capture how the long delays and precariousness of this waiting period—despite formal protection—limit access to rights and security, generating vulnerabilities similar to those of undocumented residents while also shaping pathways of belonging, integration, and exclusion. See Menjívar, “Liminal Legality”; Menjívar et al., “The Contradictions of Liminal Legality”; The CCR has characterized Convention refugees without access to permanent resident status – due to the absence of required identity documentation – as living in a state of “limbo.” This condition of prolonged uncertainty, which they attribute to the UCRCC’s five-year waiting period, is marked by significant psychological strain and practical barriers to family reunification, stable employment, international mobility, and broader social integration. Such circumstances undermine the promise of protection embedded in refugee recognition, leaving individuals vulnerable and excluded despite their formal legal status. See CCR, “Refugees in Limbo - a Human Rights Issue.”

national response. Parliamentary debates acknowledged deteriorating human rights conditions, and humanitarian assistance abroad continued in varying degrees. Still, there was no dedicated Afghan resettlement initiative, no special programs, no explicit goal of admission targets tied to Afghanistan's growing instability. Crisis was formally recognized but left unaddressed.

It is here that the notion of a *muted* armonia becomes analytically salient. More than legal possibility, an armonia effect requires the convergence of discursive legitimacy, institutional receptivity, and organized political pressure. By the 1990s, Canada possessed elements of this configuration in partial form with a maturing refugee determination system, an evolving Charter jurisprudence, and the institutional scaffolding of a liberal asylum regime. What remained absent, however, was their alignment around Afghan displacement as a distinct moral and political priority. The field was present, but diffuse; active, yet unsynchronized. Admissions did increase, but largely through indirect channels—domestic legal spillovers, processes of status regularization, and broader migration reforms—rather than through any sustained or coordinated effort to address Afghanistan's ongoing crisis.

By the end of the decade, Afghan presence in Canada had grown in absolute terms, communities had begun to consolidate, and civic associations were gradually taking shape. Yet these developments were incremental and cumulative rather than catalytic. They did not fundamentally reconfigure the terms of debate in Ottawa, nor did they produce the kind of cross-sector alignment that might have rendered Afghan displacement more forcefully legible within Canadian policy discourse. The armonia, in other words, remained faint—audible only in fragments, present but not yet amplified into a register capable of reshaping the field.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has shown how Afghan displacement entered Canadian political discourse during the late Cold War as a crisis that could be forcefully named yet governed at a distance. Afghanistan functioned as a theatre for condemning Soviet expansion and affirming Western solidarity. It did not, however, generate sustained admissions, dedicated pathways, or a robust domestic coalition capable of converting humanitarian rhetoric into durable policy outcomes. The result was a *muted armonia*—a condition in which crisis recognition existed, but the broader

convergence of advocacy, institutional receptivity, and political pressure necessary for a more expansive response did not.

At the same time, the chapter has shown why later associations linking refugee communities to terrorism cannot be read as endogenous to Afghan culture or society. The militarization of humanitarian spaces was fostered through foreign patronage, the selective empowerment of particular Islamist factions, and the strategic management of refugee populations in neighbouring states. Camps became sites where aid, recruitment, coercion, and geopolitics converged, creating conditions in which displaced Afghans would later be recoded from symbolic victims of Soviet imperial aggression into objects of securitized suspicion.

Displacement, however, was never reducible to these imposed structures. Even under conditions of duress, precarity, and vulnerability, many refugees exercised agency through negotiation, refusal, adaptation, and onward movement. In doing so, they cultivated transnational networks of their own, forged working relationships with civil society actors in the Global North, and laid the social foundations for later diasporic formations in places such as Canada. These relational worlds would later become central to advocacy mobilizations, as former refugees, their children, and allied CSOs translated lived experience into political claims. Elisabeth Leake captures the layered nature of these trajectories when she observes that refugees became at once “the targets, the victims, and the agents of the war for Afghanistan’s future,” reshaping their understandings of community and nation through exile itself.¹⁶⁴ To foreground this complexity is not only to resist the flattening logics that have long structured Afghan refugee governance. It is also to situate later advocacy within a longer history of displacement, relationality, and political agency that preceded, and exceeded, the racialized and securitized frames imposed upon it.

This is where the dissertation turns. If this chapter establishes the baseline conditions under which resonance did not consolidate, the next traces how liberal states reorganized refugee protection around deterrence, discretionary authority, and counterterrorism. The refugee-terrorism linkage that appears here in its more embryonic form becomes progressively institutionalized through policy, law, and institutional practice. Protection remains publicly affirmed but is increasingly filtered through new securitized logics and practices. The following chapter maps how Canada internalized these developments, defining the institutional terrain within which later civil-society actors would attempt to generate a more robust *armonia* effect.

¹⁶⁴ Leake, *Afghan Crucible*, 5.

Chapter Three: The Institutional Limits of Resonance: Refugee Governance amidst an Emerging Global Counterterrorism Regime

If laws need to be changed they will be. If security has to be increased to protect Canadians it will be. We will remain vigilant but will not... undermine the values that we cherish and which have made Canada a beacon of hope, freedom and tolerance in the world... We will continue to offer refuge to the persecuted... no one will stop this.

— Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, September 17, 2001¹⁶⁵

In the same breath that then-Prime Minister Chrétien pledged to increase security and legal reforms, he reaffirmed Canada's identity as a "beacon of hope" committed to "offer[ing] refuge to the persecuted." Security and sanctuary were presented as national interests that were not mutually exclusive. Yet it was precisely within this securitized humanitarian narrative that the practical meaning of protection began to narrow, as counterterrorism frameworks and expanded executive powers reshaped how refuge would be accessed and constrained.

The story of Afghan refugee governance in Canada must therefore be situated within the gradual consolidation of a legal and administrative architecture that had already begun to redefine the meaning of protection long before Kabul fell in 2021. By the time images of desperate attempts at fleeing *watan* circulated globally, the terrain upon which claims to refuge would be adjudicated had been structured, over decades, by the convergence of deterrence, executive discretion, and counterterrorism logics that narrowed the space for humanitarian admissions even as states continued to affirm their international legal obligations in principle.

In this chapter, I map that architecture, but the purpose here is not to narrate the War in Afghanistan, nor to rehearse in full a global history of the post-9/11 refugee regime. The purpose is to clarify the institutional terrain within which later civil society advocacy, whether veteran-led or diaspora-led, would have to operate and navigate. If subsequent chapters trace how different actors sought to harmonize their claims with state and public discourse and politics, this chapter clarifies the limits and constraints that shaped what could be harmonized at all.

As discussed in the preceding chapter, the late twentieth century saw liberal democracies increasingly reorient refugee governance toward the prevention, interception, and containment of refugees and asylum seekers. The principle of protection persisted rhetorically, but access to it became progressively mediated through externalization, enhanced ministerial discretion, and

¹⁶⁵ *House of Commons Debates*, No. 79.

intensified surveillance and screening. After September 11, 2001, these trends deepened as an emergent global counterterrorism regime became constitutive of domestic refugee systems. Asylum was increasingly recast as a site of irregular entry and potential threat, while refugee protection itself was drawn into a logic of anticipatory risk management. In this environment, executive authority expanded, procedural opacity deepened, and humanitarian admission contracted further.

Canada was not an exception to these trends. While continuing to present itself as a leader in refugee resettlement and multilateral cooperation, it embedded within domestic legislation a security infrastructure that rendered admissions increasingly conditional. The *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* (IRPA), amendments to inadmissibility provisions, and the normalization of extensive security screening reflected a governing logic in which the promise of refuge was filtered through discourses of threat, suspicion, and uncertainty. Protection was not abolished, per se, but it was disciplined under new logics and routed through institutional pathways that narrowed its accessibility while preserving its symbolic centrality to Canada's humanitarian image and legacy.

These developments produced a structural tension that would later become quite pronounced in the Afghan context. Canada's military engagement generated relational ties, moral vocabularies of obligation, and public commitments to human rights and women's empowerment. Yet the institutional regime responsible for admitting displaced Afghan nationals had been profoundly reshaped in racialized and securitized terms. Responsibility and restriction were thus co-produced. The same state that invoked liberal humanitarian values abroad consolidated risk-averse mechanisms at home.

By tracing the consolidation of non-entrée governance, the regionalization of containment, and the securitization of refuge and asylum within Canadian law and administrative practice, this chapter clarifies the governing conditions that preceded the 2021 crisis. It shows that when civil society actors later pressed for expanded pathways to protection, they were intervening in a political and institutional landscape already structured by discretionary authority, preventive logics, and selective admissions. Understanding this architecture helps to understand both the uneven expansion of protection that followed, as well as the possibilities and limits of the armonia effect that subsequent chapters examine.

3.1 A New Approach to Refugee Governance

In the immediate post-Cold War period, the promise of refuge remained intact in law even as it became progressively more difficult to access in practice. What had once been framed primarily as a right to seek protection was increasingly reorganized into a system designed to prevent movement before claim-making could begin.¹⁶⁶ This shift unfolded through successive legislative reforms, visa controls, carrier sanctions, bilateral agreements, and regional containment strategies that reconfigured the geography of asylum. By the late twentieth century, humanitarian commitments to protection had not disappeared, but they had become layered with preventive and exclusionary technologies of control.

This transformation is often described as the rise of “a paradigm shift” in international refugee policy and law and, similarly, as the consolidation of a new “non-entrée” regime.¹⁶⁷ States preserved formal adherence to refugee conventions while displacing the practical site of decision-making outward, containing refugee flows in the Global South and making access to territorial asylum progressively more conditional. The border, in this configuration, no longer marked simply the place at which protection claims might be heard. It increasingly became the line before which movement had to be halted. Access to asylum was filtered through pre-emptive mechanisms designed to manage risk before refugee status could even be asserted.

Such measures were frequently justified as pragmatic responses to irregular migration, smuggling networks, and capacity constraints.¹⁶⁸ Yet they also signaled deeper changes in the meaning of protection itself. Asylum was no longer primarily a matter of responding to displacement after arrival. It was now a matter of regulating mobility before refugee status could even be recognized. This required collaboration beyond the territorial state in which airlines function as gatekeepers through carrier sanctions, transit states become buffers through third-

¹⁶⁶ Abu-Laban et al., *Containing Diversity*; Chimni, “Globalization, Humanitarianism and the Erosion of Refugee Protection”; Hathaway, *Reconceiving International Refugee Law*.

¹⁶⁷ Central to B.S. Chimni’s understanding of this “paradigm shift” is the construction of a “myth of difference” between European and Third World refugee flows, wherein an archetypal “normal” refugee, which was white, male, and anti-communist, was implicitly defined, rendering racialized claimants from the Global South as fundamentally different. See, Chimni, “The Geopolitics of Refugee Studies”; Unlike exclusion through post-arrival deportation, these practices operate pre-emptively to prevent asylum seekers from reaching a state’s jurisdiction in the first place, while preserving the formal appearance of compliance with international refugee law, particularly the principle of non-refoulement. See, Hathaway, “The Emerging Politics of Non-Entrée”; Gammeltoft-Hansen and Hathaway, “Non-Refoulement in a World of Cooperative Deterrence.”

¹⁶⁸ Crépeau and Nakache, “Controlling Irregular Migration in Canada”; Roach, “Canada’s Response to Terrorism.”

country agreements, and intelligence-sharing regimes blur distinctions between immigration control and national security.¹⁶⁹ What results is a layered system in which responsibility is diffused and accountability obscured. When protection failed to materialize, the site of failure was often difficult to locate. In this way, humanitarian governance absorbed deterrence into its operational logic. States did not explicitly renounce protection. They reorganized its point of application to reduce its obligations to provide it.

Much of this reorganization unfolded alongside rising levels of global displacement in the 1990s, driven largely by civil wars in the aftermath of the Cold War. Conflicts in the Balkans, Rwanda, Somalia, and Afghanistan generated significant refugee flows, including rising numbers of claimants in Canada.¹⁷⁰ Without the Soviet Union to serve as the default antagonist in refugee narratives, these crises were often explained across both academic and policy-making communities through internalist explanations that attributed displacement to inherent ethnic strife or political instability within the country of origin, primarily from the Global South or “Third World.” These explanations often represent flows from the “Third World” as radically different from historical European displacements, a discursive move that B.S. Chimni calls the “myth of difference.” This helps justify a regime that privileges repatriation over resettlement by siting the causes of flight solely within the “Third World” state rather than in international geopolitical contexts. However, Chimni and other scholars have challenged this framing, arguing that it obscures the external economic and geopolitical factors shaping these conflicts.¹⁷¹ Rwanda’s genocide, for example, was widely portrayed as an “ethnic conflict,” yet structural adjustment programs imposed by international financial institutions exacerbated social tensions and state fragility.¹⁷² Similarly, in the former Yugoslavia, international economic restructuring and Western diplomatic interventions contributed to the conditions under which civil war erupted. These dynamics complicated the moral clarity of refugee narratives and reinforced a policy turn toward containment rather than expansive resettlement.

¹⁶⁹ Dewulf and Pacqu  , “Protecting Human Rights in the War on Terror”; Dosman, “For the Record”; Gammeltoft-Hansen and Hathaway, “Non-Refoulement in a World of Cooperative Deterrence”; Roach, “Canada’s Response to Terrorism.”

¹⁷⁰ Chimni, “The Geopolitics of Refugee Studies”; G  linas-Faucher and Nakache, “Canadian Immigration and Refugee Policies since 1945”; Zolberg et al., *Escape from Violence*.

¹⁷¹ Chimni, “The Geopolitics of Refugee Studies”; Chossudovsky, “Economic Reforms and Social Unrest in Developing Countries.”

¹⁷² Chimni, “The Geopolitics of Refugee Studies”; Chossudovsky, “Economic Reforms and Social Unrest in Developing Countries.”

This is not to suggest that the international refugee regime was ever racially neutral prior to the post-Cold War moment. As Lucy Mayblin has argued, contemporary asylum politics must be situated within longer colonial histories that shaped the very terms through which humanity, protection, and obligation have been defined.¹⁷³ From this perspective, the 1990s appear less as a point of rupture than as a moment within a more extended genealogy of colonial governance, one in which distinctions between those entitled to protection and those subject to containment were already deeply stratified. The 1951 Convention itself took form within this contested terrain. Anti-colonial delegates resisted efforts to codify imperial exclusions, yet the retention of a territorial application clause in Article 40 enabled states to determine whether, and under what conditions, the Convention would extend to dependent territories.¹⁷⁴ In practice, this preserved a differentiated geography of protection within what was formally articulated as a universal framework. What would later appear as the externalization of asylum—through visa regimes, carrier sanctions, and third-country agreements—can thus be read not as a wholly novel departure, but as a rearticulation of earlier logics of differentiation, now refracted through a more technocratic and administrative vocabulary. The language of “risk,” “capacity,” and “procedural integrity” did not displace these hierarchies so much as translate them, embedding them within new institutional forms that rendered older exclusions at once less visible and more durable.

By the early 2000s, this emergent vocabulary had begun to harden into a governing architecture through which nuanced racialized and securitized modes of control and containment were normalized across the refugee systems of liberal democracies. Canada was by no means external to these developments. Although it continued to present itself as a humanitarian leader—and in important respects diverged from the broader international shift away from exile and permanent resettlement which moved increasingly toward the language of voluntary repatriation¹⁷⁵—its asylum system nonetheless operated within the same preventive turn increasingly visible elsewhere. Indeed, Canada’s distinctive “cold ocean” geography afforded it a particular advantage in the practice of what might be called selective humanitarianism.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷³ Mayblin, *Asylum After Empire*.

¹⁷⁴ Mayblin, *Asylum After Empire*, 127–30.

¹⁷⁵ Abu-Laban et al., *Containing Diversity*; Chimni, “The Geopolitics of Refugee Studies”; Hathaway, *Reconceiving International Refugee Law*.

¹⁷⁶ Several scholars have highlighted this “cold ocean geography” argument, asserting that Canada’s physical location significantly influences its approach to refugee policy and the management of migrant arrivals. For example, see Hyndman et al., *The State of Private Refugee Sponsorship in Canada: Trends, Issues, and Impacts*, 11–12.

Shielded by vast oceans and, later, by the legal codification of the *Safe Third Country Agreement* with the U.S., the Canadian state was able to deter so-called irregular inland claimants with considerable force while preserving overseas resettlement as a pathway that remained planned, securitized, tightly controlled, discretionary, and politically useful.¹⁷⁷ At the same time, domestic legal reforms expanded detention and facilitated the deportation of rejected claimants, further entrenching a system in which protection could be publicly celebrated even as access to it was more carefully delimited.¹⁷⁸

There was also a distinct temporality to this governing landscape, one in which delay itself became an instrument of rule. Processing times stretched across months and years, converting uncertainty and precarity into technologies of governance.¹⁷⁹ Prolonged security screenings, biometric requirements, and layered application reviews operated as quieter forms of exclusion, seldom denying entry in explicit terms, yet rendering movement arduous, deferred, and at times prohibitive. Humanitarian commitment remained publicly affirmed, but the pathways leading toward it narrowed, increasingly rationalized through the administrative vocabularies of backlogs, procedural integrity, and institutional capacity.

Seen in this light, contemporary refugee governance rests on the presumption that mobility is potentially disordering and that protection must therefore be filtered through anticipatory calculations, risk assessments, and normative expectations of an applicant's alignment with state interests. The refugee appears, then, less as a bearer of rights under international law than as a subject to be verified, sorted, and securitized through an endless "exercise of counting, calculating and coding."¹⁸⁰ Suspicion becomes proceduralized, documentation assumes the character of moral currency, and the burden of proof expands until the distance between recognition and arrival grows ever wider.

By the time Canada entered the second decade of the twenty-first century, it did so already situated within this wider global refugee regime. To understand its institutional

¹⁷⁷ There is a vast and continually expanding literature on the connections between security and asylum politics. For a sample of this scholarship, see Atak et al., "Refugee System as a Bordering Site"; Carey, "Immigrants, Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism"; Cr  peau, "Anti-Terrorism Measures and Refugee Law Challenges in Canada"; Macklin, "Disappearing Refugees"; Messari and van der Klaauw, "Counter-Terrorism Measures and Refugee Protection in North Africa"; Oriola, "Counter-Terrorism and Alien Justice"; Roach, "Counter-Terrorism in and Outside Canada and in and Outside the Anti-Terrorism Act."

¹⁷⁸ G  linas-Faucher and Nakache, "Canadian Immigration and Refugee Policies since 1945."

¹⁷⁹ Masoumi, "Fast Refugee Protection"; Mountz and Hiemstra, "Chaos and Crisis"; Sahin-Mencutek et al., "A Crisis Mode in Migration Governance."

¹⁸⁰ Hyndman, *Managing Displacement*, 121.

architecture is not to claim that it mechanically determines the outcomes of refugee advocacy, but rather to delineate the terrain upon which such advocacy must struggle, negotiate, and sometimes falter. Veterans' mobilizations and diaspora interventions would later press against this racialized and securitized landscape, at times securing selective openings and at others encountering its harsher limits. The discussion now turns to a related but distinct transformation, examining the consolidation of an emergent counterterrorism regime and its consequences for the further securitization of refuge and asylum in the post-9/11 period.

3.2 Regionalized Containment and the Global Turn to Return

The end of the Cold War was met with a new transition in the governance of Afghan forced migration. During the 1980s, Afghan refugees had been folded into a global contest framed in ideological and religious terms, their presence in Pakistan and Iran sustained through external patronage and strategic attention. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fading of Afghanistan's utility within superpower rivalry, that patronage receded.¹⁸¹ What emerged in its place was a new technocratic regime of control and containment. Responsibility for Afghan mobility was still regionalized, stabilized at the borders of neighbouring states, but administered through exclusionary logics of governance rather than the more expansive rhetoric of religious solidarity that preceded it. Displacement was no longer politically instrumental in the same way and so it was to be managed, contained, and, where possible, reversed.

By the early 1990s, the rhetoric of shared religious obligation that had animated earlier hosting arrangements gave way to a vocabulary of burden, fatigue, and control. Western states, having withdrawn both militarily and financially, displayed diminishing interest in the long-term futures of Afghan nationals. Iran and Pakistan, both states that had absorbed millions of refugees, found themselves navigating domestic pressures, fiscal constraints, and shifting international incentives.¹⁸² In this climate, refugees were recast as economic liabilities and potential security concerns. Entry restrictions tightened, freedom of movement was narrowed, and access to

¹⁸¹ Ghufuran, "The Role of UNHCR and Afghan Refugees in Pakistan," 949.

¹⁸² Moghadam and Jadali, "Immigration and Revolution in Iran."

education and employment opportunities further diminished.¹⁸³ Regionalized containment, once subsidized through global strategic calculation, was left to harden under global trends of neoliberal austerity and border securitization.¹⁸⁴

At the multilateral level, this period coincided with the consolidation of repatriation as the preferred “durable solution,” leading to common characterizations of the 1990s as the “decade of return,” a formulation that signalled a broader normative shift within international refugee governance.¹⁸⁵ Return was elevated as the outcome toward which policy should orient itself. Financial support was increasingly channelled toward programs facilitating repatriation rather than local integration or expanded resettlement. In practice, this meant that Afghan refugees were encouraged, and sometimes even pressured, to see their displacement as temporary, even when the structural conditions producing exile remained unresolved.¹⁸⁶ Containment and return thus operated in tandem to stabilize mobility externally under the promise of eventual safe return, allowing states in the Global North to maintain formal commitments to protection while limiting their practical engagement in long-term resettlement.

This orientation toward return was embedded within a wider neoliberal restructuring of global governance. Wealthier states, reluctant to expand admission pathways, increasingly financed containment in frontline regions.¹⁸⁷ The delegation of responsibility was reframed as burden-sharing, though it often entailed uneven distributions of obligation detached from meaningful accountability.¹⁸⁸ Afghanistan’s neighbours became long-term custodians of protracted displacement, while states in the Global North insulated their own asylum systems from large-scale Afghan resettlements. External incentives were adjusted as funding, development assistance, and diplomatic engagements were mobilized to sustain regionalized

¹⁸³ Esfahani and Hosseini, “Afghan Refugees and Iran’s Open Door Policy in the 1980s”; Ghufuran, “The Role of UNHCR and Afghan Refugees in Pakistan”; Hugo et al., “Refugee Movement and Development – Afghan Refugees in Iran”; Langenkamp, “The Victory of Expediency Afghan Refugees and Pakistan in the 1990s”; Moghadam and Jadali, “Immigration and Revolution in Iran”; Moinipour, “Refugees Against Refugees”; Monsutti, “Afghan Migratory Strategies and the Three Solutions to the Refugee Problem”; Siavoshi, “Afghans in Iran.”

¹⁸⁴ Moghadam and Jadali, “Immigration and Revolution in Iran.”

¹⁸⁵ Ghufuran, “The Role of UNHCR and Afghan Refugees in Pakistan,” 949.

¹⁸⁶ van Houte, *Return Migration to Afghanistan*.

¹⁸⁷ Blitz et al., “Non-Voluntary Return?”; van Houte et al., “Deconstructing the Meanings of and Motivations for Return.”

¹⁸⁸ Blitz et al., “Non-Voluntary Return?”

flows rather than to facilitate durable integration elsewhere.¹⁸⁹ As such, Afghan mobility became something to be managed at a distance.

The events of September 11, 2001, intensified and rearticulated these tendencies. Afghanistan's abrupt return into the spotlight of global politics reframed displacement within the language of counterterrorism and nation-building. Yet even as military intervention unfolded, the underlying architecture of regional containment remained intact. Countries across the Global North and South intensified their policies designed to control and contain refugee mobility and "keep Afghans in place."¹⁹⁰ Pakistan and Iran continued to host the vast majority of displaced Afghans, while states in the Global North expanded security screening and narrowed admission channels, opting instead to launch large-scale repatriation programs through the UNHCR in ways explicitly linking refugee returns to the reconstruction of a "new Afghanistan."¹⁹¹

This push towards return migration was driven by a confluence of domestic and foreign policy interests. Domestically, governments sought to relieve perceived strains on welfare systems and placate rising anti-immigrant sentiment.¹⁹² In terms of foreign policy, the return of refugees was seen as the "ultimate proof of peace and return to 'normalcy'... a powerful message that the mission... in Afghanistan and the War on Terror in general was successful."¹⁹³ Returns were publicly framed as "gesture[s] of [international] confidence in the future of [Afghanistan]" and a key achievement of the NATO-led reconstruction and peacebuilding.¹⁹⁴

Yet as insecurity persisted and socio-economic conditions deteriorated, the gap between rhetoric and lived reality widened. While the early 2000s saw a large "assisted voluntary repatriation" initiative, the concept of "voluntary" soon came under intense scrutiny.¹⁹⁵ As security in Afghanistan deteriorated and asylum applications in Europe continued, host states became stricter in their practices, withdrawing temporary protection statuses and initiating return

¹⁸⁹ Majidi, *From Forced Migration to Forced Returns in Afghanistan*.

¹⁹⁰ Crews, *Afghan Modern*, 309.

¹⁹¹ Marsden, "Afghanistan"; Rotberg, *Building a New Afghanistan*; Rubin et al., *Building a New Afghanistan: The Value of Success, the Cost of Failure*.

¹⁹² Blitz et al., "Non-Voluntary Return?"

¹⁹³ Blitz et al., "Non-Voluntary Return?"; van Houte, "Returnees for Change?," 572.

¹⁹⁴ Özerdem and Sofizada, "Sustainable Reintegration to Returning Refugees in Post-Taliban Afghanistan,"

82.

¹⁹⁵ Blitz et al., "Non-Voluntary Return?"; Özerdem and Sofizada, "Sustainable Reintegration to Returning Refugees in Post-Taliban Afghanistan"; Ottonelli and Torresi, "When Is Migration Voluntary?"; van Houte et al., "Deconstructing the Meanings of and Motivations for Return."

programs that blurred the lines between choice and compulsion.¹⁹⁶ Scholars have argued that policies often labeled any non-deported return as “voluntary,” even when heavily compelled by legal circumstances or the threat of removal.¹⁹⁷ This led to the emergence of what some termed “non-voluntary” returns, where financial inducements were coupled with the explicit threat of deportation for those who refused.¹⁹⁸ This fundamental coercion undermined trust and illustrated that the primary focus of such policies were not related to justice or human capital, but rather on the predominant discourse of “burden-relieving.”

These trends persisted throughout the 2010s, as new regional arrangements formalized the conditions under which Afghan nationals could be returned or removed, even as conditions within Afghanistan remained quite volatile.¹⁹⁹ As Nassim Majidi has noted, for many families

migration remains a crucial strategy for mitigating the economic and security risks they face in Afghanistan. Without improved safety and livelihood prospects upon return, many will again turn to migration, creating a migration-return-remigration cycle as Afghans continue to move in search of protection and opportunities.²⁰⁰

Such cycles, he argues, demonstrates the unsustainability of return policies and its failure to create durable solutions.

Canada was not isolated from this evolving regime. Although its direct intake of Afghan refugees remained comparatively limited prior to 2021, its refugee and asylum system was structured within the same modes of control and containment. Resettlement pathways frequently relied on referrals from third countries, particularly Pakistan and Iran, but also from parts of Europe, presuming that Afghan nationals could remain in those jurisdictions while Canadian processes unfolded. Yet this presumption obscured the structural precarity of everyday life in those jurisdictions, where discrimination, legal ambiguity, and the constant threat of forced returns were pervasive. Asylum application timelines were often extended indefinitely, leaving

¹⁹⁶ Blitz et al., “Non-Voluntary Return?”; van Houtte et al., “Deconstructing the Meanings of and Motivations for Return.”

¹⁹⁷ Chimni, “Globalization, Humanitarianism and the Erosion of Refugee Protection”; Ottonelli and Torresi, “When Is Migration Voluntary?”; van Houtte et al., “Deconstructing the Meanings of and Motivations for Return.”

¹⁹⁸ Blitz et al., “Non-Voluntary Return?”

¹⁹⁹ The 2016 “Joint Way Forward” on migration issues between Afghanistan and the EU, for example, explicitly provided a framework for the identification and return of Afghan nationals from EU member states, which explicitly allowed for forced removals despite ongoing insecurity in Afghanistan. Majidi, *From Forced Migration to Forced Returns in Afghanistan*.

²⁰⁰ Majidi, *From Forced Migration to Forced Returns in Afghanistan*, 2.

individuals in prolonged uncertainty. Protection, in effect, was temporally and geographically deferred.

At the same time, this deferral of responsibility was also increasingly juridical and administrative. As Afghan mobility came to be interpreted through the expanding lexicon of counterterrorism, the conditions under which protection could be recognized further narrowed further. The next section examines how these preventive security logics became embedded within Canada's statutory design and administrative practice, reshaping not only where responsibility lay, but how eligibility itself was assessed.

3.3 Counterterrorism and the Securitization of Refuge and Asylum

The post-September 11 legal order reorganized the epistemology of refugee governance. The figure of the refugee was increasingly situated within a racialized and securitized imaginary that blurred distinctions between displacement and threat, refuge and suspicion. The attacks of September 11 accelerated and legitimized the securitization of migration. Far from being a discrete policy domain, counterterrorism became a lens through which mobility itself was interpreted and managed.

In Canada, as elsewhere, the immediate legislative response expanded executive authority, enhanced intelligence-sharing, and widened the ambit of terrorism-related inadmissibility.²⁰¹ The framework of refugee protection was consequently threaded through with provisions designed to anticipate threat. Refugee claimants could now be evaluated not only on the basis of persecution and vulnerability, but through perceived association, affiliation, and proximity to "terrorism."²⁰² The threshold for exclusion widened, and the language of prevention entered the heart of legal and administrative decision-making.

While international refugee law has long contained exclusion clauses for serious crimes and acts deemed contrary to the principles of the Convention,²⁰³ the post-9/11 moment conferred

²⁰¹ Cr  peau and Nakache, "Controlling Irregular Migration in Canada"; Dosman, "For the Record"; Regulations Implementing the United Nations Resolutions on the Suppression of Terrorism.

²⁰² Dosman, "For the Record."

²⁰³ The 1951 Refugee Convention states that its provisions "shall not apply to any person with respect to whom there are serious reasons for considering that: (a) he has committed a crime against peace, a war crime, or a crime against humanity, as defined in the international instruments drawn up to make provision in respect of such crimes; (b) he has committed a serious non-political crime outside the country of refugee prior to his admission to

a markedly expanded interpretive and political weight upon “terrorism” as a category of suspicion. The term itself, lacking any universally settled definition, proved readily extensible, at times applied not only to armed actors but to political dissidents and even human rights activists.²⁰⁴ Under these conditions, counterterrorism law came to operate through flexible and uneven applications, and immigration and refugee governance emerged as particularly potent sites through which suspicion could be articulated and exclusion enforced.

Terrorist listings, produced through executive designation, acquired far-reaching regulatory consequences.²⁰⁵ Once an entity is listed, prohibitions on material support may extend well beyond direct participation in violence to encompass financial transactions, logistical assistance, or even forms of incidental contact.²⁰⁶ For individuals displaced from territories under the control of such groups, geographic origin itself could trigger legal suspicion, heightened vetting, and expanded evidentiary burdens, while asset freezes, travel bans, and intensified border controls curtailed mobility on the basis of perceived association alone.²⁰⁷

Within this framework, the presumption of innocence was not formally displaced but became practically attenuated, as claimants were increasingly required to disprove association rather than establish persecution. Listing and de-listing procedures, often opaque and reliant on intelligence supplied by member states, offered limited avenues for challenge, rendering the adjudication of protection inseparable from security assessments even in the absence of criminal allegation.²⁰⁸ The question was no longer confined to whether an individual faced persecution, but extended to whether their past environment might be construed as implicating them in material support for terrorism. The line between victimhood and complicity thus blurred under the weight of this preventive logic. In this way, the boundary between criminal culpability and immigration enforcement was increasingly blurred, placing strain on the Convention’s core

that country as a refugee; (c) he has been guilty of acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.” See, Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, art. 1(F).

²⁰⁴ UNODC, “International Refugee Law.”

²⁰⁵ Dosman, “For the Record,” 9–10.

²⁰⁶ Dewulf and Pacquée, “Protecting Human Rights in the War on Terror”; Diab, “Canada”; Dosman, “For the Record”; Rosand, “The Security Council’s Efforts to Monitor the Implementation of Al Qaeda/Taliban Sanctions.”

²⁰⁷ Dewulf and Pacquée, “Protecting Human Rights in the War on Terror”; Diab, “Canada”; Dosman, “For the Record”; Rosand, “The Security Council’s Efforts to Monitor the Implementation of Al Qaeda/Taliban Sanctions.”

²⁰⁸ Dewulf and Pacquée, “Protecting Human Rights in the War on Terror”; Diab, “Canada”; Dosman, “For the Record”; Rosand, “The Security Council’s Efforts to Monitor the Implementation of Al Qaeda/Taliban Sanctions.”

commitments to non-discrimination, non-penalization, and non-refoulement. What had once functioned as a relatively bounded legal exception was reworked into a more expansive and indeterminate field of suspicion, capable of attaching itself to a wide range of affiliations, activities, and forms of proximity.

In the Canadian context, this terrain assumed institutional form through the interplay between the terrorism provisions of the Criminal Code, enacted through the *Anti-terrorism Act* (ATA), and the inadmissibility clauses of the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* (IRPA). Terrorist designation under the Criminal Code triggers broad prohibitions on the provision of property or services to listed entities, whether direct or indirect,²⁰⁹ while IRPA's security inadmissibility provisions authorize exclusion on the basis of membership, association, or perceived threat without requiring criminal conviction.²¹⁰ The significance of IRPA lies not only in its substantive provisions, but in its juridical form. As framework legislation, it delegates considerable authority to regulations, ministerial discretion, and administrative practice, preserving the formal language of refugee protection even as it expands the scope for discretionary control over admissibility, exemptions, procedures, and enforcement.

In practice, IRPA became a particularly adaptable counterterrorism instrument, one in which suspicion could be rendered administratively actionable beyond the evidentiary thresholds of the criminal law. As Kent Roach observes, the ATA's reliance on proof beyond a reasonable doubt, together with its restrictions on the use of classified evidence, limited its utility as a primary counterterrorism tool; its first conviction, for instance, was not secured until 2008.²¹¹ These procedural safeguards, central to due process, constrained the state's capacity to act on perceived threats, producing a persistent tension between counterterrorism imperatives and commitments to fairness and transparency. It was within this gap that IRPA assumed greater prominence.²¹² Its relative utility thus entrenched immigration law as a primary site through which counterterrorism objectives were pursued, consolidating a mode of governance in which security and migration became increasingly difficult to disentangle

²⁰⁹ Criminal Code; Regulations Implementing the United Nations Resolutions on the Suppression of Terrorism; Anti-Terrorism Act.

²¹⁰ IRPA.

²¹¹ Roach, "Counter-Terrorism in and Outside Canada and in and Outside the Anti-Terrorism Act"; Roach, "Canada's Response to Terrorism."

²¹² Roach, "Counter-Terrorism in and Outside Canada and in and Outside the Anti-Terrorism Act"; Roach, "Canada's Response to Terrorism."

As elaborated in later chapters, the effects of these legal reforms are particularly pronounced in contexts where armed non-state actors exercise *de facto* territorial control. In such environments, everyday life is inseparable from structures of authority that are formally designated as terrorist. Routine acts, such as paying taxes, renting property, and purchasing fuel, could be recast through narrow interpretations of terrorist financing, as potential grounds for criminalization. Transactions necessary for subsistence and survival thus became susceptible to reinterpretation as indicators of complicity, widening the gap between lived reality and the legal thresholds governing protection.

The category of “association” in this respect expanded in its significance. Inadmissibility did not require proof of violent conduct, but could now simply rest on membership, alleged sympathy, or indirect involvement.²¹³ The flexibility of these associations granted a wide interpretive latitude to decision-makers, amplifying the discretionary powers of the state. Often defended as necessary in an era dominated by discourses and logics of counterterrorism, the humanitarian consequences of such reforms were borne disproportionately by those fleeing precisely such conditions.

In this respect, counterterrorism law restructured the ecosystem around refugees and asylum-seekers. It influenced how governments funded humanitarian programs, how non-state actors organized assistance, and how legal counsel advised clients. Within Canada, IRPA codified this restructuring by reaffirming Convention obligations while also consolidating expansive ministerial authority over admissibility, exemptions, and public policy measures. Pathways could be created, accelerated, constrained, or withheld at the state’s discretion. The securitized logic of counterterrorism thus spread outward from criminal designations into the broader governance of mobility.

As discussed in later chapters, when the Taliban—long listed under Canadian law as a terrorist entity—reassumed control of Afghanistan, this legal architecture assumed renewed salience. The breadth of inadmissibility provisions, expansive interpretations of material support, and the normalization of preventive logic conditioned the interpretive frame through which Afghan displacement would be assessed. What followed cannot be understood apart from this inherited structure.

²¹³ Cr  peau and Nakache, “Controlling Irregular Migration in Canada,” 22.

The tensions that would emerge between civil society demands for urgency and state insistence on securitizing the Canadian response were rooted in two decades of cumulative reforms. Advocacy efforts would encounter a refugee regime predisposed to reading mobility through association and association through threat. Some claims proved to be negotiable where they could be translated into categories that were legible to this system, while others stalled against its exclusionary logic even as political pressures intensified.

Understanding this trajectory clarifies why advocacy could generate openings while struggling to unsettle the underlying structure of governance itself. The following section examines how these tensions crystallized as Afghanistan's crisis intensified in 2021.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has traced how Canada's post-Cold War and post-9/11 refugee governance architecture was reorganized around the logics of prevention, discretion, and securitized assessment. The language of humanitarianism endured, but access to protection narrowed. Ministerial authority expanded, counterterrorism rationalities migrated into immigration law, and the institutional pathways through which refuge might be granted became more layered, selective, and difficult to navigate. Protection was not dismantled so much as rerouted—channeled through exceptional measures, discretionary exemptions, and administratively defined categories of vulnerability that had to be distinguished, often precariously, from threat.

What emerged was a structural tension that would become especially pronounced in the Afghan case. Canada's military engagement abroad generated relational ties, moral vocabularies of obligation, and public commitments to women's rights, humanitarian leadership, and international responsibility. Yet the institutional regime through which displaced Afghans might be admitted had already been reshaped by a logic of risk management. Responsibility and restriction were thus co-produced. The same state that articulated the idioms of liberal humanitarianism abroad consolidated, at home, a highly selective architecture of gatekeeping.

It is within this institutional terrain that later forms of advocacy would have to operate. The *armonia* effect could not arise from moral urgency alone. It required claims that could be rendered resonant within a system already predisposed to read mobility through the registers of

suspicion, association, and threat. The next chapter therefore turns from institutional architecture to discursive formation, examining how Canada's war in Afghanistan helped to produce the symbolic grammars through which certain Afghan subjects later became legible as allies, victims, or threats. If this chapter has mapped the institutional limits of resonance, the next traces the discursive conditions under which resonance could become possible at all.

Chapter Four: The Discursive Preconditions of Resonance: War, Allyship, and Gendered Rescue

Terrorists are not attached to any one country. Terrorism is a global threat. The perpetrators have demonstrated their ability to move with ease from country to country, from place to place, to make use of the freedom and openness of the victims on whom they prey, the very freedom and openness that we cherish and will protect...

We will remain vigilant but will not give in to the temptation in a rush to increase security to undermine the values that we cherish and which have made Canada a beacon of hope, freedom and tolerance in the world...

The evil perpetrators of this horror represent no community or religion. They stand for evil, nothing else... Today more than ever we must reaffirm the fundamental values of our charter of rights and freedoms: the equality of every race, every colour, every religion and every ethnic origin. We are all Canadians. We are a compassionate and righteous people.

— Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, September 17, 2001²¹⁴

This is not the same UN peacekeeping that Canadians have known and supported in the past; in Afghanistan there is not yet a peace to keep, no truce to supervise or “green line” to watch. This is a peace-enforcement operation, as provided for under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter. It is a collective use of force, under international law, to address a threat to international peace and security posed by continuing disorder in Afghanistan.

— *Independent Panel on Canada’s Future Role in Afghanistan (The Manley Report)*, January 2008.²¹⁵

The quotations above reflect the discursive coordinates within which Canada’s post-9/11 engagement in Afghanistan was articulated and legitimated. In Chrétien’s remarks, terrorism is rendered placeless and borderless, an abstract and mobile evil that preys upon the very openness and pluralism Canada professes to cherish and protect. Yet the invocation of vigilance is immediately accompanied by a careful reaffirmation of constitutional virtues of equality and tolerance, pluralism across race and religion, a refusal to conflate terrorism with any faith or community, and a declaration that “we are all Canadians.” The new language of securitization of the twenty-first century was thus narrated in Canada not as a departure from its liberal values of multiculturalism and diversity but as their necessary defense. In the second statement, however, the Harper-era Conservatives recast Afghanistan in a more juridical register, no longer as a site of

²¹⁴ *House of Commons Debates*, No. 79.

²¹⁵ Manley, *Independent Panel on Canada’s Future Role in Afghanistan*, 19.

peacekeeping but of “peace-enforcement,” a site of authorized force against disorder. These statements across the Liberal and Conservative governments that ruled at the beginning and end of Canada’s mission in Afghanistan assemble a grammar in which compassion and security, tolerance and vigilance, constitutional inclusion and militarized resolve are bound together within a single national story of liberal interventionism. It is within this wartime grammar that Afghan subjects, and Afghan refugees in particular, would come to be interpreted, sorted, and rendered legible in Canadian political life.

As such, my analysis in this chapter turns to the discursive and political terrain of Afghan refugee governance in the post-9/11 period. Law and administration are animated by narratives of national identity, civilizational belonging, and moral obligation. Canada’s engagement in Afghanistan both reshaped foreign policy and the vocabulary through which Afghan civilians and refugees were rendered legible within Canadian public life and politics.

In the years following September 11, the familiar image of Canada’s peacekeeping “middle power” identity gave way to a more militarized articulation of national purpose. Political rhetoric, especially during the Harper-era Conservatives, foregrounded an image of sacrifice, international solidarity, and combat readiness. The Kandahar mission, in particular, became a focal point for the rebranding of Canada as a “warrior nation,” disciplined, resolute, and aligned with liberal democratic values under the civilizational threat of terrorism. This transformation entangled humanitarian language with a militarist nationalism that gave it a renewed and nuanced emphasis on freedom, women’s rights, and the defense of Western civilizational culture and values.

Within this discursive formation, Afghan refugees were not treated as a homogeneous category. Some were portrayed as “allies,” interpreters, locally engaged staff (LES), and partners whose loyalty affirmed the moral legitimacy of Canada’s mission. Others were subsumed within broader civilizational narratives of rescue and emancipation, especially Afghan women and girls, whose suffering was mobilized to justify intervention and reform. Still others were taken up by the securitizing imaginaries attached to insurgency, terrorism, and state fragility. These differentiated representations would later shape which claims to protection appeared most urgent, credible, and aligned with Canadian culture, values, and national identity.

The politics of deservingness that emerged from this period was thus relational and deeply stratified. Obligation was articulated most forcefully where proximity to Canada’s

military mission and nation-building agenda could be demonstrated, whether it be as heroic allies or tragic victims. Vulnerability was most legible where it resonated with new forms militarized or liberal humanitarian scripts. Conversely, claims that unsettled these narratives, or that invoked broader structural critiques of war and displacement, found less of an immediate hold.

My analysis in this chapter traces how militarized liberal humanitarianism structured the discursive field of refugee governance in Canada. It looks at the recoding of Afghan subjects from Cold War “freedom fighters” to potential terrorist threats, the construction of the Afghan “ally” as a figure of militarized obligation, and the gendered narratives of rescue that animated both public debate and foreign policy discourses. In mapping these developments, I identify the social and political conditions that made the later emergence of the *armonia* effect possible.

Indeed, by the time Kabul fell in 2021, these discursive formations were already well sedimented. Veterans, diaspora advocates, and policymakers operated within a field shaped by militarized and civilizational nationalism, Western-style liberal-democratic values, and intensifying trends of racialized securitization. To understand why certain advocacy strategies later resonated, and why others encountered added resistances, it is important first to examine how the discursive terrain of Afghan refugee deservingness was constructed during a war in which Canada was deeply and directly implicated. This chapter thus provides the historical and symbolic backdrop through which Afghan refugeeeness became legible, negotiable, and selectively recognizable within Canadian refugee governance.

4.1 Transforming the Afghan Subject

The transformation of the Afghan refugee subject within Western political imagination did not occur abruptly in September 2001. As discussed in previous chapters, it was the culmination of a longer narrative realignment in which yesterday’s Cold War allies became today’s civilizational enemies. Yet while September 11 may have not invented this transformation, it did intensify and globalize it. In the process, Afghanistan was recoded not merely as a site of conflict in the “Global War on Terror” but as the emblem of a failed state incubating radical extremism. Within this reframing, Afghan mobility itself became suspect, its trajectories shadowed by a new highly racialized and securitized suspicion.

The discursive consequences were far-reaching. Terrorism ceased to be understood as the tactic of particular organizations and became instead a civilizational pathology, diffusely attached to religious and cultural signifiers. This was a “new kind of terrorism” emanating from “radical Islamic societies” that now specifically threatened the “Western, peace-loving world.”²¹⁶ Islam was stripped of its internal diversity and increasingly mobilized as a shorthand for insurgent militancy. Afghan masculinity, in particular, was recast within Western political rhetoric as hyper-violent, patriarchal, and resistant to modern liberal values of freedom, modernity, and progress.²¹⁷ The earlier valorization of anti-Soviet resistances gave way to an existential and ontological threat to Western democracies. Where once the mujahideen had been folded into a narrative of freedom, they now appeared as evidence of freedom’s antithesis, as a new yet familiar foe, depicted as the “heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century”²¹⁸

This inversion had concrete implications for the management of forced displacement. Refugees, who had once embodied the moral indictment of Soviet aggression, now risked being read through the counterterrorist lens of threat. The figure of the asylum seeker became entangled with regularized channels of securitization. The question shifted subtly but decisively from “what has been done to this person?” to “what might this person do?”

Such depictions were anchored in the broader recoding of Afghanistan as a paradigmatic “failed state.” As Stewart M. Patrick observes, a defining shift from the late Cold War to the Global War on Terror was the relocation of danger from rival great powers to “weak and failing states.”²¹⁹ Prior to this, such states were largely understood in humanitarian terms. It was only after September 11, that the concept of “state fragility” gain traction, redefined as a breeding ground for terrorism. According to Richard Haass, weak states could imperil U.S. security “as much as strong ones.”²²⁰ This reframing quickly spread across government departments and agencies, translating issues of development into security priorities and legitimating more pre-emptive, externally managed approaches to migration and refugee governance. Such a reorientation did not eliminate or even diminish the importance of humanitarian language from

²¹⁶ Nabers, “Filling the Void of Meaning,” 205.

²¹⁷ Manchanda, *Imagining Afghanistan*; Ridouane, “Post-9/11 Masculinist Incursions in Iraq and Afghanistan.”

²¹⁸ Bush, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the United States Response to the Terrorist Attacks of September 11.”

²¹⁹ Patrick, *Weak Links*, 4.

²²⁰ As cited in Patrick, *Weak Links*, 4.

Western policy discourses, but it was increasingly articulated through a counterterrorist lens that rendered refugee protection conditional, as a matter of balancing compassion against security.

In the case of Afghanistan, the same territory said to incubate terror was also presented as incapable of safeguarding its own citizens, especially women and minorities. In this register, intervention could be cast as both a necessity for international security and as moral obligation. Addressing the UN General Assembly in November 2001, U.S. President George W. Bush articulated these discourses of threat and rescue, grieving “for all the suffering the Taliban have brought upon Afghanistan,” insisting that “the Afghan people do not deserve their present rulers,” and promising that when the regime was gone, the U.S. would help Afghan civilians “rebuild their country” and support a government that “represents all of the Afghan people.”²²¹ The Taliban were not merely adversaries of the West but illegitimate rulers oppressing Afghan society itself. The figure of the Afghan subject was thus split between terror’s host and terror’s victim, an object of suspicion and an object of salvation. The duality produced a paradox that functioned together to justify what would become twenty-years of NATO occupation, as Afghanistan became at once too dangerous to trust and too broken to abandon.²²²

The treatment of Afghan subjects within this emergent landscape was not homogenous, however. Even as they were increasingly securitized, alternative representations persisted. Afghan interpreters, women activists, and democratic reformers were mobilized as counter-figures to the specter of terrorism. As my research shows, the narrative terrain fractured into differentiated archetypes that were legible within Western foreign and refugee policy discourse: the enemy, the victim, the ally. These archetypes coexisted, often uneasily, within the same paradigm of liberal-democratically coded counterterrorism. It is from within this stratified landscape that I argue the politics of deservingness would later take shape, privileging proximity and legibility over structural critique.

4.2 Militarizing Canada’s Humanitarian Self-Image

²²¹ Bush, “Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City.”

²²² Numerous scholars in critical international relations, feminist security studies, and postcolonial theory have analyzed this dual framing of Afghanistan as simultaneously a site of danger and rescue. See, for example, Abu-Lughod, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?”; Manchanda, *Imagining Afghanistan*; Sahill, *Turbulent Afghanistan*; Sjolander, and Trevenen, “Constructing Canadian Foreign Policy: Myths of Good International Citizens, Protectors, and the War in Afghanistan.”

Canada's participation in the War in Afghanistan had consequences that extended beyond foreign and defence policy. It also reshaped how the Canadian state articulated its national role and identity. In the wake of the September 11 attacks, political discourse increasingly entangled overseas counterterrorism operations with a renewed articulation of Canada as both a loyal military ally and a principled defender of liberal-democratic values. Security and humanitarianism were not presented as competing commitments, but as mutually reinforcing expressions of national character, and Afghanistan became the stage upon which Canada could demonstrate its resolve abroad while affirming its multicultural and humanitarian identity at home. This entangled discourse was evident in then-Prime Minister Jean Chrétien's address to the House of Commons in the days following the attacks:

[Canada must] address the threat that terrorism poses... These cold-blooded killers struck a blow at the values and beliefs of free and civilized people everywhere... Canada, a nation founded on a belief in freedom, justice and tolerance, will be part of that response.

... If laws need to be changed they will be. If security has to be increased to protect Canadians it will be. We will remain vigilant but will not... undermine the values... which have made Canada a beacon of hope, freedom and tolerance in the world... a nation of immigrants from all corners of the globe, people of all nationalities, colours and religions... We will continue to offer refuge to the persecuted... no one will stop this.²²³

In his remarks, counterterrorism and refuge became two expressions of the same civilizational commitment. Canada would defend liberal values through military participation abroad while preserving them through humanitarian inclusion at home. The promise to remain open to "people of all nationalities, colours and religions" coexisted with a commitment to fortify security and adapt legal frameworks to confront new threats, however ill-defined they may be. The language of tolerance thus traveled alongside this racially-coded language of risk, binding Canada's moral identity to strategic alignment with the U.S. and NATO allies. However, this commitment would carry grave implications for refugee governance, as developments in Canada's foreign policy contributed to protracted conflict and displacement in Afghanistan, while parallel shifts in refugee policy narrowed humanitarian admissions and pathways at home.

²²³ *House of Commons Debates*, No. 79.

With regards to foreign policy, International Relations and Security Studies scholars have documented how the intervention's early optimism gave way to strategic incoherence, fragmented reconstruction efforts, and the intensification of counterinsurgency operations.²²⁴ As NATO operations expanded and civilian casualties mounted, individuals perceived to be assisting international forces faced escalating risks of Taliban reprisals.²²⁵ Canada was significantly implicated in these developments. Its leadership of combat operations in Kandahar between 2005 and 2014 placed it at the heart of one of the conflict's most volatile regions, consolidating its identity as a state willing to assume substantial military risk in the name of combatting terrorism.²²⁶

Critical IR scholarship characterizes this period as a departure from Canada's post-1960s peacekeeping-oriented "middle power" identity and the consolidation of a more overtly militarist nationalism.²²⁷ The figure of the disciplined, masculinized, and combat-ready soldier began to occupy a central place in public memory and political discourse.²²⁸ Warfighting was privileged over development, weakening civil-military coordination, and further straining an already fragile humanitarian and state-building effort abroad.²²⁹ As Justin Podur argues, when humanitarianism and diplomacy are subordinated to combat-centric imperatives, they are reduced to "instruments of military victory," rendering any reconstruction efforts "distorted, limited, and incoherent" under conditions of ongoing warfare.²³⁰ Genuine and sustainable development, he contends, requires sustained commitments to sovereignty and peace.

In terms of Canada's domestic policies, research within refugee and migration studies has documented parallel developments that have reshaped political debates and administrative practices concerning admission, membership, and belonging. The neo-conservative tenor of the country's emergent militarist and civilizational nationalism permeated reforms to citizenship tests, guides, and ceremonies, which increasingly foregrounded a valorized military past and

²²⁴ Crews and Tarzi, "Introduction"; Ibrahimi, "False Negotiations and the Fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban"; Klassen, "Introduction: Empire, Afghanistan, and Canadian Foreign Policy."

²²⁵ Human Rights Watch, "Afghanistan"; UNAMA, *Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict*.

²²⁶ Veterans Affairs Canada, "Afghanistan."

²²⁷ Kellogg, "From the Avro Arrow to Afghanistan: The Political Economy of Canadian Militarism"; McKay and Swift, *Warrior Nation*.

²²⁸ Mutimer, "The Road to Afghanistan," 217; Wegner, "(De)Constructing Foreign Policy Narratives: Canada in Afghanistan," 117.

²²⁹ Dorn and Varey, "Fatally Flawed"; Klassen, "Methods of Empire: State Building, Development, and War in Afghanistan"; Podur, "Incompatible Objectives: Counterinsurgency and Development in Afghanistan."

²³⁰ Podur, "Incompatible Objectives: Counterinsurgency and Development in Afghanistan," 341.

rebranded Canada as a “Warrior Nation.”²³¹ Discourses surrounding the “bogus claimant,” appeals to a particular brand of “Canadian values,” and the vilification of so-called “barbaric cultural practices” circulated across parliamentary debates and ministerial statements, with Muslim and other racialized people on the move increasingly positioned within a register of civilizational difference and potential threat to the nation.²³² The legitimacy of the refugee subject was, in this way, filtered through new normative expectations of loyalty, assimilation, and cultural alignment.

Although the scholarly literatures on Canada’s foreign and refugee policy approaches have largely developed in parallel, reading them together clarifies how militarist and civilizational nationalisms operated across Canada’s foreign and domestic policy domains in mutually reinforcing yet ultimately contradictory ways. Abroad, these narratives justified a warfighting posture that contributed to strategic incoherence, civilian casualties, and protracted displacements, including among Afghan nationals directly supporting Canadian forces. At home, the same ideological currents narrowed access to protection for those displaced by the conflict and violence in which Canada was directly implicated. This contradiction contributed to a specific set of moral, political, and institutional tensions within which responsibility for Afghan displacement was simultaneously acknowledged and disavowed.

Afghan immigration to Canada declined to its lowest wartime levels under the Harper-era Conservative government, even as this period saw Canada’s most pronounced military engagement in Afghanistan and a sharp escalation in conflict and displacement afflicted ordinary Afghan civilians. This decline in immigration trends likely comes as no surprise. What is more striking however is that Canada’s first dedicated Afghan resettlement program also emerged during these years, a development examined later in this chapter. It is equally significant that although the post-2015 Liberal government under then-Prime Minister Justin Trudeau sought to distance itself from the overt militarized nationalism associated with its predecessor,²³³ my research in subsequent chapters of this dissertation demonstrates that many of these discourses

²³¹ Abu-Laban et al., *Containing Diversity*, 241–48; Carlaw, “Authoritarian Populism and Canada’s Conservative Decade (2006–2015) in Citizenship and Immigration,” 797–801.

²³² Carlaw, “Authoritarian Populism and Canada’s Conservative Decade (2006–2015) in Citizenship and Immigration,” 797, 801.

²³³ Winter and Carlaw, “Mending or Patching Over Inequality? The Substance of Multiculturalism under Canada’s Liberal Government Since 2015.”

retained political and cultural salience across state and civil society, and the wartime advocacy networks it inadvertently produced continued to mobilize.

The refugee governance landscape that emerged from Canada's parallel developments in foreign and domestic policy was therefore neither uniformly exclusionary nor expansively humanitarian. It was uneven, fragmented, and stratified. This uneven terrain forms the discursive precondition for the analyses that follow. It clarifies why certain claims—those harmonizing with militarized narratives of loyalty, reciprocity, and alliance—would later gain traction more readily than others. The remilitarization of national identity did not determine advocacy outcomes, but it did influence the field within which resonance for certain refugee subgroups became possible in policy terms. By the time Afghan refugees re-entered Canadian political consciousness in 2021, these discursive formations were already firmly sedimented. Veterans, diaspora communities, and policymakers operated within a space shaped in large part by a militarized vision of liberal humanitarianism, civilizational binaries, and intensifying trends of securitization.

4.3 The Afghan “Ally” and Militarized Obligation

Where the Afghan “terrorist” emerged as a figure of anticipatory suspicion, the Afghan “ally” materialized as his moral counterpart. This figure arose from lived proximity within the dense operational spaces of Kandahar. On patrol routes, inside military bases, in tactical interrogations and intelligence briefings, Afghan interpreters, guides, drivers, and locally engaged staff became indispensable mediators between Canadian personnel and Afghan society. Their labour was central to Canadian operations, but their risk was significant. Canadian soldiers and diplomats relied on Afghan colleagues not only for translation, but for survival. Shared danger produced a narrative of mutual loyalty and responsibility. When reprisals against interpreters intensified, the discourse that took shape among Canadian personnel was a moral one of obligation— “we owe them.”²³⁴ Protection was framed as repayment for services rendered, sacrifices endured, and a trust extended in line of duty.

²³⁴ CBC, “Afghan Interpreter Believes Canada Will Help Him — but He’s Running out of Time”; Connolly, “Canada Has ‘Moral Obligation’ to Protect Afghan Interpreters from Taliban Resurgence.”

What is particularly salient about the emergence of veterans as refugee advocates is the normative and institutional terms through which their interventions were articulated. As my research shows, their advocacy was not primarily grounded in the universalist human-rights language typically seen among the more established actors within Canada's refugee and humanitarian sector. Rather, it was organized through a distinctly militarized moral economy structured around norms of loyalty, sacrifice, reciprocity, and obligation embedded within Canadian military culture.²³⁵ Within this framework, Afghan interpreters and other locally engaged staff were rarely positioned as refugees in the conventional legal sense of international protection. Instead, they were framed as "allies" who served alongside Canadian forces, protected Canadian lives, and thereby generated a moral obligation that the Canadian state was understood to have incurred and to be bound to honour.²³⁶

I argue that the unique moral authority underpinning this advocacy drew upon the same wartime discourses that had legitimized Canada's military mission in Afghanistan. Veterans were able to mobilize and repurpose elements of the state's own justificatory language—particularly those associated with Harper-era civilizational and militarist nationalisms—in support of targeted and selective refugee admissions. This moral economy of obligation, however, presupposed a sharply delineated landscape for deservingness. To understand how the persecution of Afghan *allies* was recognized and translated into claims of refugee deservingness, it is therefore necessary to examine how the *enemy*—and by extension the persecutor—was constructed within Canada's wartime and crisis discourses.

Throughout the conflict, Canadian personnel frequently emphasized the difficulty, and at times the "near impossib[ility]," of distinguishing Taliban "terrorists" from civilian "supporters," a problem exacerbated by counterinsurgency strategies that blurred conventional boundaries between combat operations and humanitarian engagement.²³⁷ These operational ambiguities were further problematized at the level of senior military leadership through the deployment of civilizational language that framed the mission as a defence of liberal-democratic values against

²³⁵ For a detailed articulation of the values, principles, and ethical framework underpinning CAF institutional culture, see *Canadian Armed Forces Ethos: Trusted to Serve* Department of National Defence, *Canadian Armed Forces Ethos.*, which outlines core commitments including duty, loyalty, integrity, and service to Canada, as well as expectations of reciprocal obligation between the institution, its members, and the state.

²³⁶ Blackwell, "How Ottawa Failed Afghans Who Risked Their Lives for Canada"; CBC, "Canada Rejects Majority of Afghan Interpreters' Refugee Claims"; VTN, *Samandar Khan's Story*.

²³⁷ Dorn and Varey, "Fatally Flawed," 975.

an ill-defined and morally absolute enemy. Rick Hillier, then-Chief of the Defence Staff—the highest-ranking position in the CAF—characterized Canada’s enemies as “detestable murderers and scumbags... [who] detest our freedoms... our society... our liberties.”²³⁸ Such representations consolidated a binary opposition between Canadian values and Afghan threat. As such, the Taliban—and those suspected of affiliation with the Taliban or other designated terrorist organizations—came to be constructed not merely as armed opponents but as the embodiment of terrorism itself. Afghan Muslim society, by contrast, was frequently rendered as a diffuse and indeterminate space of suspicion rather than as a politically heterogeneous civilian population differentiated by varying forms of agency, affiliation, and vulnerability.

These constructions were further intensified by a series of moral and institutional failures that destabilized an already fragile civilian-combatant infrastructure. Canada’s implication in civilian casualties, the transfer of detainees to Afghan authorities known to employ torture, and repeated breakdowns in aid delivery contributed to widespread resentment among Kandahar’s civilian population, including protests directly targeting Canadian forces.²³⁹ At the same time, these events generated growing unease within the CAF itself, as soldiers confronted dissonance between the mission’s stated objectives and its lived consequences on the ground. Allegations by former special forces personnel concerning the killing of unarmed civilians and the bombing of civilian homes—alongside claims of retaliation against those who reported such incidents—point to a deeper crisis of moral and institutional accountability.²⁴⁰

It was within this fractured moral and institutional terrain that Afghan “allies” emerged as exceptional figures of deservingness. Partnerships with interpreters, guides, cultural liaisons, and other locally engaged staff were widely understood by Canadian personnel to be operationally indispensable and, in many cases, integral to their personal safety.²⁴¹ As the NATO mission

²³⁸ CBC, “Helping Afghanistan Will Protect Canada, Says Top Soldier.”

²³⁹ BCCLA, “Afghan Detainee Case Documents”; Berthiaume, “Canada’s Foreign Aid to Afghanistan Had Some Success but Many Failures”; CBC, “Canadian Troops Kill Another Afghan Civilian”; CityNews, “Afghans Shout ‘Death to Canadians’ After Children Killed By Shell Blast.”

²⁴⁰ Former JTF2 Sergeant Claude Lepage’s lawsuit alleged that he was forced out of the military after reporting the execution of unarmed Afghan civilians by Canadian personnel. The case is exemplary of the mission’s ethical controversies and civilian toll, as well as the disillusionment experienced by some soldiers, highlighting systemic issues and in the CAF’s mechanisms of accountability for alleged war crimes, and fault lines in its governance structure. For details about the case, see Lapierre and Stevenson, “Former Special Ops Soldier Says He Faced ‘retaliation’ for Reporting Alleged Killing of Afghan Civilians.”

²⁴¹ Blackwell, “How Ottawa Failed Afghans Who Risked Their Lives for Canada”; Red T, “Open Letter: Protective Asylum for Endangered Afghan Host Nation Linguists”; Red T, “Re: A Pathway to Protection.”

faltered and the Taliban regained momentum, Canadian soldiers became increasingly aware that these relationships placed their Afghan colleagues at heightened risks for reprisals. This exposure extended well beyond interpreters to include cooks, drivers, cleaners, and others occupying non-combat roles.²⁴² As one veteran explained, “Our job was to take out the leadership of the Taliban, so it made everybody [who worked with us] a target.”²⁴³ Within this framework, persecution by the Taliban functioned as a necessary but insufficient condition for deservingness, as recognition and protection were mediated by whether such risk could be causally attributed to prior alignment with Canadian military objectives.

These constructions of proximity and risk were translated into advocacy discourse as veteran-led organizations, interpreters’ networks, and allied CSOs lobbied the federal government under the premise that their allies had served Canada and, in doing so, assumed extraordinary personal risk on its behalf. Oliver Thorne, CEO of the VTN, articulated this moral logic succinctly when he observed that Afghan interpreters “served [and] protected our men and women in uniform at great risk to themselves and their families.”²⁴⁴ Wendy Long, founder of *Afghan-Canadian Interpreters*, similarly stated that Canadians “have a responsibility for those people, more so than anyone else, because of their connection to Canada... They protected our men and women and we are responsible.”²⁴⁵

The powerful resonance of this politics of deservingness lay in its affect. It condensed years of shared danger in the name of advancing Canada’s liberal-democratic nation-building agenda abroad into a moral claim that was mobilized to policy lobbying. Veterans’ testimonies, letters of reference, and public interventions carried a weight and credibility across public and institutional spaces that was difficult to ignore. In such discursive mobilization, interpreters were not just conveyed as abstract claimants, but were named individuals, remembered faces, comrades from patrols and convoys with heroic and harrowing stories of sacrifice.²⁴⁶

²⁴² Human Rights Watch, “Afghanistan”; IRB, “Afghanistan: The Capacity of the Taliban to Pursue Individuals after They Relocate to Another Region; Their Capacity to Track Individuals over the Long Term”; UNAMA, *Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict*.

²⁴³ Corbella, “Danger Zone; Afghan Interpreters and Workers Helped Keep Us Safe, Now It’s Our Turn.”

²⁴⁴ *CTV National News*, “Afghan Refugees.”

²⁴⁵ Blackwell, “How Ottawa Failed Afghans Who Risked Their Lives for Canada.”

²⁴⁶ Veterans’ organizations such as VTN regularly published detailed profiles of Afghan interpreters and locally engaged staff on their websites and social media platforms. These narratives highlighted the linguistic, medical, and logistical supports Afghan locals provided for CAF personnel, their exposure to Taliban reprisals, and their precarious journeys to access protections. For a sample of these profiles, see VTN, *Mr. Noori’s Story*; VTN, *Choopan’s Story*; VTN, *Ahmad’s Story*; VTN, *Abdul’s Story*.

At times, this moral economy negotiated deservingness beyond the securitized binary of *ally* and *enemy*. Advocates frequently distinguished between long-term interpreters embedded within Canadian units and individuals who had supported the mission in less visible, intermittent, or non-military capacities. As one veteran remarked in an interview with the *Calgary Herald*,

You could have somebody who worked for multiple years as an interpreter, wearing a Canadian military uniform and has letters of recommendation from all sorts of Canadian forces members... Then you've got folks who maybe work for, you know, a month... clean[ing] the toilets, doesn't speak English, doesn't have any record of employment... why are we treating them the same?²⁴⁷

Such distinctions suggest that prevailing neoliberal and securitized logics of refugeeness were negotiated rather than contested. References to wearing Canadian uniforms and possessing letters of recommendation from soldiers functioned as evidence of trust, loyalty, and alignment with Canadian identity and values, temporarily positioning some refugees as quasi-insiders. Civilizational and racialized framings were thus rendered flexible, operating as “floating signifiers.”²⁴⁸ At the same time, these exceptions were consolidated through deeper continuities with neoliberal valuations of productivity and worth.²⁴⁹

As such, veterans’ advocacy did not fundamentally challenge the exclusionary and hierarchal logics shaping refugee governance, but instead largely operated within them with the unique tenor of Harper-era neoconservative militarism. Its effectiveness stemmed from reinforcing, rather than contesting, the prevailing civilizational, neoliberal, and security-oriented frames of Canada’s post-9/11 landscape. Afghan civilians who could not be situated within proximity-based narratives remained largely illegible within this mode of advocacy, even when they faced acute violence, displacement, or political persecution. The Afghan farmer displaced by crossfire, the grassroots activist threatened for political dissent, the family uprooted by shifting geographies of warfare—these figures lacked the connections to intermediaries with the same influential networks and capacities that could convert their lived realities of displacement into concrete pathways for protection. Their suffering was no less real, but it was less legible

²⁴⁷ Corbella, *It's Our Turn to Help Afghan Interpreters and Workers Who Risked All for Us*.

²⁴⁸ Hall, *Representation*.

²⁴⁹ This selectivity mirrors broader dynamics in Canadian migration governance in which access to protection and membership is filtered through neoliberal valuations of skills, employability, and perceived contribution, producing differentiated moral economies of worth even within ostensibly humanitarian regimes. For a sample of this literature, see Atak et al., “Canada’s Implementation of the UN Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees”; Winter, “Multicultural Citizenship for the Highly Skilled?”.

within Canada's militarized moral economy. The ally's proximity to Canadian forces thus helped to magnify their claims within public consciousness while leaving others comparatively diffuse and politically distant.

4.4 Afghan Women's Victimhood and Liberal Scripts of Gendered Rescue

The lives of Afghan women, and their plight and misery, enter into our everyday consciousness and seamlessly coalesce with what we already 'know' about Afghanistan – as the land of no hope, of devastation, of backwardness and barbarity. Afghan women are widely portrayed and perceived as victims of gross injustice, of the evils of a male-dominated, hyper-masculine society and of 'Islam' as a system of social and political organisation that has been impressionistically labelled 'anti-woman'. There is now an acknowledged need for the transformation of Afghan society, through 'modernisation' by education, a change in mindset and the 'de-Islamisation' of women.

— Nivi Manchanda, *Imagining Afghanistan*, 2020²⁵⁰

If the Afghan ally embodied obligation through proximity, the Afghan woman was mobilized through vulnerability and victimhood. In the early years of the war, images of veiled bodies, shuttered schools, and public punishments circulated widely across Western media and political rhetoric.²⁵¹ These representations rendered Afghanistan legible as a theatre of civilizational rescue, where women appeared silenced, confined, and brutalized within a violently patriarchal order, awaiting masculinized Western emancipation from masculinized Afghan oppression.²⁵² Both figures were tethered to the NATO intervention, albeit through different registers. The ally was constructed as the loyal partner—courageous, compliant, and reciprocally bound through shared sacrifice to the Western reconstruction effort. The Afghan woman, by contrast, was cast as the passive victim whose suffering, dependence, and voicelessness necessitated Western rescue.²⁵³ Her image connected security to salvation, mobilizing support for both intervention and protection, often lowering the perceived threat of entry through a nuanced discourse of compassion.²⁵⁴ Whereas the plight of Afghan allies generated claims grounded in loyalty and

²⁵⁰ Manchanda, *Imagining Afghanistan*, 146.

²⁵¹ Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?"; Manchanda, *Imagining Afghanistan*.

²⁵² Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?"; Manchanda, *Imagining Afghanistan*; Ridouane, "Post-9/11 Masculinist Incursions in Iraq and Afghanistan."

²⁵³ Baines, *Vulnerable Bodies*; Crawley, "Saving Brown Women from Brown Men?"; Freedman, "The Uses and Abuses of 'Vulnerability' in EU Asylum and Refugee Protection."

²⁵⁴ Crawley, "Saving Brown Women from Brown Men?"

reciprocity, those of Afghan women operated as a broader humanitarian alibi, reframing military occupation as benevolent guardianship rather than a projection of geopolitical interest. However, this sympathy comes at the cost of reproducing colonial paternalism, where Afghan women are imagined as incapable of self-determination, despite their long histories of resistance, activism, and political thought.²⁵⁵

The implications for refugee governance were significant. When Afghan women later sought protection, their claims could be made legible through the same vocabulary that had justified intervention. Gendered persecution resonated with established humanitarian tropes. The image of the brown men denying brown women of education or punishing them for defying dress codes had aligned neatly with racially-coded liberal understandings of rights, freedom, and emancipation. Vulnerability, when narrated through gender, became a powerful currency of recognition. In this way, refugee protection operates less as a rights-based system and more as a form of governance that sustains global hierarchies, embedding what Susan Kneebone has described as “exclusionary inclusion.”²⁵⁶ The discussion here focuses on how this dynamic operated so powerfully through the narrative of Afghan women’s victimhood and its liberal scripts of gendered rescue.

Central to this narrative is the simultaneous appropriation and marginalization of Afghan women’s voices. As Helena Zeweri and Wazhmah Osman remind us, while the valorization of anti-imperial male figures such as Ahmad Shah Massoud, “the Lion of Panjshir Valley,” and tropes like Afghanistan as “the graveyard of empires” reinforce images of a rugged, warrior-like masculinity, women are largely erased from narratives of legitimate political struggle.²⁵⁷ When Afghan women do appear, they are often represented through reductive tropes that reinforce orientalist assumptions. Such portrayals, Zeweri and Osman contend, stand in sharp contrast to the political struggles and movements of groups like RAWA, which articulate a feminist, secular, and democratic vision of Afghanistan’s future.

Yet as the testimonies and images produced by these groups travel to the Global North, they often become vulnerable to appropriation and orientalist translations. In the early 2000s, for example, the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF), an American non-profit organization, drew

²⁵⁵ Baines, *Vulnerable Bodies*; Johnson, “Click to Donate.”

²⁵⁶ Kneebone, “Women Within the Refugee Construct.”

²⁵⁷ Zeweri and Osman, “Afghan Women: Always Resisting Empire – Against the Current.”

extensively on RAWA's documentation of Taliban abuses to mobilize support for U.S. military intervention.²⁵⁸ RAWA's voice was translated into a liberal rescue narrative, stripping the group's message of its anti-imperialist and anti-militarist politics.²⁵⁹ The discursive cooptation amounted to a form of epistemic violence, where the concerns and struggles of Afghan women were made legible primarily through tropes of victimhood.²⁶⁰

The group has since resisted incorporation into such interventionist frames. In public statements, it rejected the premise that war could serve as a vehicle for women's liberation, arguing that emancipation cannot be disentangled from opposition to imperial domination.²⁶¹ To use their words, "Waging war does not lead to the liberation of women anywhere – even if you call soldiers 'peacekeeping forces.'"²⁶² This refusal underscores the profound disconnect between Afghan women's own political visions and the terms through which they were recast within liberal scripts of victimhood. Indeed, Afghan women who articulated political agency beyond such terms complicated the script. Their voices pointed to histories of foreign entanglement, shifting alliances, and development projects entangled with military objectives and imperial ventures. Such interventions threatened to fracture the moral clarity upon which liberal humanitarianism depended, where intervention and rescue required passivity, agency and resistance introduced ambiguity.

It is within this tension that the racialized dichotomies of gendered rescue reasserted itself. Afghan women are repeatedly cast as veiled victims awaiting rescue, while Western women appear as the universal bearers of modernity and emancipation.²⁶³ In Canada, these scripts were woven into official narratives of its military occupation, amplified through political speeches, citizenship guides, and commemorative narratives that positioned the Afghan mission

²⁵⁸ The FMF positions itself within a liberal-progressive tradition, advocating for gender equality, reproductive rights, and broader social justice initiatives through research, public education, and grassroots organizing. While the organization has consistently promoted non-violence in principle, it has endorsed the U.S.-led War in Afghanistan, framing military occupation as necessary to protect and liberate Afghan women from Taliban oppression. See, FMF, "Mission & Principles"; Sheehi, *Islamophobia*.

²⁵⁹ Cooke, "Saving Brown Women"; Zeweri and Osman, "Afghan Women: Always Resisting Empire – Against the Current."

²⁶⁰ Crawley, "Saving Brown Women from Brown Men?"; Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

²⁶¹ Kolhatkar and Rawi, "Why Is a Leading Feminist Organization Lending Its Name to Support Escalation in Afghanistan?"; Zeweri and Osman, "Afghan Women: Always Resisting Empire – Against the Current."

²⁶² Kolhatkar and Rawi, "Why Is a Leading Feminist Organization Lending Its Name to Support Escalation in Afghanistan?"

²⁶³ Crawley, "Saving Brown Women from Brown Men?"; Manchanda, *Imagining Afghanistan*; Zakaria, *Against White Feminism*.

as a defense of women's education and democratic participation.²⁶⁴ Schools built, literacy rates cited, and women's parliamentary representation highlighted²⁶⁵—these became emblematic metrics of success. The visibility of Afghan women's advancement under international presence functioned as a moral ledger against which the costs of war could be weighed. Canada positioned itself within this story in the role of a “stern but righteous father who must protect his family.”²⁶⁶ Gender equality was invoked as both proof of progress and justification for continued engagement. Read alongside Zeweri and Osman's analysis, the paternalistic script of Western intervention is mirrored by a maternalistic one, in which white liberal feminism, cast as a disciplining yet nurturing mother who assumes the authority to name, interpret, and authorize both Afghan women's suffering and emancipation.

These scripts have helped consolidate a dominant interpretative framework through which Afghan women's claims are assessed and evaluated, one that often feminizes and, at times, infantilizes those seeking protection.²⁶⁷ Research in U.S. asylum law shows that these frameworks are structurally embedded in ways that compel advocates to frequently portray countries of origin as “uncivilized” and incapable of safeguarding women, thereby reaffirming the refugee-receiving state as inherently “civilized” and protective.²⁶⁸ Susan Berger describes this process as a “discursive merry-go-round,” that bolsters paternalistic international hierarchies while steering responses toward depoliticized solutions that obscure global inequalities of power.²⁶⁹ Gilberto Rosas similarly notes that asylum seekers must often “rely on experts in asylum and related immigration proceedings to cast their homelands as hopeless, full of despair, and dominated by monstrous and imminent racialized and gendered oppression and violence.”²⁷⁰ As such, women's claims become legible within liberal refugee and asylum systems to the extent

²⁶⁴ Jiwani, “Helpless Maidens and Chivalrous Knights”; McDonald, *Identity Discourses and Canadian Foreign Policy in the War on Terror*; Wegner, “(De)Constructing Foreign Policy Narratives: Canada in Afghanistan.”

²⁶⁵ See, Employment and Social Development Canada, “Canada's New Government Increases It's Commitment to Enhancing Girl's Education in Afghanistan”; Global Affairs Canada, “Ministers Cannon, MacKay and Oda Announce Canada's New Role in Afghanistan”; Kilford, “Canada's Legacy in Afghanistan.”

²⁶⁶ Sjolander, and Trevenen, “Constructing Canadian Foreign Policy: Myths of Good International Citizens, Protectors, and the War in Afghanistan.”

²⁶⁷ Szczepanikova, “Performing Refugeeess in the Czech Republic.”

²⁶⁸ Berger, “Production and Reproduction of Gender and Sexuality in Legal Discourses of Asylum in the United States”; Rosas, “Necro-Subjection.”

²⁶⁹ Berger, “Production and Reproduction of Gender and Sexuality in Legal Discourses of Asylum in the United States.”

²⁷⁰ Rosas, “Necro-Subjection.”

that they conform to familiar racialized tropes of violent masculinity and victimized femininity, simultaneously affirming the authority of receiving states while obscuring the racialized, gendered, and geopolitical conditions that have shaped displacement in the first place.

This durability of these gendered and racialized binaries are underwritten by a politics of deferral that sustains the fantasy that Afghanistan can eventually be “saved,” but only through continued intervention, and only at some indefinite point in the future.²⁷¹ Coupled with the trope of “saving Afghanistan from itself,” this logic, as Nivi Manchanda argues, binds the imagined future redemption of the Other to their simultaneous construction as an enduring threat, working together to justify a form of “imperialism in perpetuity.”²⁷² Not only does this serve to provide an always ready rationale for potential (re)intervention, but it also enables a discursive basis for avoiding accountability:

... this contradiction not only sanctions intervention, but always already offers a way out: if we don’t succeed, it is because they are too different, too retrogressive and too obdurate to be saved... ‘Western’ impunity – a sort of ‘get out of jail free card’...²⁷³

The image of the Afghan woman’s victimhood, and even inadequacy, is figured centrally into this narrative, often rationalizing a persistent pull of colonial paternalism in the name of pursuing a project of liberation:

this strategic mobilisation of an investment in women’s rights is a profoundly Othering move, framing the invasion as a noble one, justified by a need to ‘stand up for the rights of an Afghan woman’ in a place where women cannot stand up for themselves.²⁷⁴

Afghanistan’s alleged difference or intransigence absolves Western actors of responsibility for repeated policy failures, while legitimating ongoing engagement as a moral duty.

The figure of the “Afghan woman” that circulated most readily in Canadian discourse was often abstracted. She appeared as a singular emblem of victimhood rather than as a participant in complex networks of kinship, class, ethnicity, and political alignment. Such abstraction flattened differences between urban professionals, rural activists, and ethnic minorities, among others whose positions within Afghan society were shaped by intersecting hierarchies. The effect was a catch-22 of sorts, as suffering was made visible, but complexity and

²⁷¹ Manchanda, *Imagining Afghanistan*, 47, 168.

²⁷² Manchanda, *Imagining Afghanistan*, 47, 168.

²⁷³ Manchanda, *Imagining Afghanistan*, 168–69.

²⁷⁴ Manchanda, *Imagining Afghanistan*, 168–69.

agency were thinned out. At the same time, Afghan men, and particularly those not legible as allies, were more easily absorbed into ambient forms of suspicion. The oversimplification facilitated selective empathy, yet it disciplined the terms of recognition. Claims that conformed to established scripts of rescue gained traction, but those that questioned the premises of intervention encountered far narrower space.

Despite these constraints, however, the script nevertheless proved politically potent. As will be discussed in later chapters, humanitarian CSOs and diaspora groups were able to invoke it strategically in calls for expanded protection. The language of girls' education and women's rights resonated with bipartisan commitments and international political discourse alike. Its effectiveness lay in its capacity to condense complexity into an intelligible form of moral clarity. A girl denied education; a woman barred from employment; an advocate for gender justice threatened for political expression.

Such figures could be narrated without destabilizing the broader civilizational frame that sustained an image of Canadian benevolence and moral superiority. Their protection affirmed national commitments to gender justice while leaving intact the securitized infrastructure described in earlier chapters. This was a grammar of liberal rescue that did not contest the prevailing refugee and counterterrorism regime, but rather navigated within it to negotiate survival. In this sense, the script functioned as a bridge, one that was less militarized than the moral economy surrounding the ally's deservingness, yet similarly capable of harmonizing advocacy with dominant narratives of national virtue and humanitarian leadership. Its strategic deployment reflected an understanding of the discursive terrain within which claims could travel.

When Kabul fell in 2021, images of women burning diplomas, journalists in hiding, and girls barred from classrooms circulated globally.²⁷⁵ These images reanimated earlier discursive scripts almost instantly. Calls for evacuation and resettlement drew heavily on the established language of gendered repression. The rapid resonance of these appeals cannot be understood apart from the decades of narrative formation that preceded them in which the terrain had already been prepared.

²⁷⁵ *The Guardian*, "An Afghan Woman in Kabul"; Moran, "Girls Are Banned from Afghan Schools. Secret Networks Are Teaching Them Anyway"; Rahi, "Afghanistan"; Serhan, "The Women Burning Their Degree Certificates."

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has traced the discursive field within which Afghan refugeehood became intelligible in Canada. Across Cold War alignments, post-9/11 securitization, the construction of the Afghan “ally,” and a liberal script of gendered rescue, Afghan subjects were rendered legible through a stratified field of deservingness. Obligation adhered most readily where proximity to Canada’s military mission and nation-building agenda could be demonstrated. Suspicion persisted where associations to Muslim identity, insurgency, or state fragility were invoked. These representations became the organizing lexicon facilitating admissions.

By the time Kabul fell in 2021, these scripts were already rooted. Veterans mobilized the language of relational obligation that had already been publicly affirmed. Diaspora groups drew upon the grammar of women’s rights and Canadian humanitarian leadership that had long underpinned the nation’s foreign policy agenda. Yet securitized suspicion continued to dominate, reflecting a durable inheritance across two decades of post-9/11 governance.

This sedimentation matters because crisis does not unfold upon neutral ground. When Afghanistan’s political order collapsed in August 2021, actors across state and civil society did not begin from a blank slate. They operated within a discursive architecture already populated by figures of the loyal ally, the vulnerable woman, the suspect Muslim male, and the fragile state. These categories would shape which claims were amplified, which were deferred, and which were translated into policy action.

The next chapter turns to the making of the 2021 crisis itself. It examines how withdrawal was rationalized, how displacement was regionalized, and how crisis was first deferred and then activated within Canada. In doing so, it sets the stage for the chapters that follow, where the *armonia* effect becomes visible as civil society actors engaged a state already committed, already exposed, and already constrained by the scripts that have been discussed here.

Chapter Five: The Politics of Withdrawal: Sovereignty, Containment, and the Making of the 2021 Afghan Refugee Crisis

While [countries in the region] want us to leave [Afghanistan]... they understand it creates a very big problem for them if we precipitously leave in terms of migration, in terms of the civil war in Afghanistan to their own interests... [this] is why we recommend... a re-invigorated regional diplomacy... that will also help leverage this with the Taliban.

— Kelly Ayotte, Co-Chair of the *Afghanistan Study Group*, February 19, 2021²⁷⁶

We will lead with our diplomacy, our international influence, and our humanitarian aid... to prevent violence and instability... human rights must be the center of our foreign policy, not the periphery. But the way to do it is not through endless military deployments; it's with our diplomacy, our economic tools, and rallying the world to join us...

I was asked to authorize — and I did — 6,000 U.S. troops to deploy to [evacuate] U.S. and Allied civilian personnel... [and] our Afghan allies and vulnerable Afghans to safety... there are concerns about why we did not begin evacuating [sooner]... some of the Afghans did not want to leave earlier — still hopeful for their country. And part of it was because the Afghan government and its supporters discouraged us from organizing a mass exodus to avoid triggering, as they said, “a crisis of confidence.” ... [Evacuations] will be short in time, limited in scope...

And once we have completed this mission, we will conclude our military withdrawal. We will end America's longest war after 20 long years of bloodshed. The events we're seeing now are sadly proof that no amount of military force would ever deliver a stable, united, and secure Afghanistan — as known in history as the “graveyard of empires.” What is happening now could just as easily have happened 5 years ago or 15 years in the future.

— U.S. President Joe Biden, August 16, 2021²⁷⁷

As is always the case, the IMF is guided by the views of the international community. There is currently a lack of clarity within the international community regarding recognition of a government in Afghanistan, as a consequence of which the country cannot access SDRs [special drawing rights] or other IMF resources.

— International Monetary Fund spokesperson, August 2021²⁷⁸

²⁷⁶ The Afghanistan Study Group (ASG) was a congressionally mandated bipartisan panel convened in 2020 by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) to assess U.S. strategy in Afghanistan. The group presented its final report at a congressional hearing composed of a bipartisan group of sitting House Representatives, and a tripartite panel of independent experts that included retired four-star general Joseph F. Dunford Jr., former Republican Senator Kelly Ayotte, and President of USIP Nancy Lindborg. For a transcript of the hearing, see *Pathway for Peace in Afghanistan*.

²⁷⁷ Biden, “Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan.”

²⁷⁸ Putz, “Taliban Takeover.”

In February 2021, as deliberations over Afghanistan's future intensified in Washington, Ayotte's remarks indicate how migration diplomacy had already been folded into discussions of withdrawal. Regional states, she observed, might welcome an American departure yet feared what would follow, namely a crisis of migration, civil war, and instability spilling across borders. The spectre of Afghan displacement surfaced again with a diplomatic and geopolitical variable, a development to be managed through renewed regional engagement with neighbouring states and contemplated as a means of exerting pressure upon the Taliban. Migration, in this rendering, was neither framed as tragedy nor recognized as a basic human right. It was treated as instrument of foreign policy, as bargaining currency, as an externality to be calculated within the wider securitized geography of international politics. Six months later, as Kabul fell and the Taliban stormed the capital, then U.S. President Joe Biden addressed the American public, announcing the deployment of 6,000 troops to secure the airport and evacuate U.S. personnel as well as "Afghan allies and vulnerable Afghans." Yet in explaining why evacuations had not begun earlier, he invoked what he called a "crisis of confidence" to rationalize the delay in evacuations. Some Afghans, he suggested, had not wanted to leave, and the Afghan government was said to have discouraged a mass exodus so as not to signal a loss of state control. The IMF's statement, in turn, translates the ambiguity of recognition into material consequence, conditioning access to financial resources on the unresolved status of Afghan sovereignty.

The crisis unfolding before the world thus appeared as a result of the miscalculations of Afghan leaders and society, rather than of the political or strategic failures of NATO invasion and withdrawal. Indeed, responsibility subtly shifted from the architects of withdrawal to the hesitations of those who would bear its aftermath. By situating the crisis within Afghan disposition rather than Western decision-making, this rhetoric marked a final act in the long narrative of liberal interventionism, in which there was a translation of withdrawal into an expression of prudence, and abandonment into an act of responsibility. Evacuation was framed as finite, time-bound, and selective, seen as an extension of the withdrawal rather than a sustained commitment to addressing growing humanitarian concerns. The vocabulary that had once animated intervention was narrowed and redacted, adjusting to a new foreign policy trajectory that once again subordinated the imperatives of protection and resettlement abroad, albeit through new discursive and institutional registers.

Such state rhetoric surrounding withdrawal helps clarify the discursive terrain upon which the 2021 Afghan refugee crisis was made governable. Years before the collapse of the Afghan state, the prospect of intensified displacement had already been anticipated across the international community, though not primarily as a question of protection, but as a problem of regional security. Its management was gradually absorbed into a vocabulary of state fragility, counterterrorism, and diplomatic leverage, such that Afghan mobility came to be apprehended less as a humanitarian imperative than as a risk to be contained and managed. The crisis of 2021, in this sense, did not simply erupt from a sudden collapse. I argue that it emerged from an accumulation of political decisions and discursive realignments through which Afghan movement was progressively reconfigured and reified as a problem of containment and reputational management. The Doha Agreement, the normalization of negotiations with the Taliban, the rhetoric of fatigue and futility that accompanied the waning legitimacy of liberal interventionism, and the anticipatory governance practices of neighbouring states each contributed to the assembly of a regionalized regime of control around Afghan displacement.

Within this emerging landscape, Afghan mobility became legible through a set of interlocking filters. It was, first, contained regionally, as neighbouring states hardened borders and international actors privileged deterrence over meaningful asylum planning. It was, second, narratively realigned, as the Taliban was recast as a pragmatic interlocutor, the Afghan government as a failed ward, and Afghan society alternately as victimized and culpable. It was, third, narrowed through a recalibrated humanitarianism, in which evacuation and protection became increasingly tethered to proximity to Western institutions, and vulnerability itself was sorted according to institutional legibility and perceived risk. And it was, finally, bounded by legal and securitized limiters—in the form of antiterrorism frameworks, sanctions regimes, and discretionary screening practices—that came to define the practical horizons of admission.

These conditions did not predetermine Canada's response to Afghan displacement, so much as they structured its possibilities. By 2021, Canada had positioned itself internationally as a proponent of multilateral responsibility-sharing, gender-responsive humanitarianism, and innovative forms of private sponsorship. Yet it continued to operate within the same global security order that had long filtered Afghan mobility through the lenses of terrorism, fragility, and risk. The stage was thus set for the politics of resonance and constraint that would come to characterize the *armonia effect*, as civil society actors sought to harmonize moral claims,

institutional precedents, and reputational commitments within a field in which hierarchies of deservingness and logics of securitization remained firmly in place.

The crisis that emerged after NATO's withdrawal was thus anticipated, externalized, and ultimately managed as a question of order concerning who may move, under what conditions, through which channels, and at whose invitation. In tracing the discursive, legal, and institutional developments that preceded and accompanied Kabul's fall in 2021, I clarify in this chapter the structural field within which the subsequent civil society mobilizations examined in Chapters Six and Seven would operate. The armonia effect does not arise in an isolated vacuum. It is contingent upon existing vocabularies of obligation, established pathways of admission, and entrenched legal and institutional structures. The making of this refugee crisis thus constituted the consolidation of a governable space in which inclusions could be negotiated, selectively, unevenly, and under a watchful constraint.

5.1 Anticipated Collapse and the Pre-Emptive Governance of Containment

Long before the Taliban's return to Kabul, the prospect of intensified displacement²⁷⁹ had already been inscribed into diplomatic exchanges, intelligence assessments, and the evolving legal and policy architectures of the region. The collapse of the Afghan state was not yet certain, but its fragility was repeatedly invoked across the international community. In congressional hearings, policy reports, and think-tank briefings, Afghanistan appeared less as a sovereign formation in its own right than as a precarious construct whose continued existence remained contingent upon foreign funding, security assistance, and sustained Western oversight.²⁸⁰ Instability, within this frame, was seen less as an aberration than as an endemic feature of the modern Afghan state, something to be anticipated, measured, and managed.

It followed that the Afghan refugee was not imagined solely as a subject in need of protection, but as a potential conduit through which that instability might travel outward.

²⁷⁹ UNHCR, *Asia & The Pacific Regional Population Trends Analysis - Forced Displacement 2020*; UNHCR, "UN High Commissioner for Refugees Warns of Grave Consequences If World Looks Away from Afghanistan, Reiterates Importance of Finding Solutions to Afghan Displacement"; *Pathway for Peace in Afghanistan*.

²⁸⁰ See, Brenner and Wallin, *Preparing for the Consequences of Withdrawal from Afghanistan*; Iqbal, "Afghan Army to Collapse in Six Months without US Help"; Thomas, *Afghanistan*; Wallin, "The Need to Prepare for the Consequences of Withdrawal from Afghanistan"; *Pathway for Peace in Afghanistan*.

Migration diplomacy thus assumed an increasingly central place in the choreography of withdrawal, as states sought to pre-empt, redirect, or contain the movement of populations before it could acquire political salience at their borders. Rather than as a humanitarian concern in its own right, the spectre of refugee movement became actionable as a form of diplomatic currency within a wider regional security calculus, one through which obligations could be deferred, responsibilities redistributed, and mobility itself rendered governable at a distance

Indeed, beneath the apparent rupture between intervention and withdrawal lies a more enduring yet nuanced continuity in the governance of racialized mobility. As such, Afghan refugees continued to be rendered intelligible through a counterterrorism framework that entangled racialized and civilizational hierarchies with the language of state failure. Only now, the idiom “weak and failing states” that had once provided fodder for intervention had now been recoded in the new legal vocabulary of “state fragility,” institutionalized in measures such as the 2019 U.S. *Global Fragility Act*.²⁸¹ The idiom had changed in form, but not in premise. Afghanistan continued to be cast as a chronically violent and unstable territory from which radical, extremist, and pathologized, transnational threats might emanate. Within this framework, refugees continued to be treated as a vector through which instability could spread from its source.

If fragility functioned as diagnosis, it also did as pretext. The more Afghanistan was described as structurally dependent, corrupt, and undeveloped, the more its citizens appeared as a predictable extension of that condition. This perceived predictability justified and fostered intensifying trends of border securitization predicated on a pre-emptive logic of containment. Years prior to Afghanistan’s collapse, countries in the region, such as Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey,²⁸² already began preparing for the consequences of a NATO withdrawal. Border

²⁸¹ Global Fragility Act, Title 22.

²⁸² Pakistan and Iran have consistently hosted the majority of Afghan refugees, but beyond these states, European countries have constituted the next major destination, with Turkey occupying a pivotal position in this migration geography. As a bridge between Asia and Europe, Turkey has functioned as a key site of EU border externalization, hosting infrastructures of surveillance, deterrence, and containment through readmission agreements, joint patrols, and migration control arrangements linked to trade and aid. Scholars have consequently described Turkey as a “buffer zone,” “gatekeeper,” and partner in “border externalization,” or more critically, as part of the outer frontier of “Fortress Europe.” See, for example, Aras and Mencutek, “The International Migration and Foreign Policy Nexus”; Canefe, “Afghanistan and Its Futures”; Dursun-Özkanca, *Turkey–West Relations*; Kaya, “The World’s Leading Refugee Host, Turkey Has a Complex Migration History”; Muftuler-Bac, “Externalization of Migration Governance, Turkey’s Migration Regime, and the Protection of the European Union’s External Borders”; Walia, *Border and Rule*.

fortifications were reinforced, deportation regimes intensified, and public statements from officials framed potential refugee inflows as destabilizing to national sovereignty and economic security.²⁸³ In Europe, similar priorities prevailed as the European Union (EU) maintained its deportation and readmission arrangements with Kabul such as the “Joint Way Forward” and subsequent “Joint Declaration on Migration Cooperation” frameworks.²⁸⁴ Even as the Taliban made territorial gains, and critics warned that such arrangements—in light of the deteriorating conditions—risked exposing returnees to “inhuman or degrading treatment,” the EU nevertheless continued to prioritize repatriation and deterrence.²⁸⁵ Targeted and heightened practices to anticipate and contain Afghan displacement thus preceded state collapse.

This pre-emptive logic was also sustained by a particular temporality. With the withdrawal framed as imminent and decisive in foreign policy terms, displacement was rhetorically situated as more of its aftershock. Military timelines were precise and concrete, yet humanitarian contingencies remained abstract. The impending possibility of mass exodus was acknowledged in hearings and diplomatic consultations yet was rarely translated into binding commitments or expanded pathways prior to state collapse. A crisis was foreseen but not foregrounded in policies or widely acknowledged. When Kabul fell in August 2021, the speed of the Taliban’s advance surprised many observers, but its imminence did not, nor did its influence on displacement. What proved more destabilizing was the nature and visibility of movement, consisting of crowds at the airport, desperate attempts to board departing aircraft, images that condensed years of anticipatory discourse into a single spectacle that would briefly capture international attention before the next crisis pulled it elsewhere.

Yet, within those brief weeks or months under the global spotlight, the pre-emptive logic of containment revealed its limits. Regional border fortifications could reduce but not prevent refugee outflows. Diplomatic leverage could not substitute for concrete protections. Remote governance could not insulate Western states from the moral and political repercussions of withdrawal after two decades of occupation. The distinction between counterterrorism strategy and migration governance would finally collapse, however briefly and partially, as evacuation, containment, and diplomatic posturing converged on the tarmac. The infrastructure that had been

²⁸³ Dambach, “Afghanistan’s Neighbors Worried about Potential Refugee Crisis”; Jain, “Afghanistan’s Neighbours Fear Refugee Crisis If U.S. Pulls Out.”

²⁸⁴ ECRE, *The JDMC: Deporting People to the World’s Least Peaceful Country*.

²⁸⁵ Ashraf, “Afghanistan.”

assembled would shape how the ensuing crisis was interpreted and managed, and movement would be filtered through eligibility categories, security screenings, and discretionary pathways. Yet the opportunity to negotiate more expansive inclusions was opened. The governable crisis had arrived and the armonia could resonate to a wider audience.

It is within this architecture of anticipated collapse and pre-emptive containment that subsequent advocacy must be situated. By the time civil society actors in Canada mobilized in response to the unfolding catastrophe, they did so within a field already structured by securitized migration diplomacy and reputational constraint. The Afghan refugee was not entering an empty policy space. They were entering a regime primed to regulate, differentiate, and contain. The openings that emerged in 2021 and beyond would thus depend not only on moral urgency, but on the capacity to navigate—and at times harmonize with—the pre-existing logics that had rendered Afghan mobility a problem to be managed long before it became a spectacle to be witnessed.

5.2 Narrative Realignment and the Reassignment of Sovereignty

Before its fall, Afghanistan had already been facing difficulties due to successive droughts, earthquakes, and an ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.²⁸⁶ Issues of poverty, healthcare, food insecurity, and inflation would only increase following the Taliban's swift capture of Kabul and the United States' subsequent decision to freeze Afghanistan's central bank reserves.²⁸⁷ The crisis that would befall the nation was quickly narrated in presidential speeches as confirmation of Afghan incapacity.²⁸⁸ Afghanistan political leaders were said to have given up and fled.²⁸⁹ Soldiers, it was suggested, had proven unwilling to defend their own country.²⁹⁰ Sovereignty, in this rendering, was recast as a matter of moral will and national responsibility of the Afghan people,²⁹¹ and its collapse appeared as a kind of "sad proof" that no measure of external assistance could compensate for the supposed internal deficiencies of a society long imagined as

²⁸⁶ Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2022: Events of 2021*; UNHCR, "Afghanistan Situation: Global Report 2021."

²⁸⁷ Mohsin, "US Freezes Afghan Central Bank's Assets of \$9.5bn."

²⁸⁸ Biden, "Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan."

²⁸⁹ Biden, "Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan."

²⁹⁰ Biden, "Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan."

²⁹¹ Biden, "Remarks on United States Military Operations in Afghanistan."

the “graveyard of empires.”²⁹² Failure, in other words, was narrated as endogenous. What receded from view was the extent to which withdrawal itself, and the terms under which it had been negotiated had helped to structure the crisis that followed. The political consequences of departure were displaced onto Afghan society, while the strategic decisions of NATO states were redescribed as prudence, realism, or the unfolding of historical inevitability

Yet even as sovereignty was rhetorically returned to the Afghan people, it was materially withheld. The Taliban—a group widely unpopular among Afghans²⁹³—assumed effective territorial control. Moreover, that authority did not translate into international recognition as the lawful government of Afghanistan. Instead, non-recognition was sedimented across financial and diplomatic infrastructures. In the name of maintaining principled distance from a designated terrorist entity, the economic arteries of the Afghan state were constricted at precisely the moment when institutional survival depended most acutely on liquidity. Civil servants went unpaid; hospitals struggled to procure basic supplies; teachers returned to classrooms without salaries; and humanitarian agencies encountered banking barriers that delayed or blocked the transfer of funds.²⁹⁴ An already fragile economy became increasingly immobilized, and the distinction between sanctioning a regime and deepening the vulnerability of a population grew progressively more difficult to sustain

The politics of sovereignty, I argue, thus operated in two registers. It legitimated direct engagement with the Taliban sufficiently to secure withdrawal and delegate counterterrorism responsibilities. At the same time, it sustained the group’s terrorist designation and denied it formal recognition, activating a legal and financial apparatus that foreclosed the flow of state resources and constrained humanitarian mitigation. Exit was made possible through conditional engagement; protection was limited through conditional recognition. The crisis that unfolded was more than the residue of military departure. It was structured by the very framework that had rendered that departure intelligible.

²⁹² Biden, “Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan.”

²⁹³ Public opinion data prior to the Taliban’s return to power complicate any suggestion that the movement embodied the will of the Afghan people. Surveys conducted in 2019 indicated that roughly 85 percent of respondents expressed no sympathy for the Taliban, a figure that increased as the group expanded its territorial control. To construe the Taliban as a straightforward nationalist expression of popular grievance therefore misrepresents the heterogeneity of Afghan political opinion and obscures the absence of broad-based democratic consent underpinning its rise. Ibrahim and Farasoo, “Understanding Shifts in US Policies towards the Taliban,” 833.

²⁹⁴ Boghani, “How Frozen Assets & Foreign Aid Is Impacting Afghanistan”; CBA, “Facilitate Humanitarian Aid in Afghanistan”; Johansson and Schaar, *Collateral Damage*.

This post-crisis landscape of refugee governance was rooted in a politics of sovereignty that required a rearticulation of Afghan authority prior to withdrawal. For two decades, Afghanistan had been narrated as a theatre of counterterrorism and reform, its future tied to the language of liberation, security, and reconstruction. To facilitate an exit without conceding the failure of these objectives demanded a new story. Sovereignty, which had been invoked to justify support of an indigenous anti-Soviet resistance, and then intervention on behalf of a fragile state and oppressed society, was now invoked to justify withdrawal. Biden's "conviction that only Afghans" were responsible "to lead their country" and "determine their own future" signalled not the restoration of autonomous agency, but the redistribution of responsibility.²⁹⁵ Yet this appeal to self-determination obscured the extent to which the Doha Agreement, negotiated without the Afghan government and against the backdrop of decades of U.S. patronage to armed Islamist actors, effectively transferred decisive leverage to the Taliban rather than to the Afghan public in whose name sovereignty was rhetorically returned. Authority was thus rhetorically returned even as material dependency and political asymmetries had been structurally entrenched.

The Doha negotiations crystallized this shift. The internationally recognized Afghan government, long held as the juridical embodiment of Afghan sovereignty, was sidelined in talks concerning its own political future. Direct negotiations between the U.S. and the Taliban conferred upon the latter a practical authority that exceeded its formal status.²⁹⁶ Recognition was withheld in diplomatic language yet conferred in operational terms. The lengthy title of the resulting peace agreement captures this paradox: *Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America*.²⁹⁷ In effect, the Taliban was treated as the actor whose consent mattered, whose compliance determined timelines, and whose assurances guaranteed the safe withdrawal of foreign forces. Sovereignty migrated from the state that held international credentials to the movement that controlled territory and possessed coercive capacity.

This dual posture rested upon a recalibration of the category of terrorism itself. For years, the Taliban had occupied the position of the irredeemable adversary, an irrational embodiment of

²⁹⁵ Biden, "Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan."

²⁹⁶ Ibrahimi, "False Negotiations and the Fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban"; Ibrahimi and Farasoo, "Understanding Shifts in US Policies towards the Taliban."

²⁹⁷ "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan."

extremism resistant to negotiation. As exit became imperative in the late 2000s, this representation proved inconvenient. The Taliban's violence was recast in "insurgent" rather than purely "terrorist" terms. As Niamatullah Ibrahimi and Abbas Farasoo explain,

While terrorists were assumed as irrational actors driven by hatred and ideology, as insurgents the Taliban were assumed to be motivated by real, and potentially valid and negotiable, grievances, and rational objectives.²⁹⁸

Drawing on this logic, Ibrahimi and Farasoo explain how U.S. military planners sought to make the Taliban "legible" by adapting lessons from twentieth-century anti-colonial insurgencies. Under the direction of David Barno, then-commander of coalition forces, this new framing was reinforced through the involvement of military historians such as Douglas Porch, who were invited to brief U.S. forces in Bagram. The comparison drawn between the Taliban and anti-colonial insurgencies was intended to situate the Taliban within a familiar framework of rebellion and negotiation.

The new label of "insurgent" did not result in the full disappearance of a "terrorist" association, however. There was still a utility to be gained through the terrorist designation, even if it was undesirable to apply it to its fullest extent. This tension was managed through a bifurcated U.S. legal framework that treated the Taliban's status less as a fixed juridical category than as a flexible instrument of foreign policy. By refraining from designating the Taliban as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO),²⁹⁹ Washington preserved the legal flexibility necessary to engage in diplomacy and negotiation. At the same time, the group's designation as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT),³⁰⁰ sustained "terrorist" status in ways that enabled asset freezes and other financial sanctions. When the Taliban assumed *de facto* control of the Afghan state in August 2021, these sanctions were extended beyond the Taliban itself and applied to Afghanistan as whole. International financial institutions, wary of sanctions violations, severed liquidity flows into Afghanistan, contributing to what some observers described as a "chilling effect" across humanitarian and commercial transactions.³⁰¹ Legal ambiguity surrounding

²⁹⁸ Ibrahimi and Farasoo, "Understanding Shifts in US Policies towards the Taliban," 832.

²⁹⁹ See, Bureau of Counterterrorism, "Foreign Terrorist Organizations."

³⁰⁰ See, Bureau of Counterterrorism, "Executive Order 13224."

³⁰¹ This "chilling effect" reflects a tendency among financial institutions to over-comply with international sanctions by avoiding transactions with designated countries altogether. As Johansson and Schaar note, even where targeted sanctions formally include humanitarian exemptions, banks often refuse to process lawful transfers, such as payments for food, medicine, or health-care workers' salaries, due to heightened legal and reputational risk. In

Afghan sovereignty and state recognition thus became a tool through which diplomatic leverage was maintained even if it was to the detriment of the humanitarian conditions on the ground.

The contradictions enabled a remarkable inversion as the same group once cast as harbouring transnational terrorists was repositioned as a potential bulwark against them.³⁰² This reformulation harkened back to the Cold War strategies reflected in the Reagan-era mantra of “any enemy of our enemy is our friend.”³⁰³ Yet it was also accompanied by a tone of unshakeable suspicion and conditional trust. Counterterrorism, the foundational justification for the occupation, was now delegated to the Taliban itself. Public assurances that the group would prevent extremist threats from emanating from Afghan soil marked a transfer of security responsibility.

Thus, the politics of sovereignty that enabled withdrawal also structured abandonment and deepened humanitarian crisis. The Taliban was rationalized sufficiently to inherit security duties yet deemed illegitimate enough to justify financial isolation. The Afghan government was bypassed in negotiations and later depicted as morally deficient in collapse. Ordinary Afghans were left to navigate the material consequences of a recognition regime that oscillated between engagement and exclusion. Exit was rendered intelligible through flexible terrorism categories and conditional diplomacy. Protection was constrained through the same instruments.

This architecture would reverberate beyond Afghanistan’s borders. As the next chapter discusses in more detail, states that declined to recognize the Taliban as Afghanistan’s government translated that posture into domestic legal regimes governing aid, mobility, and criminality. Antiterrorism law, financial compliance, and refugee admission were inextricably tied with the question of state recognition. Civil society actors seeking to deliver assistance or facilitate rescue missions would soon encounter the practical implications of this sovereign design, as humanitarian interventions were themselves recast as an activity requiring state authorization within a sanctions-based environment. In this way, the withholding of Taliban recognition abroad would find its counterpart in intensified gatekeeping at home, reshaping the terrain upon which protection could be claimed, administered, or denied.

Afghanistan, this has contributed to an economic crisis that disproportionately harms civilians and constrains humanitarian operations. See,

³⁰² Trump, “The President’s News Conference.”

³⁰³ See, Coll, *Ghost Wars*; Fergusson and Hughes, “Graveyard of Empires.”

Withdrawal, then, cannot be understood solely as the end of a war. It marked the consolidation of a new politics of sovereignty that would plague Afghanistan and its peoples in the years to follow, one in which legitimacy, finance, and mobility were tightly interwoven. The humanitarian catastrophe in its wake was not incidental to this politics; it unfolded and intensified through it.

5.3 Reputational Commitments and the Legal Architecture of Constraint

If evacuation marked the narrowing of intervention into logistics, reputational commitment marked the widening of expectation. By 2021, Canada was not merely another Western state disengaging from Afghanistan. It had, in the preceding years, fashioned itself as an architect of multilateral migration governance, a champion of responsibility-sharing, a proponent of gender-responsive protection, and a custodian of private sponsorship as a model for the world. These claims did not dissipate with Kabul's fall. They lingered, sedimented in speeches, policy documents, and diplomatic initiatives. When crisis arrived, it encountered a state already publicly invested in the language of solidarity.

The Global Compacts on Refugees and on Migration, endorsed in 2018 with considerable Canadian enthusiasm, functioned as more than symbolic instruments. They constituted a vocabulary through which obligation could be articulated. Responsibility-sharing, complementary pathways, gender equality, whole-of-society approaches—these were not abstract principles, but discursive commitments repeatedly invoked by Canadian officials in international fora.³⁰⁴ Although non-binding in law, they carried reputational weight. To retreat entirely into the grammar of security would have required a visible departure from a narrative Canada had itself helped to author.

Yet the Compacts were always double-edged from its inception. They affirmed protection while preserving sovereignty. They encouraged solidarity while reaffirming that admission remained a matter of state discretion. In this tension lay the structural limits that would later confront Canadian CSOs. Canada's self-image as a humanitarian leader did not dissolve its reliance on a host of other instruments to tightly circumscribe who would enter, who would

³⁰⁴ Atak et al., "Canada's Implementation of the UN Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees."

leave, and to what extent and to what degree.³⁰⁵ As discussed in prior chapters, people on the move have routinely been met with securitized borders, detention centres, and pushbacks, even as their rights are formally upheld through international law. These conditions, which have contributed to thousands of deaths during perilous border crossings,³⁰⁶ illustrates all too well the ongoing limitations of existing legal frameworks in guaranteeing protections.

This duality is especially salient in the Afghan case. Public commitments to resettle tens of thousands were articulated in the familiar languages of international responsibility, humanitarian leadership, and gender equity.³⁰⁷ Yet these declarations were accompanied, almost in the same breath, by repeated invocations of constraint: officials underscored the difficulties of operating within territory controlled by a listed terrorist organization,³⁰⁸ where the provision of humanitarian assistance risked exposure to criminal liability, where partnerships required legislative exemptions that would only materialize much later, and where security screening remained both pervasive and exacting.³⁰⁹ Protection was thus pledged, but it was to be delivered within a field already circumscribed by legal restraint, administrative fragmentation, and the persistent reach of sovereign discretion. Crisis, in this configuration, did not suspend sovereignty so much as nuance and expand its expression.

The result was a layered field of governance. On one plane, Canada's global reputation and its prior multilateral commitments generated pressure to act, while furnishing advocates with a repertoire of claims through which demands could be rendered morally and politically compelling. On another, domestic law, sanctions regimes, and bureaucratic procedure worked to delimit the speed, scale, and flexibility of any response. Between them lay a space of negotiation and contestation within which the armonia effect begins to come into view: not as a moment of unbounded humanitarian inclusion, but as a politics of selective resonance, unfolding within an already structured field of commitment and constraint. Canada could not easily withdraw into

³⁰⁵ Abu-Laban et al., *Containing Diversity*; George, "Immigration and Refugee Policy in Canada"; Kelley and Trebilcock, *The Making of the Mosaic*.

³⁰⁶ Walia, *Border and Rule*; Canefe, "Drowning by Numbers"; Azadah, "The Necropolitics of Canada's Afghan Resettlement Programmes."

³⁰⁷ IRCC, "Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada Departmental Plan 2023-2024."

³⁰⁸ AFGH, "Minister of International Development and Minister Responsible for the Pacific Economic Development Agency of Canada Appearance before the Special Committee on Afghanistan (AFGH) on Humanitarian Aid."

³⁰⁹ CBA, "Afghanistan and Canada's Anti-Terrorism Financing Legislation"; Dickson, "Two Years after Taliban Takeover, Many Afghans Are Languishing in Limbo as They Await Canada's Help"; Bill C-41.

silence without contradicting its prior international posture. Nor could it respond without navigating the statutory and administrative limits that had long governed refugee admission.

5.4 Conclusion

The fall of Kabul may have appeared as abrupt, but the conditions that rendered it catastrophic were steadily assembled. The Doha Agreement formalized a transfer of practical authority long incubated in diplomatic corridors, while the rhetoric of fatigue and futility attempted to prime Western publics to accept withdrawal as prudence rather than abandonment. Sovereignty, in this context, was invoked as right and responsibility of Afghan people themselves, yet in practice it functioned as a language through which those orchestrating departure could disavow responsibility for what departure would entail. At the same time, the contradiction between *de facto* control and *de jure* recognition helped sever the fiscal and institutional lifelines upon which Afghanistan's already fragile order depended.

In this chapter, I have traced how anticipated collapse, narrative realignment, and reputational commitment converged in the period immediately preceding the crisis of 2021 to produce a field of refugee governance that was at once layered and contradictory. Displacement was foreseen, yet it was framed above all as a regional security problem and an object of migration diplomacy rather than as a protection imperative in its own right. The Taliban was refigured from irredeemable terrorist adversary to negotiable insurgent and then, more paradoxically still, to both security guarantor and sanctionable authority. Financial infrastructures, legal categories, and diplomatic narratives operated at the same time and upon one another, making exit imaginable in certain respects even as they constrained relief, mobility, and institutional survival in others. The humanitarian catastrophe that followed did not unfold despite these arrangements. It unfolded through them.

Canada entered this moment bearing its own recently assumed commitments and responsibilities. Its endorsement of multilateral responsibility-sharing, gender-responsive protection, and humanitarian leadership furnished advocates with a potent language through which obligation could be forcefully articulated. Yet those commitments coexisted with existing counterterrorism statutes, sanctions regimes, and discretionary powers over admission that could

temper the scope of its subsequent response. The result of these recent developments was a layered and contradictory landscape of governance in which inclusions could be announced in expansive terms yet administered selectively.

It is on this terrain that subsequent mobilizations unfolded. The armonia effect did not arise in response to a vacuum, but within an already structured field of possibility and constraint. Civil society actors would seek to harmonize moral urgency with institutional precedent, reputational commitment with statutory limitation, and claims to protection with the demands of administrative legibility. The next chapter turns to the first major site in which this harmonization becomes especially visible: veteran-led mobilization. There, actors situated within Canada's militarized moral economy translated relational obligation into policy traction within a state already discursively committed and structurally constrained. Chapter Six, in this sense, does not depart from the present analysis so much as carry it forward, showing what becomes possible when the crisis traced here is taken up by actors able to make some of its claims resonate.

Chapter Six: Veterans-based Advocacy: Civil Society Keywork and Non-Sortie

The people who had the most courage and stood up to the Taliban are the ones who are now in most danger ... We were in Kandahar telling the Afghans to trust us, and they shouldn't have.

— Tim Laidler, CAF veteran and co-founder of Veterans Transition Network, September 3, 2021³¹⁰

Why did you turn these people away? ... No one has an answer for you ... How would you know Canada is the champion of human rights?

— Unnamed former Afghan interpreter for CAF, August 28, 2021³¹¹

If we ever get another option to get my interpreter and his family out, how do I convince him to listen to our advice after what he's been through ... I'm so embarrassed to be a Canadian.

— Siobhan Calnan, CAF veteran, August 25, 2021³¹²

CAF veterans became some of the most visible, vocal, and operationally engaged advocates for Afghan refugees. In Parliament, in media interviews, across social media, and through independently coordinated rescue operations, they publicly demanded that Canada act with urgency, criticizing the delays in policymaking and implementation, stringent eligibility requirements, and inaccessible application processes. Unsatisfied with government (in)action, veteran-led and veteran-affiliated CSOs, such as Aman Lara and VTN, mobilized capacities and resources³¹³ that exceeded those typically available to the humanitarian groups more commonly involved in refugee politics and, in specific moments, appeared to operate parallel to or in tension with the state itself.

This was an unprecedented development. Veterans rarely occupy central roles in refugee governance, nor do they typically serve as catalysts for expanding humanitarian protections. At the same time, however, their efforts were not directed toward all Afghan nationals but toward a

³¹⁰ Blackwell, "How Ottawa Failed Afghans Who Risked Their Lives for Canada."

³¹¹ Hoekstra, "Canada Needs to Step up Its Efforts to Get Interpreters and Families out of Afghanistan."

³¹² Blackwell, "Canada's Evacuation Flights from Kabul Could End in Hours, Stranding 1000s of Ex-Employees, Advocates Say."

³¹³ Aman Lara, "OPERATIONS"; Semple, *Lack of Support for Afghan Refugees Frustrating Canadian Veterans*; VTN, *Canadian Dave's Rescues*.

narrowly defined subgroup—those who had worked directly with Canada during its mission in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2014. That mission generated a substantial constituency of Canadians with direct or indirect experience of Afghanistan, as more than 40,000 CAF members served in Afghanistan and supporting locations between October 2001 and March 2014, making it Canada’s largest deployment of CAF personnel since the Second World War.³¹⁴ In Kandahar, where many of the most politically resonant claims around interpreters and LES later centred, the Canadian battle group included nearly 3,000 personnel at its peak.³¹⁵

Veterans’ emergence as influential actors thus presents a compelling case for research. I argue that their emergence and engagement was neither accidental nor simply the product of an organic humanitarian awakening prompted by crisis. It reflected the political and institutional afterlives of Canada’s war in Afghanistan, and the particular forms of obligation generated through it. Many CSOs framed the threat facing Afghan partners as a question of responsibility, that these were people on whom Canadian forces had depended, often for their own survival, and whose exposure to violence was inseparable from Canada’s military presence. In this framing, failure to evacuate Afghan interpreters and other locally engaged staff was more than a humanitarian failure, but a breach of trust that risked undermining Canada’s credibility, both internationally and within its own military community.

This mode of normative claim-making proved effective in part because it drew on institutionally familiar and politically resonant narratives about service, loyalty, and reciprocity. At the same time, it operated through a narrow grammar of refugee deservingness. Protection was articulated less in universal rights-based terms than through proximity to Canadian military objectives and wartime relationships. The result was a stratified field of obligation in which some lives became urgently legible to the Canadian state, while others remained peripheral.

This chapter examines veterans-based advocacy as a form of influential yet bounded intermediation. Its interventions mattered not because they stood outside state power, but because they operated in unusually close proximity to it—drawing on a distinctive combination of symbolic authority, institutional familiarity, and moral claims forged through Canada’s war in Afghanistan and the remilitarized national narratives that accompanied it. Veterans’ advocacy generated political pressure, sustained media scrutiny, and concrete policy commitments. Yet

³¹⁴ Department of National Defence, “The Canadian Armed Forces Legacy in Afghanistan.”

³¹⁵ Department of National Defence, “The Canadian Armed Forces Legacy in Afghanistan.”

these gains remained uneven and fragile. Formal recognition did not reliably translate into timely mobility or protection, and it was precisely this persistent gap between authorization and movement that produced some of the sharpest tensions between veterans and the state.

To make sense of the emergence of veterans as advocates, their political traction, and their eventual frictions with state authority, I advance three related arguments. First, veterans mobilized a militarized moral economy that framed Afghan “allies” as uniquely deserving of protection, thereby helping open selective refugee pathways for individuals whose vulnerability could be narrated through Canada’s wartime relationships and foreign policy commitments. Second, the 2021 evacuation reveals a distinct mode of crisis governance in which obligations to Afghan allies were formally affirmed yet repeatedly inhibited in practice, producing a persistent gap between recognition and exit. I conceptualize this condition as *non-sortie*: a form of mobility control exercised by destination states at or near the point of origin through discretionary and securitized practices that render departure formally authorized yet practically unattainable. Third, when veterans-led organizations moved beyond advocacy and assumed direct operational roles to address gaps in state-led responses—a practice I call *civil society keywork*, meaning a field of coordinated interventions in which non-state organizations and networks mobilize their own resources and capacities to address urgent protection, evacuation, and resettlement needs on the ground—the state moved to reassert its authority through legal and procedural containment, most notably via strict interpretations of antiterrorism law that exposed core elements of such work to criminal liability.

The chapter proceeds as a discussion of four interconnected themes: the translation of advocacy into policy pathways; the governance of evacuation through non-sortie; the emergence of civil society keywork and the state’s responses to it; and the question of sovereignty that operates through this governance landscape. The conclusion reflects on what this case suggests about the possibilities and limits of veterans-based mobilization.

6.1 Translating Obligation into Policy

The militarized moral economy outlined above was first translated into formal refugee policy through Canada’s initial *Special Immigration Measures* (SIM) program for Afghan

interpreters, implemented between 2009 and 2012, and then later reopened in July of 2021. I argue that while the SIMs represented significant moral and political concessions—acknowledging obligation toward Canada’s allies—they also exposed the institutional limits of service-based deservingness once routed through a securitized immigration apparatus. Crucially, veterans’ advocacy helped transform Afghan resettlement from a marginal policy issue into one that carried political costs for inaction, producing program expansion and repeated interventions even as underlying logics of restriction and control persisted.

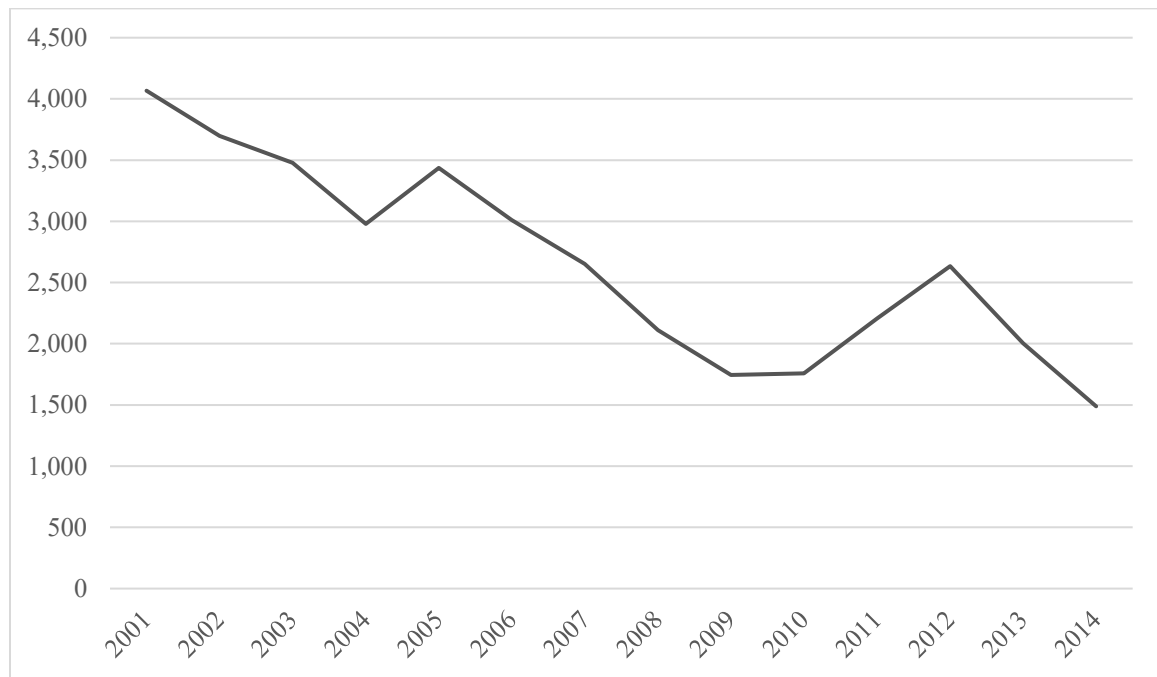


Figure 9. Immigration intake to Canada from Afghanistan, 2001-2014.³¹⁶

When the program was first opened in 2009, it codified proximity and loyalty as eligibility criteria by privileging Afghan nationals who could demonstrate sustained employment in support of CAF operations, verified through continuity of service, documentary proof, and, in some cases, letters of endorsement from CAF personnel.³¹⁷ Family reunification pathways were constrained, and many individuals who had supported the mission intermittently, earlier in the

³¹⁶ Adapted from IRCC data IRCC, “Admissions of Permanent Residents by Country of Citizenship”; IRCC, “Permanent Residents by Country of Citizenship.”

³¹⁷ IRCC, “Government of Canada Creates Special Immigration Measures to Recognize Contribution of Afghan Staff in Kandahar”; IRCC, “Backgrounder - Frequently Asked Questions”; Levitz, “Afghan Interpreters Turned Away Now Get Second Chance to Come to Canada.”

conflict, or in less visible roles were excluded.³¹⁸ Claims were assessed through a securitized lens, with applicants refused for failing to demonstrate sufficiently elevated risk or for allegedly “exacerb[at]ing the risks they claim to face by going to the press with their stories,” as stated in a September 2011 government briefing note.³¹⁹ In essence, the program functioned as a narrowly bounded exemption within an otherwise regressive neoconservative refugee and immigration regime. That the SIM emerged when overall Afghan immigration had fallen to its lowest point during Canada’s wartime period (see Figure 9) further underscores the exclusionary selectivity of these Harper-era measures.

Fault lines soon emerged, especially when the program first closed. While government officials maintained that “all eligible applicants... have had ampl[e] opportunity to submit an application,”³²⁰ advocates countered that hundreds of Afghan partners remained unprotected and at serious risk.³²¹ Notably, even actors without formal military affiliations adopted militarized discourses in their critiques, suggesting that such logics had permeated beyond the defence sector and into parts of wider civil society. One Toronto immigration lawyer, for example, denounced the program as “a disgrace and an embarrassment to Canada... bring[ing] our immigration and refugee program to an all-time low,” arguing that the country had “lure[d] desperate Afghans into service and sacrifice and then ‘thank[ed]’ them by refusing their claims for protection.”³²² Yet these objections focused primarily on policy implementation, scope, and timing, rather than on the foundational distinction between deserving allies and residual others. Even the critiques from non-military actors largely reproduced the same militarized moral grammar, condemning the state for abandoning its partners without questioning why protection was so narrowly tethered to service-based affiliation.

Efforts to extend or revisit the SIM encountered consistent resistance from senior officials across both the Harper-Conservative and Trudeau Liberal governments, further highlighting the limits of this militarized moral grammar once articulated through refugee policymaking channels. While individual Members of Parliament (MP) periodically expressed

³¹⁸ CBC, “Canada Rejects Majority of Afghan Interpreters’ Refugee Claims”; Gurney, “Some Good, If Belated, News for Canada’s Afghan Allies.”

³¹⁹ CBC, “More Afghan Interpreters Settle in Canada.”

³²⁰ CBC, “More Afghan Interpreters Settle in Canada.”

³²¹ Blackwell, “How Ottawa Failed Afghans Who Risked Their Lives for Canada”; CBC, “Canada Rejects Majority of Afghan Interpreters’ Refugee Claims”; Red T, “Open Letter: Protective Asylum for Endangered Afghan Host Nation Linguists”; Red T, “Re: A Pathway to Protection.”

³²² CBC, “Canada Rejects Majority of Afghan Interpreters’ Refugee Claims.”

support for renewed measures, such interventions were routinely contained. When one MP circulated an open letter in early 2019 calling for renewed attention to the issue, he was reportedly reprimanded by the Immigration Minister for “openly lobbying his own government.”³²³ Even as the Liberal government rhetorically distanced itself from earlier neoconservative rhetoric,³²⁴ such instances illustrate that Afghan resettlement continued to be treated as a politically sensitive liability rather than as a site for inclusive or expansive humanitarian action.

These unresolved tensions and faultlines deepened under conditions of renewed crisis beginning in at least May 2021, as NATO’s withdrawal coincided with a renewed and increasingly coordinated Taliban offensive. A wide range of advocates repeatedly emphasized the escalating risks facing Afghan partners.³²⁵ Yet despite their sustained and intensifying pressure, federal government action remained intermittent and incremental.

It was not until July 23, 2021—approximately two months after the Taliban initiated their full-scale offensive—that Canada announced a new immigration program for Afghan allies.³²⁶ Formal approval for evacuations under *Operation Aegis* followed a week later, on July 30.³²⁷ By this point, however, the Taliban had seized control of approximately half of Afghanistan’s 419 districts,³²⁸ and the conflict had already generated the internal displacement of nearly 300,000 people.³²⁹

Compounding this delay, the newly announced SIMs were widely criticized by veterans and other advocates as “cumbersome” and “bureaucratic,” inhibited by a “red-tape filled process that is very slow,” and marked by “extreme centralized political micro-management.”³³⁰ Critics increasingly argued that the federal government had “botched the process for months,” pointing

³²³ Blackwell, “How Ottawa Failed Afghans Who Risked Their Lives for Canada.”

³²⁴ Winter and Carlaw, “Mending or Patching Over Inequality? The Substance of Multiculturalism under Canada’s Liberal Government Since 2015.”

³²⁵ CCAP, “Canadian Campaign for Afghan Peace”; Blackwell, “‘Catastrophe’ in Afghanistan”; National Post View, “Canada’s Afghanistan Humiliation”; *Special Committee on Afghanistan - Evidence 003*, 3; Corbella, “Danger Zone; Afghan Interpreters and Workers Helped Keep Us Safe, Now It’s Our Turn”; Laurie, “Not Giving up on Our Allies; But Afghans Face ‘horrific’ Odds”; The Canadian Heroes Foundation, “Afghanistan Is Falling.”

³²⁶ IRCC, “Government of Canada Offers Refuge to Afghans Who Assisted Canada.”

³²⁷ Department of National Defence, “Operation AEGIS.”

³²⁸ Al Jazeera, “Taliban Seek to Cut off Afghan Population Centres.”

³²⁹ UNHCR OCHA, *UNHCR Regional Bureau for Asia and Pacific (RBAP) Bi-Weekly External Sitrep*.

³³⁰ Corbella, *It’s Our Turn to Help Afghan Interpreters and Workers Who Risked All for Us*; Corbella, “Danger Zone; Afghan Interpreters and Workers Helped Keep Us Safe, Now It’s Our Turn”; Fife, “Canadian Veterans Group Gives up Afghan Rescue Efforts, Citing Burnout and Ottawa’s Bureaucratic Roadblocks”; Gollom, “Why Canada Failed to Rescue ‘a Hell of a Lot More’ Afghans, According to Former Generals.”

to “unrealistic and confusing application requirements and complete silence from the department after paperwork ha[d] been submitted.”³³¹

As conventional lobbying yielded limited success, advocacy strategies began to shift. Veterans-led CSOs and allied actors turned more deliberately toward public and media-facing interventions, organizing protests on Parliament Hill and issuing statements through major Canadian newspapers and media broadcasting outlets.³³² This public-facing advocacy amplified pressure on Ottawa and forced the issue into national headlines.

Importantly, the influence of these interventions travelled back into formal state institutions—e.g., through parliamentary committees³³³ and senate debates—carrying with them new forms of evidentiary and moral authority.³³⁴ A particularly illustrative example emerged during a February 2022 Senate debate, when Senator Salma Ataullahjan explicitly linked government inaction to warnings raised by veterans’ groups well before the fall of Kabul. Drawing directly on reporting by *The Fifth Estate*, a CBC documentary program, Ataullahjan argued that senior officials were aware of the risks facing Canada’s allies but failed to act decisively:

... an investigation by “The Fifth Estate” revealed that [IRCC] was aware of the urgency needed to take decisive action and bring our interpreters to safety in Canada... As early as February 2020... [he] was contacted by Liberal MP Marcus Powlowski... [who] had pushed to rescue Afghan interpreters weeks before Kabul fell, citing credible evidence of an imminent Taliban attack... and concerns brought to him by an Aman Lara co-founder. While strict paperwork rules and deadlines imposed by... IRCC, led to hundreds of desperate evacuees exposing themselves to Taliban collaborators by rushing to local internet cafés to complete the application, Jeff Valois, who was at the time an advisor to the Prime Minister, allegedly ordered Powlowski to stay in his lane and to let professionals in the ministries handle it... in light of the growing number of blunders committed by our

³³¹ Corbella, “Danger Zone; Afghan Interpreters and Workers Helped Keep Us Safe, Now It’s Our Turn”; Gollom, “Why Canada Failed to Rescue ‘a Hell of a Lot More’ Afghans, According to Former Generals.”

³³² Blanchfield, “Kabul Safe Houses Need \$5 Million by Friday to Stay Open, Say Veterans”; Corbella, *It’s Our Turn to Help Afghan Interpreters and Workers Who Risked All for Us*; Fife, “Canadian Veterans Group Gives up Afghan Rescue Efforts, Citing Burnout and Ottawa’s Bureaucratic Roadblocks”; Keung, “Canada Backs Away from 72-Hour Timeline for Afghans Who Worked with Military to Apply for Sanctuary”; Keung, “He Worked — and Took Fire — alongside Canadian Soldiers. Now This Afghan Interpreter Waits for the Taliban and Fears He Is Doomed.”

³³³ AFGH, *Honouring Canada’s Legacy in Afghanistan*; Keung, “With Thousands of Afghans Still Desperate to Flee the Taliban, Is Canada Set to Close Its Doors?”

³³⁴ *Debates of the Senate*, No. 17.

government, many are losing faith in Canada's rescue efforts. Why is our government playing political games instead of saving lives?³³⁵

The senator's remarks hint at the permeability of state institutions under conditions of effective and sustained public scrutiny. Information originating in veterans-led CSOs was mediated through investigative journalism and re-entered parliamentary spaces as politically authoritative knowledge, enabling legislators to formalize critiques of ministerial judgment, bureaucratic rigidity, and executive credibility.

The cumulative effects of pressures on the state were ultimately reflected in formal parliamentary assessment. In a June 2022 report, the Special Committee on Afghanistan delivered a pointed critique of the federal government's crisis response, emphasizing not uncertainty but the failure to act on mounting evidence of risk:

Even if the exact point at which the Taliban's ascendancy became inevitable could not have been predicted with certainty... greater prudence—and, therefore, a more proactive approach—was warranted in response to Afghanistan's clearly worsening trajectory... long before 15 August 2021, the risks associated with the Taliban should have compelled greater urgency and a more systematic policy and planning effort across the Canadian government to help people reach safety before it became much harder to do so.³³⁶

While government messaging consistently emphasized its commitment to Canada's allies, the practical pathways remained obstructed by procedural barriers, fragmented communication, and delayed execution.

The trajectory of Canada's SIMs for its Afghan allies thus reveals both the scope and limitations of militarized discourses of deservingness once translated into policy. Veterans' advocacy succeeded in compelling recognition, generating formal commitments, and keeping the issue politically salient across successive governments. Yet these gains repeatedly stalled at the point where moral obligation had to be converted into timely mobility, protection, and exit. As service-based deservingness was institutionalized through securitized administrative criteria, discretion, delay, and procedural rigidity became central features of implementation rather than anomalies. The result was not a wholesale rejection of obligation, but its containment within narrow, highly conditional pathways that proved fragile under conditions of escalating risk. My findings suggest that while militarized moral economies can open policy pathways, they offer

³³⁵ *Debates of the Senate, No. 17.*

³³⁶ AFGH, *Honouring Canada's Legacy in Afghanistan.*

limited leverage over how, when, and whether protection is operationalized. It is this gap—between authorization and movement, recognition and exit—that necessitates a shift in analytic focus from deservingness to the governance of mobility itself.

6.2 Non-Sortie

While the politics of militarized deservingness helps explain how “allies” became legible as subjects of protection, it does not fully explain why so many remained unable to reach safety even after that recognition had been granted. For that, the analysis must turn from deservingness to mobility. The central problem in the Afghan case was more than whether Canada acknowledged obligation, but also how that obligation was governed once it had to take material form as departure. From late July 2021 onward, veterans and other advocates were often able to secure formal commitments, visa approvals, and public affirmations of responsibility for their allies. Yet these recognitions repeatedly failed to produce actual movement. People were deemed eligible, even welcomed in principle, and still remained in the country. It is this condition that I describe as *non-sortie*.

By *non-sortie*, I mean a mode of mobility control in which departure is formally authorized yet practically obstructed through discretionary, securitized, and extraterritorial practices exercised in the country of origin. The concept names not exclusion at the border, nor the familiar practices of *non-entrée* through which arrival is prevented in the first place,³³⁷ but the management of exit itself as a site of sovereign control. In moments of evacuation especially, departure cannot be assumed simply because admission has been announced. It must be organized, permitted, and made materially possible. In the Afghan case, that threshold became one of the principal sites at which Canada’s humanitarian commitments were narrowed in practice.

This is why explanations that rest solely on bureaucratic confusion, miscommunication, or the speed of the Taliban’s advance are insufficient. Such factors mattered, but they do not capture the patterned way in which movement was constrained even where protection had

³³⁷ Gammeltoft-Hansen and Hathaway, “Non-Refoulement in a World of Cooperative Deterrence”; Hathaway, “The Emerging Politics of Non-Entrée.”

already been recognized. A clearer account lies in how sovereignty is understood and practiced in refugee governance. There is a longstanding assumption that the exclusion of non-citizens is a defining prerogative of sovereignty, and that states possess an unfettered right to determine admission and refusal.³³⁸ As Audrey Macklin reminds us, however, refugees unsettle this assumption and thus generate a particular anxiety for the state:

By virtue of Canada's international obligations under the 1951 UN *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, Canada is bound not to *refouler* (return) a person who meets the international definition of a refugee... If they reach the border and meet the refugee definition, Canada must accept them.³³⁹

Refugees are, in Macklin's view, "self-selected... they choose Canada; Canada does not choose them." It is for this reason that signatory states such as Canada devote such effort to preventing refugee claimants from reaching their borders in the first place. The challenge refugees pose to sovereignty, then, lies less in admission once present than in their capacity to reach the jurisdictional threshold at which legal obligations apply. What non-sortie captures is the way this logic materialized in the Afghan case. Sovereign control persisted through delay, opacity, selective recognition, and the management of access to evacuation corridors. Protection existed discursively and administratively, but not always spatially or in practice.

The most concentrated site of this dynamic was Kabul International Airport in August 2021 (see Figure 10). In the aftermath of state collapse, the airport came to function as an intensely securitized zone in which access to departure was governed through a shifting regime of checkpoints, perimeter control, and real-time discretionary judgment under conditions of fear and uncertainty.³⁴⁰ For those seeking resettlement, possession of documentation did not offer guarantees. Visas did not grant passage through the gates. Authorization and movement were thus separated from one another. The airport became, in effect, an extraterritorial border. It became a place within the country of origin where Canada and other NATO partners exercised control over who could move, when, and under what conditions.

³³⁸ Macklin, "Borderline Security," 389; Whitaker, "Refugees," 414–17.

³³⁹ Macklin, "Borderline Security," 389.

³⁴⁰ On the practical obstacles affecting interpreter evacuations, see Chase and Fife, "Last Kabul Flight Carrying Canadian Nationals, Afghan Refugees to Leave Thursday, Five Days Ahead of U.S. Withdrawal Deadline"; Gollom, "Why Canada Failed to Rescue 'a Hell of a Lot More' Afghans, According to Former Generals"; LaFlamme, "Afghanistan," August 26, 2021.

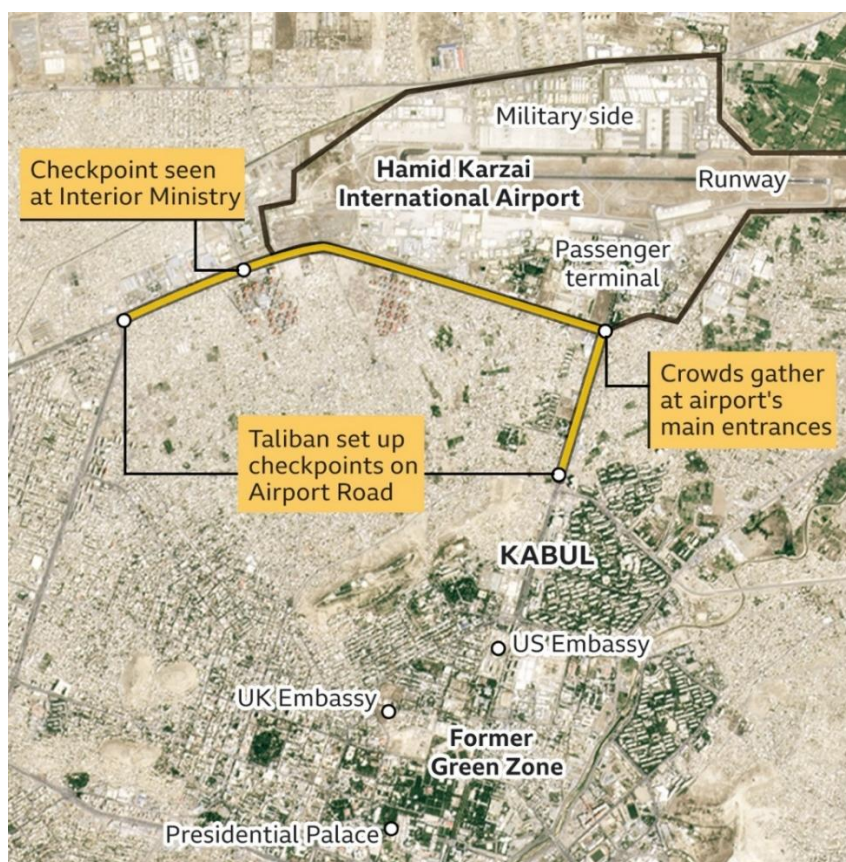


Figure 10. Satellite map of the area surrounding Kabul International Airport.³⁴¹

Veterans' testimonies and interventions repeatedly pointed to this gap. Many sought to guide their allies through the evacuation process, only to confront the instability of exit at its very threshold. Many approved visa holders were turned back or left exposed despite following official instructions, contributing to mounting disillusionment and grievance among veterans.³⁴² In one widely circulated video on social media, Canadian soldiers appear to ignore a group of Afghan civilians pleading for access to airlifts while holding up their exit documents. One man is heard saying:

They are completely ignoring [us]... We have approved visas... We are showing them our documents, and we are asking them to at least support us to get out.³⁴³

³⁴¹ Sourced from *Planet Labs*, as reproduced in *BBC Indonesia*. BBC News, "Afghanistan."

³⁴² Blackwell, "'I've Got to Run for My Life': Thousands Stranded, Advocates Upset as Canada Ends Evacuation Flights from Kabul"; Blackwell, "How Ottawa Failed Afghans Who Risked Their Lives for Canada"; Nardi, "'It Isn't Good Enough.'"

³⁴³ Chase and Fife, "Last Kabul Flight Carrying Canadian Nationals, Afghan Refugees to Leave Thursday, Five Days Ahead of U.S. Withdrawal Deadline."

The significance of such scenes lies not simply in their pathos, but in what they disclose about the organization of protection. Individuals with approvals and travel documents were left outside the evacuation perimeter, not because obligation had been formally withdrawn, but because entry into the space of departure remained contingent, unstable, and subject to securitized judgment. Canadian officials acknowledged the “heart-wrenching” scenes but emphasized force-protection requirements and the danger of terrorist attack in order to justify the constriction of movement corridors leading to the airport³⁴⁴—articulating the common rationale that often casts humanitarianism as an impediment to security interests.³⁴⁵

The contradiction became especially stark in the days leading to the Abbey Gate bombing on 26 August 2021.³⁴⁶ Even as intelligence warnings circulated regarding the danger of an imminent attack on crowds near the airport, many Afghan civilians approved for evacuation remained concentrated in and around these spaces (see Figures 11 and 12), often after having received inconsistent or delayed guidance.³⁴⁷ The point is not simply that the airport was dangerous. That much was obvious. It is that danger itself had become part of the terrain through which exit was governed. Those already deemed worthy of protection were still required to endure extreme risk in order to approach the narrow aperture through which movement might be granted. Canadian personnel, citizens, and permanent residents were prioritized, while Afghan nationals remained exposed outside the perimeter even where their admission—and thus prospective permanent residency—had been authorized in principle.³⁴⁸ It is worth noting that no Canadian soldiers or citizens were harmed, and while Canadian ministers indicated that Afghan nationals destined for Canada were also unharmed, the VTN reported that some of the families it was assisting were caught in the blast and required hospitalization.³⁴⁹

³⁴⁴ Chase and Fife, “Last Kabul Flight Carrying Canadian Nationals, Afghan Refugees to Leave Thursday, Five Days Ahead of U.S. Withdrawal Deadline.”

³⁴⁵ de Lint and Giannacopoulos, “Framing Migration.”

³⁴⁶ The suicide bombing killed 183 people, including 170 Afghan civilians and 13 U.S. military personnel, and injured hundreds more. Bennett et al., “Photos and Videos Reveal Crowded Checkpoints, Chaos at Kabul Airport on Day of the Attack”; Cooper et al., “As U.S. Troops Searched Afghans, a Bomber in the Crowd Moved In”; Trudeau, “Statement by the Prime Minister on the Deadly Attacks in Afghanistan.”

³⁴⁷ Kotecha, “Afghanistan”; Laurie, “Not Giving up on Our Allies; But Afghans Face ‘horrific’ Odds.”

³⁴⁸ No Canadian soldiers or citizens were harmed, and while Canadian ministers indicated that Afghan nationals destined for Canada were also unharmed, the VTN reported that some of the families it was assisting were caught in the blast and required hospitalization. LaFlamme, “Afghanistan,” August 26, 2021; Nardi, “‘It Isn’t Good Enough.’”

³⁴⁹ LaFlamme, “Afghanistan,” August 26, 2021; Nardi, “‘It Isn’t Good Enough.’”



Figure 11. Civilians outside Abbey Gate with travel documents, prior to bombing.³⁵⁰



Figure 12. Wide view image of Abbey Gate, prior to bombing.³⁵¹

After the airlifts ended, the logic of containment did not disappear so much as revert to a more familiar and politically insulated form. During the evacuation itself, Canada's role in authorizing departures, identifying eligible persons, and publicly committing to rescue rendered

³⁵⁰ Abbey Gate served as a key site during evacuations. Its narrow corridors, adjacent drainage canal, and lack of crowd control infrastructure made it a bottleneck for thousands of civilians attempting to access airlifts. Image sourced from *New Zealand Defence Force* via *Getty Images*, as reproduced in *Task & Purpose*. Schogol, "Troops Knew 'an Attack Was Coming' at Kabul Airport but Their Hands Were Tied, Investigation Reveals."

³⁵¹ Sourced from *U.S. Central Command/AP*, as reproduced in *CNN*. See, Walsh and Krever, "Exclusive: New Evidence Challenges the Pentagon's Account of a Horrific Attack as the US Withdrew from Afghanistan."

its responsibility for movement more immediate and difficult to displace, even if that responsibility was repeatedly narrowed in practice through the non-sortie conditions that obstructed exit from Kabul. Once the evacuation was formally over, however, those left behind could be repositioned beyond the space of direct operational control. What followed was a renewed reliance on the more established modalities of non-entrée and border externalization, through which destination states manage protection claims at a greater jurisdictional and geographic distance from the sites of immediate danger.

It was under these conditions that those left behind were repeatedly instructed to “shelter in place” or to make their way to third countries by their own means, from which Canada would then be prepared to process onward movement.³⁵² Cast as pragmatic guidance, such directives in fact transferred responsibility for safe passage onto displaced persons themselves. Statements by Canada’s Foreign Affairs Minister distilled the logic of abdication at work in this discourse, suggesting that those still in Afghanistan “are best placed to make the decision about what their lowest-risk safe route is.”³⁵³ Movement was no longer to be facilitated as an urgent matter of evacuation, but deferred into self-navigated overland routes, border crossings, and precarious stays in neighbouring states. This mattered all the more because the regional border regime into which Afghan civilians were being channelled had already been tightening since at least 2019, as neighbouring states prepared for the possibility of a U.S. withdrawal that might send “hundreds of thousands of refugees” across their frontiers.³⁵⁴

In this sense, non-sortie and non-entrée should not be understood as wholly separate logics, but as complementary modalities within the same broader politics of containment. The former obstructed departure at the moment when Canada’s commitments and operational role rendered movement a more immediate object of responsibility; the latter resumed once that responsibility could be more effectively externalized, territorialized, and made contingent upon refugees reaching a third country on their own. The mechanism may have changed, but the governing logic remained. Risk and responsibility were displaced onto the displaced themselves, while the state retained authority over when, where, and under what conditions formal protection would become actionable. Public commitments to pursue “other pathways” thus coexisted with

³⁵² Nardi, “‘It Isn’t Good Enough.’”

³⁵³ Nardi, “‘It Isn’t Good Enough.’”

³⁵⁴ Dambach, “Afghanistan’s Neighbors Worried about Potential Refugee Crisis”; Jain, “Afghanistan’s Neighbours Fear Refugee Crisis If U.S. Pulls Out.”

practical inaccessibility—passport requirements, visa barriers, dangerous transit routes, and the uncertainties of onward processing—producing a temporal politics in which rescue was not abandoned outright, but deferred, rerouted, and made conditional.³⁵⁵

For many of those on the move, this meant that the promise of protection was transmuted into prolonged uncertainty, hazardous overland passage, and renewed encounters with securitized borders elsewhere in the region. Even reaching a third country did not resolve that uncertainty. Many remained stranded for months or years awaiting resettlement decisions in contexts marked by precarious legal status, restricted access to work, and persistent exposure to deportation.³⁵⁶ What emerged, then, was not the end of containment but its rearticulation from the obstruction of exit under evacuation conditions to the externalization of mobility under a new political order shaped by Taliban rule, regional securitization, and the international refusal to recognize Afghanistan's *de facto* authorities.

For veterans and allied advocates, repeated encounters with authorization unaccompanied by any feasible pathway to movement steadily eroded confidence in formal policy processes and exposed the limits of advocacy confined to lobbying and procedural engagement. It was under precisely these conditions that advocacy increasingly assumed an operational dimension, as veteran-led organizations and their partners across domestic and international spaces took on direct responsibility for facilitating movement and protection where state action was delayed, constrained, or absent.

6.3 Civil Society Keyword

If non-sortie names the distance between recognition and movement, civil society keyword names the improvised mobilizations through which that distance was, however partially

³⁵⁵ Critical scholarship within refugee studies has long emphasized the politics of temporality through which displacement is administered. Across different contexts, waiting, delay, procedural suspension, and indefinite uncertainty have been shown to operate as techniques of control, prolonging precarity while deferring durable protection. Read in this light, the redirection of Afghan nationals toward other pathways formed part of a wider temporal politics in which rescue was not simply denied, but stretched out, rerouted, and made contingent through bureaucratic and geopolitical delay. See, Hyndman, *Managing Displacement*; Menjivar, "Liminal Legality"; Mountz and Hiemstra, "Chaos and Crisis"; Sahin-Mencutek et al., "A Crisis Mode in Migration Governance."

³⁵⁶ Dickson, "Two Years after Taliban Takeover, Many Afghans Are Languishing in Limbo as They Await Canada's Help"; Stewart, "Afghan Refugees Approved for Canada Relocation Languish in Pakistan."

and precariously, bridged. As frustrations mounted with official responses, veterans' groups and partnered organizations moved beyond advocacy in the narrow sense of lobbying, media outreach, and parliamentary pressure. They began to assume a more direct role in the organization of protection itself by identifying at-risk individuals, coordinating communications, arranging safehouses, sharing intelligence, facilitating routes to border crossings, and, where possible, helping families navigate onward movement toward third countries.³⁵⁷ These were interventions into the practical management of mobility at a moment when the state's own mechanisms were partial, delayed, or inaccessible.

I use the term *civil society keywork* to describe this field of coordinated non-state interventions through which organizations mobilized their own resources, networks, and capacities to facilitate evacuation, protection, and onward movement under crisis conditions. The term is meant to capture something more specific than advocacy and more immediate than conventional humanitarian service provision. Unlike more conventional CSO interventions, such as advocacy or intermediary services that translate formal policy into practice,³⁵⁸ civil society keywork involves intervening directly in the organization of mobility itself. It seeks, in part, to do the work that policy has not yet done, or has not done effectively. It emerges where formal pathways existed in principle but remained inaccessible in practice.

In the Afghan case, veteran-linked organizations such as the VTN and Aman Lara became especially significant because they possessed a distinctive combination of assets: operational familiarity, transnational military and diplomatic contacts, public legitimacy, and an ability to move between official and unofficial channels of governance. As one VTN member explained:

... Using our network of veterans, and our cross nation connections, our friends in the US and the British Forces, people who were on the ground were able to feed real time intelligence back to the government and support this operation and try and get people out safely.³⁵⁹

They operated in a hybrid space, at times supplementing government efforts through information-sharing, case coordination, and logistical support, and at other times acting outside, around, or ahead of formal state channels altogether.

³⁵⁷ Aman Lara, "OPERATIONS"; VTN, *2021 Annual Report*.

³⁵⁸ Fee, "Resettlement Knowledge."

³⁵⁹ Solomon, "Afghanistan."

What made their interventions significant, however, was the ways in which they began to perform functions ordinarily reserved to sovereign authority through the direct organization and management of movement itself. This is not to suggest that such interventions suspended or appropriated the state's authority to admit or exclude non-citizens. Rather, civil society keywork emerged precisely in the space opened by the gap between formal recognition and actual movement. By intervening directly in the organization of mobility, veteran-led CSOs did not displace sovereignty, but they did enter a terrain that states ordinarily seek to regulate closely: the practical coordination of exit, transit, and access to protection.

That tension was visible in the markedly uneven political economy through which evacuation and protection work proceeded. Although CSOs became central to facilitating movement and survival (see Figures 13 and 14), they did so while absorbing substantial financial, logistical, and emotional costs, even as the state retained exclusive authority over visas, border access, and final admissions. The VTN and its partners, for example, reported that maintaining their network of Kabul safehouses cost roughly \$20,000 per day, covering rent, food, generators, security measures, and basic medical supplies for approximately 2,000 individuals in hiding.³⁶⁰ These safehouses were indispensable to eventual evacuation, allowing at-risk Afghan nationals to remain concealed, housed, and medically supported while awaiting access to government-funded flights in August 2021 or, later, to overland convoys into neighbouring states.³⁶¹ Once air routes closed, CSOs also assumed the costs and risks of onward movement, reporting that transportation to third countries such as Pakistan often cost between \$3,000 and \$5,000 per person, financed largely through charitable fundraising rather than state support.³⁶² As one VTN member put it, “we’ve got to make sure that we keep operational security, it has to be there, but we do need that open door with government to make sure we feed our lists in and get them out.”³⁶³ The point, then, is not simply that CSOs filled a gap, but that

³⁶⁰ VTN, *2021 Annual Report*.

³⁶¹ Blackwell, “‘Maybe They Will Hang Me’: Fearing Death, Stranded Former Employees of Canada Desperate for Another Way out of Afghanistan”; Dickson, “Afghans Approved for Resettlement in Canada Hide in Fear as They Await Evacuation; Non-Profit Aman Lara Is Working with Ottawa to Find a Way to Move Approved Afghans without Passports Directly to Canada”; LaFlamme, “Afghanistan,” October 5, 2021; Solomon, “Canada Taking In 5,000 Afghans From The US.”

³⁶² JHR, “Help JHR Evacuate Journalists from Afghanistan”; JHR, “An Open Letter to the Newly Elected Liberal Government on Honouring Canada’s Promise to Our Afghan Allies”; Scrivener, “Nearly 10 Years Ago, the Star Helped a Teenager Escape the Taliban. When Militants Took Back Afghanistan, It Was Her Turn to Save Her Family.”

³⁶³ Solomon, “Afghanistan.”

they did so from a position of structural dependence where they could facilitate movement, shelter, and survival, but they could neither confer legal status nor guarantee admission.



Figure 13. Families at a safehouse awaiting evacuation to Canada³⁶⁴



Figure 14. A family on a VTN donor-funded road convoy to Pakistan³⁶⁵

This constitutive asymmetry helps explain why the state did not consolidate civil society keyword in the manner that earlier Canadian refugee responses had incorporated non-state actors through more formalized sponsorship and reception mechanisms. In the Afghan case, veteran-led keyword was not principally concerned with supplementary financial assistance or post-arrival

³⁶⁴ Image source: *Global News*. Bell and Semple, “Inside the Kabul Safe Houses Where Afghans Wait to Be Evacuated to Canada.”

³⁶⁵ Image source: *Global News*. Bell and Semple, “Inside the Kabul Safe Houses Where Afghans Wait to Be Evacuated to Canada.”

reception within a stabilized legal framework. It entered the far more sensitive terrain of movement and admission itself, facilitating exit from an active crisis zone, coordinating extraterritorial mobility, and operating in a field shaped by Taliban control, diplomatic non-recognition, and legal uncertainty. As broader scholarship on crisis governance suggests, relations between states and CSOs tend to remain comparatively cooperative in domains such as reception and integration, yet become more contested when non-state actors intervene in fields tied to border control, protection, and mobility,³⁶⁶ particularly when they move beyond subsidiary roles or begin to monitor, substitute for, or expose state practice. The Afghan evacuation offers a particularly messy instantiation of this dynamic. Veteran-led organizations were neither fully incorporated into a formal humanitarian architecture nor outright prohibited from acting. They operated instead in a fragmented and hybrid governance space, one in which operational indispensability coexisted with persistent legal and political vulnerability.

Precisely because civil society keywork entered this sensitive terrain, it remained tolerable only in unstable and limited ways. What followed was not its institutional consolidation, but the progressive reassertion of state authority through legal interpretation, funding refusal, and, eventually, a permissions-based humanitarian regime. The question, then, was not whether veterans and their partner organizations could act at all, but under whose authority, on what terms, and for how long.

6.4 Non-Recognition and State Containment

Canada has no intention of recognizing the Taliban, which remains a listed terrorist organization, as the Government of Afghanistan... Canada remains committed to supporting the basic needs of Afghans while avoiding any action that could benefit, or infer recognition of, the de facto Taliban authorities.

— CIMM Issue Notes, April 26, 2023³⁶⁷

This committee note distills, with a certain bureaucratic calm, the governing paradox that structured Canada's response to the Afghanistan crisis. On its surface, the statement appears

³⁶⁶ Sahin-Mencutek et al., "A Crisis Mode in Migration Governance," 9.

³⁶⁷ CIMM, "Minister of International Development Appearance before the Standing Committee On Citizenship and Immigration (CIMM) on the Government's Response to the Final Report of the Special Committee on Afghanistan."

conciliatory as Canada withholds diplomatic recognition from a designated terrorist entity while affirming its commitment to the humanitarian needs of Afghan civilians. Yet within this formulation lies a deeper politics of sovereignty. The Canadian state simultaneously repudiated the legitimacy of Taliban rule and reasserted its own authority over the legal and material conditions under which Afghan lives might be assisted, moved, or admitted. Non-recognition abroad and gatekeeping at home, in this sense, did not operate as separate logics or merely adjacent practices. They belonged to the same governing posture, one in which the denial of legitimacy to one sovereign order became inseparable from the consolidation of control by another.

My argument in this section is that the Canadian state's responses to veterans' mobilization—from non-sortie during Operation AEGIS, to restrictive interpretations of antiterrorism law, to the later construction of a permissions-based humanitarian regime—were all animated by a sovereign logic in which foreign policy priorities and refugee governance became still more tightly braided together. The refusal to recognize the Taliban as Afghanistan's *de jure* government did not suspend the necessity of governing the consequences of Taliban rule. It furnished, rather, a basis for tightening Canadian control over refugee mobility, humanitarian assistance, and access to membership, even as civil society actors demonstrated that some of these functions could, however partially and precariously, be facilitated beyond formal state channels.

This sovereign posture cannot be understood apart from the wider legal and financial architectures through which it operated. As discussed in earlier chapters, the Taliban's designation as a terrorist entity functioned less as a fixed classification grounded in consistent definitional criteria than as a flexible instrument of Western foreign policy. In the U.S., a bifurcated legal framework preserved room for diplomatic engagement even as sanctions and asset freezes sustained material pressure. By refraining from designating the Taliban as a *Foreign Terrorist Organization* (FTO),³⁶⁸ Washington maintained the legal flexibility necessary to negotiate the Doha Agreement—a peace deal premised, paradoxically, on the Taliban's commitment to combatting terrorism. At the same time, the group's designation as a *Specially Designated Global Terrorist* (SDGT),³⁶⁹ sustained its “terrorist” status while also enabling asset

³⁶⁸ See, Bureau of Counterterrorism, “Foreign Terrorist Organizations.”

³⁶⁹ See, Bureau of Counterterrorism, “Executive Order 13224.”

freezes and expansive sanctions. When the Taliban assumed *de facto* control of the Afghan state in August 2021, these measures were extended in ways that contributed to a broader “chilling effect” across humanitarian and commercial transactions.³⁷⁰ Legal ambiguity surrounding Afghan statehood and sovereignty thus became a means of preserving diplomatic leverage, even at substantial humanitarian cost.

Canada’s response broadly mirrored these effects, though with far less legal gradation. Under Section 83.01 of the Criminal Code, the Taliban is designated a terrorist entity, a classification that triggers a sweeping prohibition against knowingly providing, directly or indirectly, property or services for its benefit.³⁷¹ Unlike the more differentiated American framework, the Canadian system offered little meaningful distinction among forms of terrorist listing. This statutory rigidity did more than just constrain avenues for diplomacy. It became a mechanism through which the state reasserted control over the terms of humanitarian action itself.

Government officials maintained that even indirect and incidental expenditures associated with sheltering or evacuating Afghan civilians—including taxes on fuel, food, rent, or transportation—could constitute prohibited support for terrorism.³⁷² This interpretation was invoked to justify the refusal of public funding for safehouses, land convoys, and related evacuation expenditures³⁷³ even as the government acknowledged that evacuees could not safely access exit routes without interim shelter and protection.³⁷⁴ At the same time, it rendered the use of privately raised funds a potential source of criminal liability, effectively foreclosing both state-supported and autonomous non-state intervention during a period of acute humanitarian need. What had emerged in the previous section as civil society keywork was thus not simply left

³⁷⁰ This “chilling effect” reflects a tendency among financial institutions to over-comply with international sanctions by avoiding transactions with designated countries altogether. As Johansson and Schaar note, even where targeted sanctions formally include humanitarian exemptions, banks often refuse to process lawful transfers, such as payments for food, medicine, or health-care workers’ salaries, due to heightened legal and reputational risk. In Afghanistan, this has contributed to an economic crisis that disproportionately harms civilians and constrains humanitarian operations. See,

³⁷¹ Criminal Code, § 83.01; Public Safety Canada, “Currently Listed Entities.”

³⁷² AFGH, “Minister of International Development and Minister Responsible for the Pacific Economic Development Agency of Canada Appearance before the Special Committee on Afghanistan (AFGH) on Humanitarian Aid.”

³⁷³ Dickson, “Afghans Approved for Resettlement in Canada Hide in Fear as They Await Evacuation; Non-Profit Aman Lara Is Working with Ottawa to Find a Way to Move Approved Afghans without Passports Directly to Canada.”

³⁷⁴ Chase and Fife, “Shelter in Place.”

unsupported. It was increasingly enclosed within a legal framework that recast life-preserving assistance as presumptively suspect.

This interpretation did not pass uncontested. Legal practitioners and humanitarian organizations challenged both its doctrinal coherence and its practical consequences, insisting that the issue at stake was not merely one of technical statutory application, but of how far a logic of suspicion might be allowed to reach into the ordinary conditions of survival. The *Canadian Bar Association* (CBA) argued that unavoidable, life-preserving expenditures could not reasonably satisfy the *mens rea* requirement associated with terrorist financing offences.³⁷⁵ To hold otherwise, they warned, was to risk casting refugees and asylum seekers themselves into legal jeopardy for the basic living expenses in their everyday lives.³⁷⁶ The *Canadian Immigration Lawyers Association* (CILA), for its part, challenged the state's categorical treatment of the Taliban as a non-governmental actor for the purposes of the Criminal Code, noting that under customary international law it is effective control, rather than diplomatic recognition, that bears most directly on whether an entity functions as a governing authority.³⁷⁷ On this view, taxes, fees, and administrative charges paid, however indirectly, to de facto authorities should not automatically trigger provisions designed for non-state terrorist actors, particularly where such payments were unavoidable in the course of humanitarian protection. The dispute, then, was never simply about statutory interpretation. It concerned whether non-recognition abroad would be permitted to harden into a domestic legal regime that narrowed the conditions under which assistance, mobility, and protection could lawfully proceed.

In the absence of timely legal clarification or exemption, CSOs were forced to adapt their evacuation and protection practices in ways that often heightened risk for those they sought to assist. Some groups avoided formal accommodation arrangements to evade taxes on hotel rooms, while others transported fuel from neighbouring states before entering Afghanistan.³⁷⁸ These adaptations increased vulnerability to surveillance, checkpoints, and interdiction. Legal

³⁷⁵ CBA, "A Step in the Right Direction."

³⁷⁶ CBA, "A Step in the Right Direction"; Dickson, *Ottawa's Anti-Terrorism Laws Hinder Efforts to Evacuate Afghans Loyal to Canada out of Afghanistan*.

³⁷⁷ Dickson, *Ottawa's Anti-Terrorism Laws Hinder Efforts to Evacuate Afghans Loyal to Canada out of Afghanistan*.

³⁷⁸ Dickson, *Ottawa's Anti-Terrorism Laws Hinder Efforts to Evacuate Afghans Loyal to Canada out of Afghanistan*.

ambiguity thus translated into heightened danger on the ground, narrowing the range of actions that CSOs could safely undertake.

As these constraints persisted, the cumulative financial, logistical, and emotional burdens of civil society keywork became increasingly unsustainable. Veteran-led CSOs reported expenditures amounting to tens of thousands of dollars per day to maintain safehouses and support evacuations, largely through private donations.³⁷⁹ Over time, these pressures reshaped relationships within what had initially functioned as a relatively coordinated rescue ecology. VTN increasingly concentrated its constrained resources on assisting refugees with direct ties to Canada's military, while Aman Lara recalibrated its operations through partnerships supporting a broader population of approved and at-risk Afghan nationals.³⁸⁰ By April 2022, VTN announced the end of its rescue operations,³⁸¹ nearly one year before amendments to the Criminal Code were enacted. During this period, several Afghan allies had either been captured by Taliban forces, remained in hiding within Afghanistan, or were stranded in precarious conditions in third countries awaiting resettlement decisions.³⁸² Legal ambiguity, in other words, did not merely regulate civil society action. It functioned to exhaust, fragment, and reorganize it.

It was only with the passage of Bill C-41 in March 2023 that Canada introduced a mechanism ostensibly designed to reconcile the effects of its counterterrorism regime with the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding in Afghanistan. Yet this legislative adjustment did not displace the sovereign logic that had constrained civil society keywork. Rather than lifting prohibitions in any general sense, the amendment established a permissions-based regime through which organizations were required to seek prior authorization for activities that might otherwise risk criminal liability.³⁸³ Government communications described the framework in explicitly discretionary terms:

In deciding whether to grant an authorization, the Minister of Public Safety would consider referrals by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship...

³⁷⁹ Fife, "Canadian Veterans Group Gives up Afghan Rescue Efforts, Citing Burnout and Ottawa's Bureaucratic Roadblocks"; Fife, "Ottawa's 'selfish' Policy Sparks End to Afghan Rescue Effort"; Semple, *Lack of Support for Afghan Refugees Frustrating Canadian Veterans*.

³⁸⁰ Aman Lara, "Afghanistan"; Dickson, "Afghans Approved for Resettlement in Canada Hide in Fear as They Await Evacuation; Non-Profit Aman Lara Is Working with Ottawa to Find a Way to Move Approved Afghans without Passports Directly to Canada."

³⁸¹ VTN, *Thank You*.

³⁸² Blackwell, "Canada's Afghan Helpers Still Stranded; Taliban Targets a Year Later"; The Canadian Press, "Senate Passes Long-Delayed Bill Aimed at Unblocking Canadian Aid in Afghanistan."

³⁸³ Bill C-41.

Authorizations would be subject to information-sharing between departments and agencies for the purpose of security review... and applicants would be assessed on the need for the proposed activity, the capacity of the organization to manage and report on funds, and whether the benefits of permitting the activity outweigh the risk of terrorist financing...

Applicants granted authorizations would be subject to stipulated reporting and compliance conditions, and the Minister of Public Safety would retain the authority to amend, suspend, or revoke authorizations as deemed necessary to mitigate security risks.³⁸⁴

On the surface, the amendment seemed to supply legal clarity and to reopen a path for humanitarian work in Afghanistan. Yet what it clarified, in practice, was less the protection of humanitarian action than its subordination to a newly formalized logic of permission. Humanitarian intervention was recast as a licensed exception, absorbed into a framework that widened ministerial discretion under the sign of securitization. Rather than enabling an autonomous sphere of civil society action, the amendments consolidated state authority over who might act, under what conditions, and on behalf of which populations. Civil society keywork, so operationally indispensable in the acute phase of crisis, was thus first constrained through legal ambiguity and then reincorporated through a permissions-based regime that preserved for the state the authority to decide when compassion could become lawful action.

It is at this point that the relation between foreign policy and refugee governance comes most clearly into view. Canada's refusal to recognize the Taliban as Afghanistan's *de jure* government did not alter the fact that the group exercised *de facto* control over territory, infrastructure, taxation, and movement. What non-recognition did instead was to translate itself inward, taking domestic legal form as a posture in which engagement within Taliban-controlled space became presumptively suspect. Even as the Canadian state tacitly acknowledged the Taliban's effective authority in practice—warning that incidental payments might “benefit” the *de facto* rulers—it simultaneously reinforced its own sovereign authority over refugee mobility by disavowing the sovereign authority of the Afghan state. Assistance, movement, and onward travel were thereby rendered matters requiring renewed forms of authorization from Canada itself. CSOs, accordingly, were not merely confronting logistical obstacles; they were operating within a legal and political order that reasserted the state as the exclusive arbiter of legitimate

³⁸⁴ Public Safety Canada, “Bill C-41.”

protection and admission. The withholding of recognition abroad thus found its domestic counterpart in an intensified regime of sovereign gatekeeping at home.

This dynamic resonates with longstanding insights in critical refugee studies, which have challenged the assumption that the exclusion of non-citizens constitutes the ultimate and unqualified prerogative of sovereignty.³⁸⁵ As the discussion of non-sortie has already suggested, the issue is not simply admission once refugees arrive, but the state's capacity to govern whether they ever reach the jurisdictional threshold at which legal obligations become actionable in the first place. Canada's evacuations illustrate this logic with particular clarity. During the Kabul airlift, some Afghan nationals boarded Canadian aircraft without prior visas or formal authorization. Once on Canadian territory, however, their status required regularization, and, in recognition that return was unsafe, IRCC introduced special measures first to grant temporary status and shortly thereafter to provide permanent residence and access to settlement supports.³⁸⁶ Protection, under such circumstances, became difficult to withhold once physical presence had been established. Through non-sortie, however, the broader architecture of Canada's response worked to prevent precisely this outcome. Its practical effect was to keep potential claimants beyond Canadian jurisdiction by obstructing entry into Kabul airport and restricting access to airlifts, sites within the country of origin that functioned, in effect, as Canada's extraterritorial borders.

In this respect, the state's response to veterans' mobilization did not simply reject or ignore civil society pressure. It absorbed that pressure rhetorically while displacing the mechanisms of control and containment to sites less vulnerable to legal obligation. Commitments to resettle at-risk civilians were publicly affirmed and policy pathways announced, yet implementation remained filtered through extraterritorial practices, legal rigidity, and discretionary authorization. Advocacy generated discursive openings in which Afghan interpreters and LES could be cast as allies deserving protection. At the level of practice, however, sovereign gatekeeping endured. The terrain of authority shifted—from the securitized perimeter of Kabul airport to the statutory architecture governing aid, sponsorship, and

³⁸⁵ Macklin, "Borderline Security," 389; Whitaker, "Refugees," 414–17.

³⁸⁶ See, IRCC, "Temporary Public Policy for Foreign Nationals Being Airlifted from Afghanistan"; IRCC, "Amended Temporary Public Policy to Facilitate Permanent Residence for Certain Citizens of Afghanistan Issued Temporary Resident Permits."

movement—but the governing principle remained the same, reaffirming that admission and protection were to remain subordinate to state authorization.

The novelty of veterans' interventions becomes clearer still when placed alongside other challenges to Canadian authority over membership and belonging. In his study of the *Sandy Bay Ojibway First Nation's* (SBOFN) attempt to grant protection and membership to Sister Juliana, a Nigerian nun facing deportation, Amar Bhatia recounts how the Federal Court rejected the band's decision on the grounds that only the Canadian state possessed the authority to confer permanent status.³⁸⁷ In his decision, Justice Harrington's reasoning was explicit in its implications:

the proposition put forward if brought to its extreme is that each and every band (and there are more than 600) has the power to usurp the discretion of the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration by accepting non-residents as band members and thereby granting them permanent resident status.³⁸⁸

What was at stake, then, was not jurisdiction in some abstract legal sense, but the far more foundational question of whether the power to constitute membership could be exercised through authorities other than the settler state.

A limited parallel may be drawn to the Afghanistan case. In both instances, non-Canadian-state actors sought to enact forms of inclusion that bore, in different ways, upon the question of membership. If sovereignty is commonly understood, at its limit, as the power to exclude non-citizens, then such gestures of inclusion can appear as challenges to state authority. Yet the political meaning of those challenges differs profoundly. In the Sandy Bay case, the granting of membership was decolonial in character, pressing against the settler state's claim to singular and consolidated sovereignty at a foundational level. Veterans' advocacy, by contrast, did not contest the terms of Canadian settler membership as such; it pressed for broader inclusion within them. Although it strained state authority by demanding more rapid, expansive, and flexible admissions, and by demonstrating that protection could be partially facilitated through civil society actors operating beyond formal state channels, it did not unsettle the underlying foundations of Canadian settler-colonial sovereignty in the way that Indigenous jurisdiction and self-determination are so often perceived to do.

³⁸⁷ Bhatia, "Re-Peopling in a Settler-Colonial Context," 346–48.

³⁸⁸ *Sandy Bay Ojibway First Nation v. Canada*, ¶ 11.

Veterans' mobilization nonetheless exposed significant fault lines within and across Canadian state and civil society. Disillusioned by what they regarded as unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles and a moral abdication of sorts, many leveraged the transnational networks, operational knowledge, and public legitimacy acquired through military service to facilitate evacuations and provide protections when official channels stalled or faltered. The operational openings they produced were accompanied by discursive ones, in which local interpreters and other LES were recast as quasi-insiders, even as "Canadians-in-waiting"—figures bound to Canada and imagined as already tethered to the national community through loyalty, shared sacrifice, and a heroic wartime camaraderie. Yet the solidarities forged through these mobilizations remained sharply delimited. They privileged those whose belonging could be rendered legible through militarized discourses, while leaving more marginal those whose claims to protection were less easily verified, securitized, or assimilated. Veterans' groups thus disrupted, for a time, the state's monopoly over the practical management of refugee admissions, but they did not displace the sovereign foundations that continued to determine the terms of Canadian membership. Instead, it highlighted both the permeability and the resilience of that architecture, where state authority could be pressured, rhetorically unsettled, and administratively challenged, yet ultimately reasserted and consolidated. What the Afghanistan case discloses, then, is not the erosion of settler sovereignty under civil society pressure, but an instance of its flexibility and adaptation, and perhaps even expansion, absorbing moral critique while preserving exclusive control over recognition, mobility, and membership in nuanced ways.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter has traced the distinctive entry of Canadian veterans into a field of refugee governance in which they are not ordinarily expected to appear as central advocates. Their influence arose not in spite of their intimacy with the state, but through it—born of wartime experience, steeped in institutional familiarity, and authorized by a moral economy in which military service, loyalty, and sacrifice continue to carry unusual political weight. That proximity furnished veterans with a credibility that travelled easily across media platforms, parliamentary debate, and bureaucratic backchannels, while also enabling a kind of operational fluency that

many actors more conventionally associated with refugee politics could not readily command. Yet the very intimacy that gave their interventions traction also marked the limits of what could be claimed, on whose behalf, and with what permanence.

Three propositions emerge from this analysis. First, veterans' interventions drew much of their force from a militarized grammar of obligation that rendered interpreters and other locally engaged staff legible as exceptionally deserving, precisely because their vulnerability could be narrated as the afterlife of a shared wartime relation. What followed was not a broad humanitarian opening, but a selective and carefully mediated one, in which protection remained tethered to recognizable affiliations with Canadian military and state purposes rather than to any wider politics of refugee vulnerability. Second, the crisis brought into focus a lesson too often obscured by humanitarian rhetoric: authorization is not the same as mobility. Through the concept of non-sortie, I have shown how exit could be repeatedly affirmed in principle while being obstructed in practice through delay, discretionary gatekeeping, and extraterritorial forms of control exercised by the destination state from within the country of origin itself. Third, when veteran-led organizations crossed the threshold from advocacy into civil society keywork, the state did not consolidate that work as a durable extension of protection. It moved instead to contain it, first by translating humanitarian necessity into possible criminal liability through strict interpretations of antiterrorism law, and later by recoding humanitarian action as a licensed exception subject to ministerial discretion.

What comes into view, then, is a distinctive politics of Canadian sovereignty in which obligations to refugees may be publicly acknowledged even as the terms of their fulfilment are carefully administered so as to preserve the state's exclusive authority over recognition, mobility, and admission. Through non-sortie, this authority condensed around the securitized perimeter of Kabul airport, which functioned, in effect, as an extraterritorial border. From there it extended into the domestic legal architecture governing aid, sponsorship, and movement, where humanitarian necessity was first rendered perilous and only later made lawful through prior authorization. Veterans' mobilizations were therefore not a rupture in Canadian sovereignty so much as an intra-colonial contest over inclusion into Canadian membership. They were consequential and indeed life-saving, but ultimately bounded by the same state-centred regimes that structure exclusion, even if it sought to negotiate how those exclusions were to be expressed.

Read through the *armonia effect*, this chapter clarifies how certain claims acquire political and policy resonance when they can be made to harmonize with dominant narratives of obligation, loyalty, and national identity. Veterans were able to amplify their demands for evacuation and resettlement precisely because they struck notes already familiar to the Canadian state, notes tuned by militarized nationalism, wartime reciprocity, and the moral afterlife of intervention. But this is also why the openings they helped produce remained selective and provisional. The same mechanisms that translated urgency into policy traction also narrowed the field of concern and ensured that protection remained subordinate to sovereign discretion. If this chapter has examined how militarized proximity can open distinctive channels of protection, the next turns to a different register of intermediation: diaspora-led advocacy, where claims move less through wartime reciprocity than through the more familiar idioms of liberal humanitarianism, rights, and reputational leadership. There, too, the question will not be whether advocacy mattered, but how its uneven resonances produced differentiated pathways of inclusion.

Chapter Seven: Diaspora-based Advocacy: A Fragmented and Uneven Playing Field

In 2015, Manmeet Singh Bhullar took on the cause of helping Sikh and Hindu minorities in Afghanistan... facing persecution at the hands of the Taliban. Void of their basic rights of safety and religious freedoms, they endured physical violence, sexual harassment, and denial of education for children... Manmeet worked to temporarily move families to India and then to their permanent homes in Canada... [the foundation has] since, shepherded strategy, policy, refugee applications, local and international coordination, and government and stakeholder engagements... After the attack at an Afghanistan Gurdwara in 2020 and the devastation that Afghanistan endured in 2021, this project has grown in scope... working actively with the Government of Canada to assist many other families that have since fled Afghanistan.

— The Manmeet Singh Bhullar Foundation, 2021³⁸⁹

We... represent a cross-section of voices from the Afghan community in Canada, Canadian civil society, international organizations, nonprofits, activists, and individually concerned citizens. We are deeply disturbed by the escalating humanitarian crisis... As a beacon of freedom, rule of law, and human rights, we are writing to urge Canada to recognize the moral imperative to resettle more Afghans, provide immediate and further humanitarian aid, engage in proactive diplomacy in support of international humanitarian law, and preserve the rights of girls, women, and ethnic and religious minorities... The progress that Canada has helped make in Afghanistan through funding and military support is jeopardized by Taliban rule. Girls and women are at risk of forced marriage and being banned from studying and working... [Groups] such as the Hazara community, Afghan Hindus, and Afghan Sikhs... historically and currently face systematic discrimination, repeated targeted violence, and resulting displacement.

— Canadian Campaign for Afghan Peace, September, 2021³⁹⁰

The two statements that open this chapter provide context to an argument about how protection is made intelligible, and by whom, in a moment when Afghanistan's collapse had brought its citizens' suffering into Canadian public and political attention. One, issued by the Manmeet Singh Bhullar Foundation, speaks in the language of targeted protections for a religious minority group. The other, advanced by the Canadian Campaign for Afghan Peace, speaks through a more expansive register of rights, coalition, and reputation. Together they mark the boundaries of a field of diaspora advocacy, not as a single voice rising in unison, but multiple constituencies entering Canadian governance through different registers and socio-political location, with each

³⁸⁹ MSBF, "Save Afghan Minorities."

³⁹⁰ CCAP, *Open Letter: Immediate Action Canada Should Take to Help Afghans*.

compelled, in its own way, to translate Afghan suffering into forms the state can recognize, process, and contain.

Indeed, diaspora-led advocacy played a consequential role in shaping Canada's policy response to the Afghan displacement crisis of 2021, but its influence was neither uniform nor evenly distributed. My central claim in this chapter is that the efficacy of such advocacy turned less on the intensity of moral appeal, or on the presumed coherence of an "Afghan diaspora," than on the extent to which particular constituencies were able to align their claims with prevailing Canadian discourses of liberal humanitarianism, minority protection, and securitized governance. Advocacy, in other words, proved most effective where refugee claims could be translated into forms that were legible within policy—demands that resonated with established institutional precedents, that could be carried by credible intermediaries, and that were accompanied by comparatively lower perceived threat profiles within a governance architecture that continued to preserve state discretion over the timing, scale, and form of admission. The result was an uneven and differentiated landscape of access, in which multiple pathways expanded even as they remained stratified in their reach, tempo, and political intelligibility.

A central concern of this chapter is thus the analytic risk of treating either "Afghan" or "diaspora" politics as coherent and unified formations. Such terms may function as convenient shorthand, but they also risk obscuring the heterogeneity of actors, solidarities, and claims that animate the field. Mobilizations on behalf of Afghan refugees were shaped not only by shared national origin, but by religious, ethnic, gendered, political, and cross-diasporic affiliations that intersected in uneven ways. In several instances, influential interventions did not emerge from Afghan-origin actors alone, but from alliances extending across diasporic and civil society formations, such as those among Indian-Canadian advocates mobilizing on behalf of Afghan Sikhs and Hindus. To invoke "the diaspora," then, as though it were a singular political subject, or to assume it necessarily implies a shared national origin between advocates and the refugees on whose behalf they mobilize, is to misrecognize a field structured by differentiation, uneven access to political capital, and distinct grammars through which claims to protection are made legible and actionable.

Building on earlier chapters' analyses of crisis recognition, discursive framings, and institutional precedents, and following the preceding chapter's focus on veterans' mobilizations and militarized politics of deservingness, this chapter turns to a different but adjacent register of

intermediation. Where veterans' advocacy drew traction from wartime reciprocity and proximity to a militarized rendition of Canadian identity and values, diaspora organizations and allied CSOs mobilized through the idioms of liberal humanitarianism, minority protection, and rights-based translation that became particularly salient during the Trudeau-era Liberal government. Their interventions were central to episodes of advocacy-driven policy expansion in Canadian refugee governance that emerged in moments when sustained pressure, coalition-building with longstanding humanitarian organizations in Canada, and strategic alignment with existing legal and administrative frameworks inflected with neoliberal-multiculturalism converged to create or expand channels of protection, even amid broader restrictive structural conditions. Yet, as in the veterans' case, these openings unfolded within a sovereign architecture that retained ultimate authority over recognition and admission.

I advance this argument through a comparative analysis of two prominent forms of diaspora-based advocacy that secured differential access to protections and resettlement: (1) government-affiliated Indian-Canadian advocacy; and (2) women-led, second-generation Afghan-Canadian advocacy. Advocacy on behalf of Afghan Sikh and Hindu refugees aligned with politically established segments of the Indian diaspora and was associated with comparatively lower perceived securitization risk. This alignment facilitated a bounded yet more timely resettlement response, articulated through discourses of deservingness grounded in religious minority persecution within a Muslim-majority context. A more substantively inclusive initiative was advanced by a largely second-generation and women-led segment of the Afghan diaspora—most notably the *Afghan Youth Engagement and Development Initiative* (AYEDI), which coordinated a broad coalition of actors through the *Canadian Campaign for Afghan Peace* (CCAP). Their campaign translated Afghan refugee deservingness into a policy language that both resonated with and exerted pressure upon Canada's self-image and reputation as a humanitarian leader. In doing so, it engaged with Trudeau-era neoliberal multicultural discourses of diversity, foregrounding women's rights, girls' education, LGBTQ rights, and the protection of ethnic and religious minorities. Across both cases, diaspora-led advocacy mediated, translated, and formatted claims into forms legible within Canadian policymaking channels. Yet these translations unfolded within a governing logic that ultimately "contained diversity," delimiting which demands could be advanced and how far they could travel.

The chapter therefore situates diaspora-led advocacy networks as intermediaries within Canadian refugee governance that are capable of opening pathways of inclusion while simultaneously operating within, and at times reproducing, the selective and racialized logics that continue to structure and contain access to protection, membership, and belonging. The *armonia effect* as seen in this case study demonstrates how varying diaspora-led initiatives can harmonize political pressures, historical precedents, and reputational commitments into concrete policy outcomes, even as structural limits continue to delimit who becomes legible as a deserving refugee, under what conditions, and with what degree of urgency and visibility.

7.1 Fragmentation, Intermediation, and Differential Access

Before turning to the specific advocacy formations examined in this chapter, it is necessary to clarify how diaspora politics operates within the architecture of Canadian refugee governance. My research suggests that the fragmentation evident across diaspora-led advocacy should not be read too quickly as a simple failure of coordination, still less as evidence of an absent collective will. It is better understood as the trace of a governing field in which protection is never distributed evenly, but parceled out through differentiated channels, each structured by distinct configurations of political capital, institutional recognition, and perceived security risk. Here, the research on differential inclusion from critical scholars like Jennifer Hyndman, Luin Goldring and Patricia Landolt are especially useful, for it directs attention away from a crude opposition between inclusion and exclusion and toward a more stratified landscape in which actors and populations are sorted across uneven gradients of access, precarity, and belonging.³⁹¹

In such a field, diaspora actors do not encounter the state as a unified subaltern counterpublic, as Nancy Fraser might contend,³⁹² but rather as intermediaries whose influence depends on their capacity to translate refugee claims into forms that policy can recognise, process, and authorize. Their task is to render suffering administratively intelligible. It is to take the diffuse violence of displacement and recast it into categories that can travel through visa

³⁹¹ Goldring, “Precarious Legal Status Trajectories as Method, and the Work of Legal Status”; Hyndman, “The Russian Invasion of Ukraine and Humanitarian Nationalism in Canada”; Landolt and Goldring, “Political Cultures and Transnational Social Fields.”

³⁹² Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere.”

streams, ministerial announcements, humanitarian exemptions, and public narratives of obligation. Some were able to do this with considerable success. Others encountered the familiar frictions of securitized governance, where claims that could not be easily coded as low-risk, deserving, or administratively manageable were delayed, narrowed, or left to languish.

Fragmentation, in this sense, was not incidental to governance. It was one of its conditions

This intermediary role, I argue, helps explain why some advocacy initiatives generate timely openings while others meet delay, attenuation, or refusal. More than simply amplifying select refugee voices, advocates actively filtered, formatted, and prioritized them so that they might travel through legal and bureaucratic channels already shaped by humanitarian reason, securitized judgement, and administrative convenience. They selected which stories would be made public, which populations would be foregrounded, which vocabularies would be used, and which forms of proximity to Canada could be made to matter. As such, differential inclusion is treated here as something actively produced through social and institutional sorting. Goldring's formulation of the "work" of legal status sharpens the point further.³⁹³ Status, in her account, is not simply granted or withheld at the end of a legal process; it is assembled through navigation, documentation, waiting, applications, negotiations over access, and encounters with institutional actors operating through discretion and uncertain temporalities. Although she develops this concept in relation to precarious legal status trajectories in Canada, I extend her insight here to suggest that diaspora advocacy can function as an unevenly distributed capacity to mediate aspects of that work for others.

Hyndman's work on diaspora-civil-society mobilizations offers another analytic foundation for my analysis. Her comparative account of Canada's responses to recent refugee crises shows that diasporas do not encounter the state on level terrain.³⁹⁴ Some possess the demographic weight, institutional embeddedness, and historical legitimacy necessary to convert collective claims into state-recognized forms with relatively little friction. Others must labour under the burden of suspicion, geopolitical anxiety, and racialized assessments of threat. Hyndman's distinction between the "humanitarian nationalism" attached to the Ukrainian case and the more securitized terrain of "diaspora geopolitics" surrounding Afghan and Syrian advocacy is particularly instructive, because it demonstrates that advocacy does not unfold in a

³⁹³ Goldring, "Precarious Legal Status Trajectories as Method, and the Work of Legal Status."

³⁹⁴ Hyndman, "The Russian Invasion of Ukraine and Humanitarian Nationalism in Canada."

neutral public sphere. It unfolds within hierarchies of recognition already shaped by race, geopolitics, and national self-image.

Yet the Afghan case also presses the analysis in a somewhat different direction. If Hyndman shows how national diasporas are differentially received within refugee governance, Goldring and Landolt help illuminate how unevenness is reproduced within the field itself. The relevant distinctions here do not end at the level of national origin. They extend inward, into the religious, political, gendered, and institutional differentiations that organize who can most effectively carry a claim across the threshold of public and policy legibility and interest. In the Afghan case, fragmentation did not arise solely because advocacy was weak, emergent, or poorly coordinated. It also reflected the fact that not all Afghan constituencies, nor all those advocating on their behalf, were positioned equally within Canada's domestic political and discursive order. Certain claims could be made to resonate with pre-existing narratives of minority protection, liberal humanitarian rescue, or feminist concern. Others remained more difficult to translate, either because they were entangled with securitized Muslim identities, because they exceeded administratively manageable categories, or because they pressed too directly against the limits of the state's preferred humanitarian self-image.

This is why it is important not to treat "diaspora advocacy," Afghan or otherwise, as though it were a singular political formation moving through institutions with a common voice and a shared stock of legitimacy. It was, rather, a stratified field of mediation in which access to political capital varied quite significantly. Some actors entered the field with affiliations that reduced perceived security concerns, with ties to elected officials, or with access to institutional partners already familiar to the state. Others relied on more emergent networks, on discursive fluency, coalition-building, and the moral pressure generated by Canada's own claims to humanitarian leadership. The difference did indeed matter for how it affected whether a claim was heard, but it also mattered because it shaped the very terms on which it could be heard at all.

My analysis therefore complicates normative assessments of diaspora advocacy that judge success chiefly by reference to inclusivity or representational breadth. Advocacy initiatives that opened pathways to protection often did so by narrowing the scope of contestation. They foregrounded claims that could be reconciled with prevailing risk assessments, available policy instruments, and familiar moral grammars. They did not necessarily challenge the deeper premises of securitized migration governance. More often, they worked within them, or around

them, translating refugee need into administratively and politically acceptable forms. Conversely, claims that exceeded these parameters, by pressing against restrictive family definitions, contesting securitization more directly, or demanding broader departures from established channels of governance, were more likely to stall even when articulated through widely shared humanitarian principles. In this sense, differential access was not merely the outcome of a fragmented field. It was one of the mechanisms through which that field was governed.

Viewed in this light, diaspora-based advocacy for Afghan refugees operated less as a unified movement than as a differentiated field of alignment, translation, and mediation. Some actors were able to harmonize political pressure, institutional precedent, and reputational discourse in ways that generated concrete openings. Others remained on the margins of recognisability, compelled to work harder for more uncertain gains. These positional differences shaped not only who was included, but how inclusion itself was structured: through which pathways, at what speed, under what justificatory language, and with what degree of visibility and permanence. What emerged, then, was both a fragmented advocacy landscape, and a patterned and uneven architecture of access, one in which diaspora actors played a consequential role while still moving within a sovereign order that retained the authority to decide which claims could enter, which could wait, and which could be left behind.

7.2 Selective Solidarities and Low-Risk Inclusion

Afghan Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan, a country with a Muslim majority, face deep-rooted widespread discrimination and have suffered deadly attacks from Daesh affiliates. Their community has been declining for years and many have fled Afghanistan to seek asylum in other countries.

The Manmeet Singh Bhullar Foundation will be the primary implementing partner... for the duration of one year to all principal applicants and their family members who will have immigrated to Canada under this temporary public policy.

— IRCC, *Temporary Public Policy to facilitate the resettlement of Afghan Sikhs and Hindus*, May 28, 2021

The policy for resettling Afghan Sikhs and Hindus constituted Canada's earliest formal response to escalating risks in Afghanistan in 2021, and for that reason it offers a revealing entry point into the differentiated politics of diaspora advocacy. Although implemented by the state, the measure

was closely intertwined with the political influence of Sikh and Hindu advocacy networks in Canada that had, over time, secured institutional access, electoral visibility, and credibility within policymaking spaces. In this respect, the policy illustrates a form of selective solidarity in which diaspora positioning—rather than ties of national origin alone—shaped which forms of vulnerability became legible and actionable in advance of the broader crisis.

The justificatory language of the policy is instructive. By attributing persecution primarily to “deep-rooted widespread discrimination” within a “Muslim-majority country” and to attacks by Daesh affiliates, the policy rendered “refugeeness”³⁹⁵ legible through a narrow civilizational frame. A complex political and security landscape was flattened into a diffuse environment of religious intolerance. This framing obscured the central role of the Taliban’s resurgence as a source of persecution and, more broadly, elided the fact that many Afghan Muslims—including women, ethnic and religious minorities, political dissidents, and civil society actors—were themselves subject to targeted violence by both the Taliban and Daesh. Vulnerability, in other words, was made most legible not through the broader crisis of state collapse and political violence, but through the narrower and more governable rubric of minority religious persecution

It is within this context that advocacy on behalf of Afghan Sikh and Hindu refugees illustrates a distinct mode of diaspora politics with selective humanitarian inclusions within Canada’s crisis-driven refugee governance, in which selective humanitarian inclusion was facilitated by the political capital of non-Afghan diaspora networks and comparatively low securitization profiles. Unlike broader Afghan advocacy initiatives that sought to expand protection across heterogeneous populations, this pathway emerged through narrowly bounded claims grounded in religious minority status, limited population size, and alignment with influential religious communities. The resulting policy outcome proved relatively timely and administratively manageable, but it also generated new hierarchies of legitimacy and contention among actors mobilizing on behalf of other subgroups of Afghan refugees.

On one hand, Sikh and Hindu Afghan nationals benefited from alignment with established segments of the Indian diaspora in Canada—an electorally significant and institutionally embedded community with extensive organizational capacities and political capital. With roughly 1.6 million people—about four percent of the Canadian population—the

³⁹⁵ Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees*, 45.

Indian diaspora is one of the most influential and fastest-growing demographic groups in the country.³⁹⁶ The Sikh community, in particular, is noted as a potent political force with deep organizational strength, a long history of activism, and a disciplined, concentrated voter base in critical electoral ridings that allows it to “punch above its weight in domestic politics.”³⁹⁷ Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s quip during his visit to American University in 2016—“I have more Sikhs in my cabinet than Modi does”³⁹⁸—further illustrates the community’s political visibility and influence. Conversely, the smaller and comparatively less influential population of Muslim Afghan-Canadians also highlights a notable limitation. As a newer national diaspora group in Canada, whose immigration began only after the 1980s, and whose networks, while politically active, lacked the same generational depth and institutional reach, it experienced more difficulty in lobbying for timely policies.

This influence carried across state and civil society partnerships. Central to the policy’s implementation, for instance, was the *Manmeet Singh Bhullar Foundation* (MSBF), which served as the primary implementing partner of the program and its exclusive Sponsorship Agreement Holder. This CSO assumed responsibilities typically reserved for state agencies or international organizations such as the UNHCR, insofar as it issued referral letters, submitted sponsorship and permanent-residence applications, and provided income support in accordance with federal guidelines. This delegation illustrates how state capacity in crisis contexts can be extended through trusted non-state intermediaries whose community legitimacy and bureaucratic fluency make them key instruments of selective humanitarian governance.

On the other hand, the religious identities of Sikh and Hindu Afghan refugees appear to have raised fewer securitization concerns than those associated with Muslim identities, whose resettlement was entangled with the discursive and legal legacies of the “war on terror.” Abu-Laban, Tungohan, and Gabriel describe such distinctions as part of the broader “criminalization” process in immigration and citizenship regimes, whereby certain groups are constructed as “undesired” because of the risks or threats they are imagined to pose.³⁹⁹ Afghan Muslims were

³⁹⁶ Bajeli-Datt, “The Rise of Indian-Origin Politicians in Canada - Socially Active, Politically Empowered.”

³⁹⁷ Bajeli-Datt, “The Rise of Indian-Origin Politicians in Canada - Socially Active, Politically Empowered”; Gopal, “Khalistani ‘Doom Loop’ and the Promise of India-Canada Relations.”

³⁹⁸ Bajeli-Datt, “The Rise of Indian-Origin Politicians in Canada - Socially Active, Politically Empowered.”

³⁹⁹ This is not to say that non-Muslim groups have been exempt from securitization. Tamil refugees, for example, despite being predominantly Hindu, were heavily scrutinized in Canada through discourses of ethno-nationalist terrorism. A fuller exploration of how terrorism designations are unevenly applied across different

thus more easily cast through the prism of Islamic terrorism, whereas Sikh and Hindu Afghans were positioned within a more negotiable humanitarian frame as vulnerable minorities fleeing persecution. As such, religious identity functioned as both a humanitarian marker and a governance technology, attributing deservingness by distancing claimants from dominant security imaginaries attached to Muslim identity.

The small population of Afghan Sikhs and Hindus also rendered a specialized program both administratively manageable and politically expedient. Initially, the pathway was capped at roughly three dozen applicants but underwent significant expansion as the situation on the ground continued to deteriorate. By April 2022, it had been incorporated into *Operation Afghan Safety* and increased to 300 applicants.⁴⁰⁰ By focusing on a small and narrowly defined group with established political support and a lower-risk profile, yet still circumscribing that support to incremental improvements over time, the government could extend access to protections while simultaneously “containing diversity.”⁴⁰¹ This approach enabled the state to demonstrate humanitarian responsiveness through a limited intake, while also constraining broader access for the larger and more “threatening” population of Afghan nationals.

Selective inclusions also reordered hierarchies of legitimacy among advocacy actors themselves. The attempted evacuation of Afghan Sikhs during the fall of Kabul became a flashpoint for contention between Sikh diaspora advocates and veteran-linked civil society actors who prioritized Afghan nationals employed by or affiliated with Canada’s military mission. Critics argued that, under conditions of extreme scarcity, operational resources should be directed first toward Canadians and then toward Afghans with direct institutional ties to Canada, framing the evacuation of Afghan Sikhs—despite their severe persecution—as a misordering of priorities rather than a rejection of humanitarian protection.

Moreover, the controversy surrounding the attempted evacuation of Afghan Sikhs during the fall of Kabul illustrates how selective inclusion did not merely fragment Afghan advocacy, but brought competing regimes of deservingness into direct contestation. Criticism of then–Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan emerged from some veterans and military-linked advocates who

religious and ethno-political contexts lies beyond the scope of this dissertation, but the contrast highlights the specificity of the Afghanistan case.

⁴⁰⁰ IRCC, “Temporary Public Policy to Facilitate the Resettlement of Afghan Sikhs and Hindus”; IRCC, “Temporary Public Policy to Facilitate the Resettlement of Afghan Sikhs and Hindus as Part of Operation Afghan Safety.”

⁴⁰¹ Abu-Laban et al., *Containing Diversity*.

alleged that Canadian special forces were directed to evacuate approximately 225 Afghan Sikhs during the August 2021 airlift. They claimed that the minister's directive diverted scarce resources away from evacuating Canadian citizens and Afghan nationals with direct institutional ties to Canada on the final outbound flights from Kabul.⁴⁰² As retired major-general David Fraser argued, "in a humanitarian crisis, we have a responsibility to get Canadians out first and we get Afghans out who helped us out next. Once you get all those people out, you can start to look at the rest."⁴⁰³ From this perspective, redirecting scarce and time-constrained operational resources toward Afghan Sikhs—who, despite facing severe persecution, "had no link to Canada," according to military sources⁴⁰⁴—was framed as a mismanagement of priority under conditions of extreme scarcity.

By contrast, Sikh diaspora advocates mobilized a different but equally selective humanitarian logic grounded in religious persecution and minority vulnerability. Sajjan himself defended his actions by insisting that "getting vulnerable groups – women, religious minorities, LGBTQ people – out of Kabul was a 'priority' for Canada," and that Afghan Sikhs were "amongst several vulnerable populations that Canada and its allies were working to bring to safety."⁴⁰⁵ Sikh organizations further rejected critiques of preferential treatment, with the *World Sikh Organization* describing allegations of impropriety as "deeply troubling" and "influenced by bias against his Sikh identity."⁴⁰⁶ The resulting dispute was thus not between inclusion and exclusion, but between competing selective claims, each grounded in distinct institutional histories, moral economies, and advocacy networks. In this way, Canada's crisis response demonstrated reordered hierarchies of legitimacy among advocates, producing contestations between constituencies whose claims were made intelligible within parts of Canada's refugee regime yet failed to translate effectively to others.

7.3 Broader Visions of Inclusion and Liberal Translation

⁴⁰² Fife and Chase, "Sajjan Instructed Special Forces to Rescue Afghan Sikhs during Fall of Kabul."

⁴⁰³ Fife and Chase, "Sajjan Instructed Special Forces to Rescue Afghan Sikhs during Fall of Kabul."

⁴⁰⁴ *The Globe and Mail*, "Globe Editorial"; Fife and Chase, "Sajjan Instructed Special Forces to Rescue Afghan Sikhs during Fall of Kabul."

⁴⁰⁵ Tasker, "Sajjan Says He Relayed Information on Rescuing Sikhs in Afghanistan during Chaotic Fall of Kabul"; *The Globe and Mail*, "Globe Editorial."

⁴⁰⁶ Tasker, "Sajjan Says He Relayed Information on Rescuing Sikhs in Afghanistan during Chaotic Fall of Kabul."

Afghan diaspora organizations in Canada have advanced their advocacy largely through the idiom of universal human rights, with women's rights operating as a central normative reference point within these claims. Organizations such as the *Afghan Women's Organization* (AWO) have foregrounded gender-based harms following the Taliban's return to power, emphasizing restrictions on women's access to employment and education, confinement to the home, the prevalence of forced marriages, and documented cases of persecution and public punishment.⁴⁰⁷ In its 2023 *International Women's Day* statement, AWO called for "solidarity with the women of Afghanistan... for their human rights, for their truth and justice."⁴⁰⁸ Similar themes were echoed by the broader coalition, the *Canadian Campaign for Afghan Peace* (CCAP), with which AWO is affiliated. In its open-letter, CCAP characterized the situation as a "full-scale humanitarian catastrophe" and called for the protection of "girls, women, and ethnic and religious minorities."⁴⁰⁹ By foregrounding human rights, the rule of law, freedom of expression, access to education, property rights, and women's empowerment, these organizations articulated a discursive framework that was both broadly inclusive and closely aligned with liberal humanitarian norms that have long structured Western engagement with Afghanistan.

These claims were mobilized through a coordinated coalition that functioned as an intermediary between Afghan-Canadian communities and the Canadian state. AYEDI played a central role in convening CCAP, bringing together actors from across "the Afghan community in Canada, Canadian civil society, international organizations, nonprofits, activists, and individually concerned citizens."⁴¹⁰ The coalition advanced a multifaceted agenda that included expanded eligibility criteria encompassing individuals still inside Afghanistan, increased resettlement commitments, immediate humanitarian assistance through NGOs and international partners, and protections for ethnic and religious minorities during Afghanistan's political transition.⁴¹¹ By combining experiential knowledge with legal, technical, and institutional expertise, the coalition translated dispersed grievances into policy-legible demands capable of gaining traction within federal decision-making processes.

⁴⁰⁷ Afghan Women's Organization, "AWO Presentation to Canadian Government Officials"; Afghan Women's Organization, "Statement on International Women's Day 2023."

⁴⁰⁸ Afghan Women's Organization, "Statement on International Women's Day 2023."

⁴⁰⁹ CCAP, *Open Letter: Immediate Action Canada Should Take to Help Afghans*.

⁴¹⁰ CCAP, *Open Letter: Immediate Action Canada Should Take to Help Afghans*.

⁴¹¹ CCAP, *Open Letter: Immediate Action Canada Should Take to Help Afghans*.

A defining feature of this advocacy was its strategic engagement with the liberal democratic and interventionist discourses that have long underpinned Canada's foreign policy orientation and national self-conception as a humanitarian actor. One of CCAP's central demands called on Canada to "ensure that any engagement with the ruling [Taliban] power be conditional upon the preservation of the progress achieved over the last 20 years with regards to democracy, human rights, freedom of speech, rule of law, and education for girls and women"⁴¹² closely mirroring the language historically deployed by the Canadian government to justify both its military involvement in Afghanistan and its broader counterterrorism agenda.⁴¹³ The coalition similarly framed Canada as a "beacon of freedom, rule of law, and human rights," and as "a beacon of hope for those in need,"⁴¹⁴ thereby reaffirming the state's humanitarian identity and its leadership role in refugee governance,⁴¹⁵ including its commitments under the *Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees*.⁴¹⁶ The invocation of Canada as a "beacon of hope" echoed language articulated at the outset of the post-9/11 era, when Prime Minister Jean Chrétien pledged that Canada would increase security if necessary, yet would "continue to offer refuge to the persecuted" and remain a "beacon of hope, freedom and tolerance in the world." That formulation, binding vigilance to refuge and security to humanitarian identity, had long structured the grammar of Canadian crisis governance. In drawing upon it, Afghan women-led advocates were activating a historically sedimented state vocabulary whose promise had always coexisted with a restrictive refugee and asylum regime.

Importantly, these invocations were *conditionally* tied Canada's humanitarian self-image to the coalition's normative demands, emphasizing that Canada "can do more to champion the rights of the most vulnerable in Afghanistan" and that "the fight for justice and equality in Afghanistan continues."⁴¹⁷ This politics of translation reflected back the image Canada seeks to project internationally,⁴¹⁸ while rendering that image contingent upon the delivery of concrete policy outcomes. If such an approach demonstrates mimicry, it does so not through the portrayal

⁴¹² CCAP, *Open Letter: Immediate Action Canada Should Take to Help Afghans*.

⁴¹³ Sjolander, and Trevenen, "Constructing Canadian Foreign Policy: Myths of Good International Citizens, Protectors, and the War in Afghanistan"; Klassen, "Methods of Empire: State Building, Development, and War in Afghanistan."

⁴¹⁴ CCAP, *Open Letter: Immediate Action Canada Should Take to Help Afghans*; AYEDI, *AYEDI Statement on the 3rd Anniversary of the Taliban Invasion of Afghanistan*.

⁴¹⁵ Abu-Laban et al., *Containing Diversity*, 69–74.

⁴¹⁶ Atak et al., "Canada's Implementation of the UN Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees."

⁴¹⁷ AYEDI, *AYEDI Statement on the 3rd Anniversary of the Taliban Invasion of Afghanistan*.

⁴¹⁸ Fassin, *Ebook of Humanitarian Reason*, 256–57.

of what Western states and refugees are, per se, but through what refugee advocates understand these states would like themselves and refugees to be. By framing their claims in terms consistent with the state's own vocabulary, these diaspora-led organizations enhanced the perceived legitimacy of their proposals, presenting them as natural extensions of Canada's established humanitarian legacy and responsibilities.

Policy outcomes, however, depended on more than discursive alignment alone. It also required favourable political conditions and recognizable precedents. The 2021 snap federal election was called on the same day Kabul fell to the Taliban (August 15),⁴¹⁹ immediately elevating Afghanistan to a salient issue within federal campaign debates. Diaspora-led movements mobilized quickly, launching a national campaign within days, assembling a multipartisan coalition spanning Canadian civil society, international organizations, nonprofit actors, and concerned citizens, and sustaining public pressure on party leaders to articulate concrete policy commitments.⁴²⁰ Demands advanced after the election, such as expanding resettlement to 95,000 individuals, were less successful, gaining support only from smaller political parties.⁴²¹ This contrast underscores the importance of electoral timing in shaping the reach of rights-based advocacy. Diaspora advocates also mobilized the 2015 Syrian refugee response as a concrete benchmark for both the speed and scale of Canada's obligations. *Operation Syrian Refugees*, through which the federal government resettled more than 25,000 Syrians within 100 days, has been widely characterized as an exceptional, politically driven intervention enabled by electoral incentives, heightened media visibility, and extraordinary coordination across government institutions.⁴²² Afghan advocacy coalitions invoked this precedent not merely as a moral analogy, but as empirical evidence that similarly rapid and expansive measures were administratively feasible and politically achievable when sufficient political will was mobilized.⁴²³ In addition, Canada's recent leadership in advancing the Global

⁴¹⁹ Department of National Defence, "Operation AEGIS"; Rosenberg, "Report on the Assessment of the 2021 Critical Election Incident Public Protocol."

⁴²⁰ CCAP, *National Campaign Launches Calling on Canada to Take Further Immediate Action for Afghanistan*.

⁴²¹ CCAP, "Petition E-3750 - Petitions"; CCAP, *Green Party of Canada Endorses Afghan-Canadian Coalition Positions, Joining NDP in Standing Up for Afghanistan*; CCAP, *Campaign Update*.

⁴²² Hamilton et al., "How Operation Syrian Refugees Informs Canada's Responses to Current and Future Refugee Crises."

⁴²³ CCAP, *Campaign Update*; Marchand, "Canada Promised to Bring in 40,000 Afghan Refugees. Only 8,500 Have Arrived," 40; Pulfer, "Canada Needs to Fast-Track Afghan Resettlement. NGOs and Veterans Are a Crucial Part of the Solution."

Compacts created a normative environment in which claims framed around gender equality, responsibility-sharing, and expanded pathways to protection were particularly salient. The federal government routinely framed its Afghan resettlement response in direct reference to the Compacts, presenting it as an expression of Canada's obligations under these global frameworks.⁴²⁴ Even when not cited explicitly, the Compacts functioned as reputational reference points, increasing the political costs of inaction.

Mobilized under these conditions, advocacy translated into concrete outcomes. In August 2021, Canada announced a resettlement target of 20,000 Afghan refugees; within weeks, the Liberal government doubled this commitment to 40,000, aligning directly with CCAP's demands.⁴²⁵ The government also allocated \$50 million in emergency humanitarian assistance to UN agencies and the Red Cross,⁴²⁶ although disbursement remained constrained by the antiterrorism legislation discussed in the previous chapter. Administrative adjustments—including limited streamlining of biometric requirements and modest improvements to family reunification—further eased access for some applicants. These developments underscore the practical force of rights-based and reputationally attuned advocacy when it converges with electoral timing, institutional precedent, and a government publicly invested in humanitarian self-presentation.

Yet this mode of translation also carried identifiable limits. The liberal humanitarian frames that enabled policy traction narrowed, at the same time, the range of claims that could be advanced without losing legibility. By centring Afghan deservingness through familiar idioms of rescue, freedom, women's rights, and human rights, advocacy risked reproducing the same gendered and racialized narratives that have long organized Western humanitarian engagement with Afghanistan. Protection became most intelligible when articulated through vulnerability rather than through political agency, structural critique, or historical responsibility. This tension does not diminish the significance of women-led diaspora advocacy. It clarifies its paradoxical position within liberal governance where its effectiveness depended precisely on its capacity to harmonize with a discursive repertoire that also constrained how Afghan self-determination, resistance, and historical agency could be represented.

⁴²⁴ IRCC, "Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada Departmental Plan 2023-2024."

⁴²⁵ CCAP, *Statement on the Canadian Federal Election Results*.

⁴²⁶ CCAP, *Campaign Update*.

This tension does not negate the significance of women-led diaspora advocacy, but it does underscore its paradoxical position within liberal governance. Rights-based translation proved effective precisely because it harmonized with the state's existing discursive repertoire, yet that same repertoire constrained how Afghan agency, resistance, and self-determination could be articulated. The implications of this paradox—where advocacy both expands access to protection and risks reinforcing the epistemic foundations of selective inclusion—are taken up more fully in the chapter's concluding synthesis.

7.4 Comparative Asymmetry and the Ukrainian Exception

One of the first things that I looked at when we understood there was the potential for an influx of Ukrainians... [was] whether we could stand up a refugee resettlement program, and we quickly realized that would be inappropriate for the circumstances and would take too long... we've been able to create this program that doesn't have an upper limit... because we're not looking at traditional refugee resettlement... If we learned anything about Ukrainians who are fleeing this conflict, it's that they love their homeland and they want to go back when the war is over...

With respect to Afghanistan, the reason the approach is different... is that the people who are fleeing Afghanistan, we're planning to have them become Canadians and to live here forever. When you have a permanent resettlement process, that works into our annual levels planning to make sure we're prepared to resettle and set people up for success on a permanent basis... We've made a specific commitment to individuals — specific individuals who worked or fought alongside the Canadian Forces — and most of those people are still inside Afghanistan, and the Taliban, who seized control of the region, which is a terrorist entity under Canadian law, is not letting them leave...

So, the circumstances are quite different between the two efforts, but I'm very proud, because Canada — in both Ukraine and Afghanistan — has really become the world leader when it comes to welcoming those fleeing humanitarian crises.

— then-Immigration Minister Sean Fraser, March 6, 2022⁴²⁷

The uneven outcomes generated by Afghan diaspora advocacy become most visible when situated alongside Canada's response to Ukrainian displacement. Rather than constituting a parallel humanitarian case, the Ukrainian response operates as an example of the structural limits

⁴²⁷ Lee, "Most Ukrainians Coming to Canada Will Want to Return Home."

of both diaspora-led advocacy and Canada's refugee governance architecture. The divergence between the two responses cannot be reduced to geopolitics or international relations alone, but rather make visible the deeper assumptions within Canadian refugee politics concerning temporality, race, national belonging, and the appropriate subjects of state protections.

These asymmetries became especially apparent following Canada's rapid implementation of the *Canada–Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel* (CUAET) program in March 2022.⁴²⁸ Within less than one month of the program's launch, Canada authorized entry for more than 41,000 Ukrainians through temporary residence pathways. This expansion occurred at a moment when Canada had yet to fulfill its earlier pledge to resettle 40,000 Afghans—nearly a year after the fall of Kabul—and when Afghan admissions continued to be delayed by security screening requirements, logistical constraints, and capped program design.⁴²⁹ Unlike Afghan resettlement initiatives, CUAET imposed no cap on admission and bypassed the formal refugee resettlement system altogether.⁴³⁰ The speed and scale of this response intensified public and scholarly scrutiny of Canada's differential legal-administrative treatment of displaced populations and raised renewed questions about how humanitarian urgency is defined, operationalized, and selectively applied.⁴³¹

These distinctions were articulated explicitly in this section's opening quote from the then–Minister of Immigration Sean Fraser, who defended the stark difference between Canada's Afghan and Ukrainian responses on the grounds that a traditional refugee resettlement program would have been “inappropriate” for Ukrainians because it would “take too long.” The statement invites an unavoidable question, as to why delays were deemed unacceptable in the Ukrainian case, yet treated as administratively routine and necessary in the Afghan one, even as Afghan civilians faced escalating insecurity, targeted reprisals, and acute humanitarian collapse. Minister Fraser explained that Ukrainians were being admitted as temporary residents expected to return once conditions improved, whereas Afghans were processed as permanent residents whom Canada was “planning to have... live here forever.” While framed as a context-sensitive humanitarian distinction, this reasoning sorted displaced populations into distinct temporal

⁴²⁸ CIMM, “CUAET Overview.”

⁴²⁹ Azadah, “The Necropolitics of Canada's Afghan Resettlement Programmes.”

⁴³⁰ Azadah, “The Necropolitics of Canada's Afghan Resettlement Programmes.”

⁴³¹ Hyndman, “The Russian Invasion of Ukraine and Humanitarian Nationalism in Canada”; Fong and Saar, “Canada Needs to Be as Welcoming to Afghan Refugees as It Is to Ukrainians.”

categories that carried differential treatment and assessments of urgency. The notion of “temporariness,” as such, functioned as an enabling condition for urgent and administrative flexibility, whereas “permanence” justified prolonged, securitized processing.

The temporal logic at work here intersects with racialized and civilizational assumptions about conflict and displacement. Public commentary surrounding the invasion of Ukraine made such assumptions unusually explicit. Take, for instance, CBS correspondent Charlie D’Agata’s comments on Ukraine, that it

isn’t a place, with all due respect, like Iraq or Afghanistan, that has seen conflict raging for decades. This is a relatively civilized, relatively European – I have to choose those words carefully, too – city, one where you wouldn’t expect that, or hope that it’s going to happen.⁴³²

His remarks articulated, however controversially, a hierarchy of expectation in which war in some regions of the world appear aberrational and intolerable, while in others it is expected and normalized. Although Fraser’s remarks were more measured, the underlying structure of differentiation was not entirely dissimilar. The framing of Ukrainians as temporary visitors presumed both the imminence of return and the stability of a European homeland to which return was conceivable. Yet nearly four years into the Russo-Ukrainian war, mass displacement persists, and many of the more than 300,000 Ukrainians admitted to Canada under temporary measures have sought permanent settlement.⁴³³ The presumed temporariness that justified administrative acceleration has proven far less certain in practice. As such, Ukrainians were positioned as returnable, culturally proximate subjects whose displacement posed minimal disruption to the imagined national order. Afghans, by contrast, were framed as future citizens whose admission reflected a diversity that necessitated containment through extensive vetting, integration planning, and incorporation within annual immigration targets.

Beyond the temporal distinctions articulated by the Minister of Immigration, state officials advanced further explanations for the differential treatment, emphasizing Afghanistan’s specific security and diplomatic constraints. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and senior government officials repeatedly cited Taliban non-cooperation, insecurity on the ground, and the necessity of extensive security screenings as primary obstacles to resettlement.⁴³⁴ Capacity was

⁴³² Bayoumi, “They Are ‘Civilised’ and ‘Look like Us.’”

⁴³³ Ricci, “More than 3 Years after Relocating to Canada, Ukrainians Say Their Lives Remain in Limbo.”

⁴³⁴ Azadah, “The Necropolitics of Canada’s Afghan Resettlement Programmes.”

also invoked as a limitation. As a spokesperson for the Minister of Immigration claimed, the volume of interest from Afghan applicants far exceeded what Canada could reasonably process, necessitating difficult exclusions despite public commitments.⁴³⁵

These official explanations did not go uncontested. Many scholars, activists, and immigration lawyers argued that the discrepancies between the Afghan and Ukrainian responses could not be reduced to diplomatic or logistical constraints. Some described the disparity as “night and day,” contending that the government’s demonstrated capacity to implement flexible, timely, and streamlined mechanisms for Ukrainians indicated that the slower and more restrictive approach applied to Afghans reflected policy prioritization rather than structural inevitability.⁴³⁶ Others pointed to entrenched racial hierarchies within the Canadian immigration and refugee system, arguing that whiteness, European origin, and geopolitical proximity facilitated a form of humanitarian generosity rarely extended to racialized populations from the Global South.⁴³⁷ Related critiques drew attention to disparities in media coverage and humanitarian aid flows,⁴³⁸ reinforcing perceptions among advocates, and even among displaced Afghans themselves, that they had been “forgotten” or “left to die.”⁴³⁹

Read through the lens of the *armonia effect*, the Ukrainian response illustrates a level of resonance that Afghan advocacy, however sustained, could not fully replicate. The implementation of the CUAET, with its rapid and robust administrative flexibility, uncapped admission, and political consensus suggests a conjuncture in which humanitarian urgency, geopolitical alignment, racial proximity, and domestic political incentives came together with minimal institutional resistance. In this sense, the “airflow” of crisis-driven refugee politics encountered few structural stops, as temporariness enabled accelerated protections, racial and cultural familiarity reduced securitized suspicion, and political consensus across Canadian society and government that rendered an unprecedented expansion of state protections operationally viable and straightforward. The result was a response that exceeded what routine

⁴³⁵ Azadah, “The Necropolitics of Canada’s Afghan Resettlement Programmes.”

⁴³⁶ Sachdeva, “‘Night and Day.’”

⁴³⁷ Kuluberhan, “Opinion”; Levitz, “Why Doesn’t Canada Treat Afghan Refugees like Ukrainians? Because They Aren’t ‘White and Christian,’ Complaint Alleges”; Pardy, “Why Are Some Refugees More Welcome in Canada than Others?”

⁴³⁸ Colombo, “Are Death and Suffering in Ukraine Different than in Yemen, Afghanistan or Ethiopia?”

⁴³⁹ Bergeron-Oliver and Cousins, “Bureaucratic Red Tape Is Leaving Afghan Refugees on the Tarmac, Canadian Veterans Warn”; Stewart, “Afghan Refugees Approved for Canada Relocation Languish in Pakistan.”

refugee governance would ordinarily permit, something that Hyndman has termed as “humanitarian nationalism.”⁴⁴⁰

The politics that emboldened Canada’s Ukrainian response thus highlights a horizon that lies beyond the outer limit of the *armonia effect* as it operated in the Afghan case. Even where Afghan diaspora advocacy successfully harmonized liberal humanitarian discourse, electoral incentives, and reputational commitments, it could not dislodge the deeper racialized and temporal logics that differentiated between temporary and permanent displacement, or between populations framed as “easily absorbed into Canadian society” and those subjected to “nine degrees of security scrutiny.”⁴⁴¹ Read alongside the Afghan cases examined in earlier sections, the Ukrainian exception clarifies the structural constraints within which diaspora-led advocacy operates. Such advocacy can expand pathways, increase commitments, and modestly alter legal-administrative practices. It cannot, on its own, however, overturn the assumptions that govern who may move, how quickly they can move, who must wait, how long they must wait, and whose protection remains conditional.

7.5 Conclusion

The cases examined in this chapter demonstrate both the generative capacity and the potential limitations of diaspora-led advocacy within crisis-driven refugee governance. Across distinct forms of mobilization, advocacy proved capable of opening policy pathways, expanding resettlement commitments, and reshaping the public grammar of humanitarian obligation. Yet these gains were consistently partial, uneven, and fragile. The *armonia effect* helps to account for these outcomes by foregrounding the extent to which advocacy succeeds in harmonizing its moral claims with state discourses, institutional precedents, and opportune political junctures. At the same time, this process exposes a less visible dimension of advocacy-driven change, in which inclusion is expanded without fundamentally displacing the hierarchies that structure refugee governance.

⁴⁴⁰ Hyndman, “The Russian Invasion of Ukraine and Humanitarian Nationalism in Canada.”

⁴⁴¹ Fong and Saar, “Canada Needs to Be as Welcoming to Afghan Refugees as It Is to Ukrainians.”

Across the Afghan cases, policy outcomes for refugees depended on the ability of diaspora and civil society actors to translate claims into forms compatible with dominant neoliberal-multicultural and securitized frameworks. Advocacy on behalf of Afghan Sikhs and Hindus succeeded through selective solidarity grounded in religious minority status and the political capital of more established diaspora networks, producing a bounded yet timely pathway to protection. Women-led coalitions secured broader commitments by mobilizing a robust and inclusive set of discourses compatible under frameworks of universal human rights and gender equality, aligning their demands with Canada's humanitarian self-image and international reputation. In each instance, advocacy operated primarily through intermediation rather than radical or decolonial contestation, working within the state's diversity-inflected grammar of refugee deservingness, risk, and responsibility. The result was a relative expansion of pathways layered onto an institutional architecture designed to manage, sort, and ultimately contain mobility.

My comparative analysis of the Afghan and Ukrainian responses helped grasp the outer limits of the *armonia* effect. Despite the convergence of significant advocacy pressures, electoral incentives, and reputational concerns, advocates for Afghan refugees were unable to secure a response comparable in speed, scale, or flexibility to the uncapped temporary pathways extended to Ukrainians. This contrast underscored the depth of the assumptions that condition humanitarian generosity in Canada, and particularly those relating to race, temporality, and national belonging. It also demonstrated that even highly effective advocacy efforts are unlikely to override deeply embedded governing logics that differentiate between populations understood as culturally proximate, temporary and returnable, and those rendered racialized and Othered, and whose protection is feared to imply permanent residence. In this sense, the Ukrainian exception helps elucidate the structural ceiling against which Afghan advocacy ultimately pressed.

These limits are also deeply epistemic. The liberal humanitarian frameworks that render refugee claims legible also impose constraints on how suffering, agency, and deservingness can be articulated. Afghan identity, particularly when gendered and racialized, often becomes a floating signifier through which both selective openness and restrictive control are justified. Within refugee governance, women's suffering is frequently rendered intelligible through narrow scripts of vulnerability and rescue, leaving little political space to grapple with the complexities

of gendered power, resistance, or historical complicity with conflict and displacement. International organizations and the refugee sector more broadly have often reinforced these reductive frames, even as they operate in the name of protection.

Critical scholarship on asylum governance helps to clarify how such narrative constraints are structurally embedded rather than incidental. Research on U.S. asylum adjudication, for example, demonstrates how advocates are often compelled to depict countries of origin as incapable of protection in order to render claims legible within liberal legal frameworks. Susan Berger characterizes this dynamic as a “discursive merry-go-round,” one that reproduces paternalistic hierarchies while depoliticizing the global conditions that generate displacement. Gilberto Rosas similarly observes that liberal legal regimes demand testimonies saturated with racialized and gendered projections of violence and despair to justify admission. As he argues, applicants are required to render their homelands “so hopeless, so bleak, so full of imminent danger” that protection becomes morally unavoidable. Although developed in the context of the U.S.–Mexico border, these insights resonate strongly with the Afghan refugee case in Canada, where advocacy frequently relied on familiar narratives of gendered and racialized suffering to establish legitimacy.

These narrative constraints help explain why advocacy success often carried epistemic costs. By foregrounding vulnerability and moral urgency, diaspora-led advocacy enhanced the perceived legitimacy of refugee claims while narrowing the political horizons through which Afghan agency, resistance, and self-determination could be articulated. Such frames have been central to mobilizing support for intervention and admission, lowering the perceived threat of entry by presenting protection as an apolitical act of compassion. Yet this sympathy is not without consequence. It risks reproducing colonial forms of paternalism, casting Afghan populations as objects of rescue rather than political subjects. In this sense, refugee protection operates less as a rights-based regime than as a mode of governance that sustains global hierarchies—what Susan Kneebone has described as “exclusionary inclusion.”

The material limits of advocacy became especially visible at the level of policy implementation. While new pathways and expanded commitments created tangible avenues for protection, many eligible applicants remained in hiding or waited months—sometimes years—for updates, approvals, or clearance to resettle. Improvements to family reunification were narrow, and administrative barriers persisted. These outcomes demonstrate that discursive

resonance alone cannot overcome the structural constraints of securitization, legal exceptionalism, and bureaucratic gatekeeping.

None of this diminishes the significance of diaspora-led advocacy. On the contrary, the interventions examined here saved lives, expanded access to protection, and materially reshaped Canada's refugee response at a moment of acute crisis. Afghan diaspora groups—particularly the second-generation, women-led core of AYEDI and its leadership within broader coalitions—operated as intermediaries between displaced populations and the Canadian state. They did not merely transmit grievances. They translated lived experiences of displacement, Taliban persecution, and gender-based violence into the language of Canadian liberal democracy, mobilizing affect and institutional authority to convert suffering into a resonant claim on state responsibility. The politics of Afghan survival thus moved across borders and generations, repurposing the state's own humanitarian repertoire to demand protection in the aftermath of failed liberal interventionism.

The other side of the *armonia effect*, then, does not necessarily lie in co-optation or appropriation, but in the paradoxical engagement and situational reproduction of hierarchies through successful advocacy, lobbying, and intervention. Diaspora-led movements were able to negotiate inclusions by differentiating between populations, claims, and temporalities—between religious minorities and Muslim Afghans, between feminized vulnerability and securitized risk, between temporary European displacement and permanent Global South resettlement. These distinctions were themselves the conditions under which advocacy gains became possible. Harmonization opened doors, but largely those the system was already receptive to unlock.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

The meaning of the imperial past is not totally contained within it, but has entered the reality of hundreds of millions of people, where its existence as shared memory and as highly conflictual texture of culture, ideology, and policy still exercises tremendous force.

— Edward W. Said, 1994⁴⁴²

Said's observation is not a general lament about the persistence of the past, nor a simple reminder that history continues to matter. It is a claim about the afterlife of empire as an active and unsettled inheritance, one that continues to organize memory, culture, ideology, and policy long after formal episodes of conquest, intervention, occupation, or withdrawal are declared complete. The imperial past survives not as a sealed archive, but as a field of relation, remembered unevenly, narrated competitively, institutionalized selectively, and made actionable through the practices of states. This dissertation has proceeded from a similar premise. Canada's response to Afghan displacement cannot be understood only as a sequence of refugee programs, visa categories, parliamentary debates, or administrative failures. It belongs to a longer and wider history in which Afghanistan, Canada, and the international refugee regime have been drawn into overlapping geographies of intervention, alliance, securitization, humanitarian obligation, and selective admission.

It is from within this problem of inheritance, rather than from outside it, that the form of this dissertation must be understood. The project began with a broader concern about relation, regarding how Afghan refugees, other racialized (im)migrants, Indigenous peoples, and white European-origin settlers are situated within the same settler-colonial order, though never on equal historical or political terms. That question remains central to the horizon of this work. Yet it could not be approached responsibly by beginning only at the moment of arrival, settlement, or incorporation. Before asking what Afghan refugees are being admitted into, I first had to ask how they had been rendered admissible, inadmissible, conditionally protectable, or administratively deferred across different historical conjunctures. Before turning fully to the relations among differently positioned peoples on these lands, it was necessary to reconstruct the global and Canadian histories through which Afghan displacement became legible as an object of policy, advocacy, suspicion, obligation, and rescue. The settler-colonial question was therefore not

⁴⁴² Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 12.

abandoned. It was deferred in order to be approached with greater historical discipline, and with a fuller sense of the imperial, military, humanitarian, and securitized histories that Afghan refugees carry with them into what is now called Canada.

This dissertation therefore began with a set of questions emerging from a historical pattern. For decades, Afghan nationals comprised one of the world's largest and most protracted refugee populations. Their displacement stretched across generations, across regimes, across continents. Yet within Canadian refugee politics, it remained peripheral, acknowledged episodically but rarely addressed in a substantive manner. Then, in 2021, the collapse of the Afghan state precipitated the largest resettlement initiative for Afghan refugees in Canada's history. An unprecedented expansion. And still, it drew sustained criticism. Why did this moment generate such scale, and such contestation? Why did veterans, figures that are more commonly associated with theatres of war than with refugee protection, become visible intermediaries of mobility? And why had earlier periods, marked by comparable or even greater displacement, produced such little political resonance?

Across the chapters of this dissertation, I have argued that these developments are best understood through what I call the *armonia effect*. Protection did not expand in 2021 solely because the suffering intensified, nor because administrative capacity suddenly became available. It expanded because advocacy, discourse, and institutional precedent converged in a prism that rendered Afghan displacement newly legible within Canadian political life. Civil society actors, veterans, and diaspora organizations translated moral claims into vocabularies the state could more readily recognize—obligation, partnership, vulnerability, humanitarian leadership, minority protection. Where such claims could be harmonized with existing discursive and institutional frameworks, policy openings followed. Where this harmonization was partial, fragile, or absent, protection was delayed, narrowed, or withheld. The effect, in this sense, names not openness in the abstract, but the selective amplification by certain advocates through which some refugee claims became urgent, plausible, and actionable within the state's governing repertoire while others remained comparatively muted.

This resonance unfolded within a governing architecture not of the moment, but of inheritance. Cold War containment. Post-9/11 counterterrorism regimes. Militarized humanitarianism. The politics of withdrawal. Each left sediment within the annals of Canadian law and policy. The Afghan case does not present a rupture in refugee governance so much as it

does a reorganization of its modalities. And crisis did not suspend sovereign authority so much as it redistributed it. Responsibility migrated across diplomatic channels, sanction regimes, special pathways, and civil society partnerships, while admission, recognition, and mobility remained anchored in state discretions. The armonia effect clarifies how advocacy can generate openings within this field of constraint. It also clarifies why those openings are selective, uneven, and frequently provisional.

The conditions that enabled resonance in 2021 were assembled over time. Chapter Two demonstrated that Afghan displacement during the Cold War failed to generate a comparable field of advocacy, not because compassion was absent, but because the demographic presence, institutional channels, and discursive alignment necessary for harmonization had yet to coalesce. Chapter Three traced the consolidation of counterterrorism governance after 2001, narrowing the institutional terrain within which protection could be pursued and embedding risk management at the centre of refugee policy. Chapter Four examined how narratives of allyship, gendered rescue, and civilizational defence configured Afghan deservingness during the war years, preparing the ground for later mobilization. Chapter Five situated the 2021 crisis within the politics of withdrawal, where migration diplomacy, sanctions, and anticipatory containment delimited the horizons of mobility even as evacuation unfolded. Chapters Six and Seven then analyzed the distinct interventions of veterans and diaspora actors, whose advocacy translated refugee claims into policy-legible demands through different, sometimes competing, registers of obligation and belonging.

Refugee governance, as the Afghan case makes clear, does not operate through a single institutional register or from a single site of sovereign intention. It is dispersed across fragmented laws, diplomatic arrangements, policy instruments, advocacy networks, and discursive formations that do not always move in concert. Protection becomes politically imaginable only when claims reverberate across these domains—when they can be translated into familiar vocabularies, aligned with historical precedent, and routed through channels the state already knows how to recognize and administer. The armonia effect names this conjunctural alignment. It is not a romantic metaphor for harmony, still less a claim that crises produce coherence. It is an analytic for understanding why certain crises acquire unusual traction within state structures while others, no less devastating, remain comparatively faint within the political ear. It directs

attention to timing, mediation, and legibility, and insists that even in moments of expansion, the limits of protection remain structured by the very architecture through which they are negotiated.

8.1 The Armonia Effect: Openings and Limits

One of the central findings of this dissertation is that the post-2021 expansion of protection cannot be understood apart from the field of advocacy that animated it. Protection did not emanate from the state as a spontaneous humanitarian reflex. It was pressed into motion by actors who altered the terrain upon which policy could be debated, contested, and made plausible in administrative terms. Veterans, diaspora organizations, humanitarian advocates, journalists, and legal actors helped translate the Afghan crisis into claims that could circulate within Canada's institutional vocabularies and moral economies. The armonia effect thus becomes visible not in advocacy alone, nor in state response alone, but in the unstable relation between and across these domains, in those moments when heterogeneous pressures acquired enough resonance to make new pathways of protection possible.

This advocacy field, however, was not a unified front, nor was it capacious in equal measure. Veterans' groups stood among the most visible and politically consequential, yet their advocacy was structured through a distinctly militarized moral economy. Loyalty, reciprocity, wartime camaraderie and sacrifice. Interpreters and LES were made legible as "the ally" who had "stood shoulder to shoulder," with Canadian troops. The framing proved to be effective because of its alignment with established narratives of national sacrifice and obligation promoted during the Harper-era Conservatives and the neoconservative tenor of its immigration and foreign policy approaches. But it also delineated its own boundaries of deservingness. Those whose vulnerability was no less severe but whose relationship to Canada was less institutionally legible remained more peripheral to its claims.

The relative absence of sustained veterans' advocacy on behalf of Afghan women renders this dynamic especially visible. During the war, women's rights had functioned as a central moral idiom of military intervention and reconstruction efforts. Gender equality was invoked as evidence of Canada's purpose, to promote democracy, progress, and freedom. After the withdrawal, however, women rarely occupied the foreground of veterans' efforts in the same

sustained manner as they did within diaspora-led campaigns. The language of women's protection persisted, but more as atmospheric justification to describe the civilizational difference and threat between Canada's enemies and allies than as an organizing principle for interventions and contestations on behalf of women and minorities themselves. This sort of disjuncture recalls earlier critiques of Western engagement in Afghanistan, where gender equality served as a legitimating discourse, even while it remained unevenly embedded in military strategy and post-war governance.

Diaspora-based mobilization moved through a different, and in some respects broader, register. These actors mobilized liberal-humanitarian idioms of universal rights, minority protection, women's equality, and civilian vulnerability, thereby widening the conceptual field in which deservingness could be articulated. Their interventions helped secure broader commitments and diversify the channels through which protection might be pursued. Yet they too encountered limits structured by institutional familiarity, political capital, and perceived risk. Claims advanced on behalf of non-Muslim religious minorities often travelled through more established political networks and were met with less securitized suspicion. Broader claims on behalf of Afghan civilians, particularly those without recognized minority status or institutionally legible ties, faced a more durable barrier of resistance. What emerged, then, was not a singular opening of inclusion, but a stratified landscape of admission, in which multiple pathways expanded while remaining unevenly accessible.

The relationship between veterans' and diaspora-led mobilizations further clarifies the conditional character of resonance. These constituencies did not coalesce into a unified advocacy bloc. Their claims sometimes intersected, but their priorities, constituencies, and political grammars diverged. Veterans foregrounded obligation to wartime partners; diaspora actors more often emphasized humanitarian protection, rights-based inclusion, or the differentiated vulnerabilities of women, minorities, and other civilians. Coordination was episodic rather than consolidated. The *armonia* effect, in this sense, does not presume cohesion. It identifies those moments when different claims, without losing their difference, acquire sufficient alignment with prevailing state vocabularies to generate movement in concrete policy terms. That alignment is always contingent. It is shaped by timing, narrative compatibility, institutional familiarity, political proximity, and the extent to which a claim can be rendered intelligible, actionable, and low-risk within the state's governing frame.

Such dynamics complicate celebratory accounts of Canada's response. The period after 2021 did witness a significant expansion of protection, and advocacy was indispensable to that outcome. Yet the distribution of protection remained structured by longstanding hierarchies of inclusion and belonging. The Afghan case therefore shows that resonance can widen the space of admission without dismantling the selective logics that organize it. Doors did open, but they opened most readily for those already, or most successfully, inscribed within Canada's moral and political imagination. More broadly, this is what the *armonia* effect helps to explain beyond the Afghan case itself. That is, why some crises, or some subjects within them, acquire unusual traction within restrictive systems of refugee governance, while others remain faintly audible, deferred in time, or never fully heard at all.

This dissertation has traced the selective expansion of protection, but it has also pointed, if more quietly, to the political ground upon which that selectivity was organized. The sovereign problem at issue was never only one of administrative discretion, diplomatic negotiation, or humanitarian design. It was also bound to a settler-colonial order in which the Canadian state continues to assert authority over movement, admission, and political belonging on lands whose prior legal and political orders endure rather than disappear. In that sense, the influential advocacy formations examined here did not confront sovereignty from some exterior position. More often, they moved through its hierarchies, translating Afghan suffering into claims the state could hear without loosening its governing prerogatives.

Bakan and Abu-Laban's work is instructive here, especially in showing that solidarity in settler-colonial contexts cannot be detached from land, dispossession, and the specific racisms through which claims are denied, recoded, or cast as excessive.⁴⁴³ Palestine, they argue, makes this especially legible. It shows how states in the Global North may speak in the language of security and humanitarian necessity even as they continue to regulate which forms of suffering become politically audible, and on what terms. Amar Bhatia presses the question further by refusing the presumption that the Crown's authority over migration is self-grounding. His work asks what it means to claim a right to be here at all in the settler-colonial context of Canada, and suggests that such a right cannot be understood apart from treaty relations, Indigenous law, and

⁴⁴³ Bakan and Abu-Laban, "Anti-Palestinian Racism, Antisemitism, and Solidarity."

contested jurisdiction.⁴⁴⁴ Arat-Koç, in turn, warns against a refugee politics organized through charity, gratitude, or easy analogy. If refugee and Indigenous struggles sometimes converge, they do so without guarantees, and only through a politics of place attentive to displacement, imperial violence, sovereignty, and the unequal terms on which states make suffering visible and protection imaginable.⁴⁴⁵

Read from within the present conjuncture, this analytic may also cast light on the direction of Canadian refugee governance in the years ahead. Under Prime Minister Mark Carney, and in the aftermath of Bill C-12's enactment in March 2026, the institutional terrain of asylum in Canada appears to be hardening, marked by new limits on eligibility, expanded administrative powers, and a renewed language of control, deterrence, and border management.⁴⁴⁶ At the same time, escalating conflict in the Middle East has produced further displacement and cross-border movement, including large-scale displacement in Lebanon and significant internal displacement and outward movement from Iran,⁴⁴⁷ even as Canada remains home to large and internally differentiated Iranian and Lebanese diasporas whose interventions are unlikely to proceed in a single voice or according to a singular grammar of deservingness. If the Afghan case offers a wider lesson, it is that future Canadian responses to such crises will not be determined by volume of need alone. They will be shaped by the uneven politics through which refugee claims are translated, stratified, and made resonant across civil society and the state.

But the parallax gap cannot be left aside here. As ministerial powers and discretions expand, the armonia effect can help explain why some claims may still acquire traction while others do not. Yet it also directs attention to the deeper sovereign architecture through which all such claims are filtered. What may appear, at one level, as a broader convergence toward restriction, deterrence, and control must still be read, in the Canadian case, through the unsettled conditions of a settler state whose authority over mobility and admission rests on contested ground. Further work on the armonia effect may therefore help clarify not only how emerging

⁴⁴⁴ Bhatia, "'In a Settled Country, Everyone Must Eat'"; Bhatia, "The South of the North"; Bhatia, "We Are All Here to Stay?"

⁴⁴⁵ Arat-Koç, "Decolonizing Refugee Studies, Standing up for Indigenous Justice."

⁴⁴⁶ IRCC, "New Immigration and Asylum Measures from Bill C-12 (the Strengthening Canada's Immigration System and Borders Act) Have Become Law"; CCR, "Passing of Bill C-12 Is an Attack on Refugee and Migrant Rights in Canada."

⁴⁴⁷ Ito, "UNHCR"; Ali and Chughtai, "Iran to Lebanon."

claims to protection are mediated by shifting questions of legibility, security, and moral obligation, but also how the expanding administrative reach of refugee governance risks widening, rather than narrowing, the distance between refugee protection and the ongoing settler-colonial ordering of land, jurisdiction, and political belonging.

Any fuller account of Afghan resettlement in what is now called Canada cannot end at the moment of admission, as though arrival were the conclusion of governance rather than its continuation in another key. Resettlement is not the terminus of the story but its entry into a different register, in the ordinary and intimate life of settlement, where power persists less through dramatic acts of exclusion than through the repeated disciplines of incorporation, integration, and social relation. It continues in schools and workplaces, in sponsorship arrangements and community associations, in mosques, advocacy circles, and neighbourhoods, and in that dense, uneven field of relationships, solidarities, misunderstandings, and tensions through which distinct peoples come to inhabit the same lands without ever doing so on equal historical ground.

It is here that another set of questions presses forward. How do former interpreters and locally engaged staff, religious and ethnic minorities, women activists, privately sponsored families, and others admitted through more diffuse humanitarian routes come to understand their presence on these lands? Through what idioms, obligations, and encounters do they narrate their relation to Indigenous peoples, to treaty, to land, and to the ongoing structures of settler rule? Through what constellations of institutions, actors, and political habits are they drawn into the settler-colonial equation, and with what consequences for themselves and for others? Do they come to know Canada chiefly through the state's preferred languages of rescue, gratitude, and multicultural incorporation, whether in their neoliberal or neoconservative variants, or do some begin, however tentatively, to place Afghan histories of war, intervention, and displacement into a more difficult relation with Indigenous sovereignty, dispossession, and the unfinished political life of these lands?

This dissertation has traced much of the historical and contemporary politics through which Canada has governed Afghan refugees, but the question it opens is wider than the account it can finally hold. What remains insufficiently answered is how to think more fully about the settler-colonial dimensions of this landscape, and about the life of governance after resettlement, where the differentiated ways Afghan groups are folded into, negotiate, reproduce, or at times

trouble the relations of power that organize belonging here still require closer study. These questions lie beyond the scope of this dissertation, but not beyond its implications. They arise from the very architecture of state sovereignty and its extraterritorial expressions reconstructed in these chapters, and they mark one of the most necessary directions in which this inquiry must continue.

In this sense, the dissertation ends where it began, though not by returning to the same place unchanged. It began with a question of relation, with the difficulty of thinking across struggles that may be proximate without being identical, connected without being equivalent, and ethically entangled without being easily reconciled. It arrived, by necessity, at a more specific historical inquiry into Canada's governance of Afghan refugees from 1979 onward. That inquiry has shown that refugee protection is never only a question of need, nor only of law, nor only of humanitarian will. It is also a question of resonance, of how claims travel, how they are translated, what histories they awaken, which institutions they encounter, and which sovereign arrangements they leave intact.

The journey from Kabul to Turtle Island therefore remains unfinished. It cannot be reduced to movement from danger to safety, from abandonment to rescue, or from displacement to belonging. It is also a movement across imperial afterlives, state categories, advocacy formations, diasporic memories, and lands already structured by prior and ongoing claims. To reconstruct Canada's response to Afghan displacement has been to follow one part of that journey, to understand how Afghan refugees were made visible, governable, admissible, and at times disposable within Canadian political life. To continue the work is to ask how that visibility is situated within the deeper histories of land, sovereignty, and relation that precede and exceed the refugee regime itself. That task remains ahead, not as an addendum to this dissertation, but as one of the questions its history has made impossible to avoid.

Afterword

On August 16, 2021, Zaki Anwari and his brother had scaled the fence of Kabul airport, joining thousands of others on the tarmac, in a desperate attempt to flee their homeland.⁴⁴⁸ The seventeen-year-old, who had played on his country's national youth football team, had once told his family he would never leave Afghanistan unless he could return—but his convictions changed overnight. Just a day earlier, news had broken that President Ashraf Ghani had abandoned the country, and the Taliban had seized control of the capital.⁴⁴⁹ That night, Zaki told his brother he wanted to leave. Without a passport or visa, his options were few. The next day, he was among at least a dozen men who clung to the outside of a U.S. military transport plane as it taxied down the runway, bound for the Al Udeid Airbase in Qatar.⁴⁵⁰ Most lost their grip before the aircraft could even take off—but Zaki held on. His grip not failing until the plane was airborne and its landing gear retracted.



Figure 15. An illustration of the scenes at Kabul Airport on August 16, 2021.⁴⁵¹

⁴⁴⁸ Michaelson and Majidi, “He Saw the Panic.”

⁴⁴⁹ Gall et al., “The Taliban Take over the Presidential Palace.”; Sullivan et al., “Afghan President Ashraf Ghani Flees Country as Capital Falls to Insurgents – as It Happened.”

⁴⁵⁰ “Zaki Anwari.”

⁴⁵¹ An illustration, by artist Amir Mansour Rahimian. Rahimian, “مردن صدبار شرف دارد به زندگی زیر تیغ وحوش.”

Fida Mohammad and Safiullah Hotak also lost their lives on that fateful day.⁴⁵² The scene, captured on video and circulated widely across global news outlets and social media, became one of the many haunting images of that summer, crystallizing the desperation of civilians facing the abrupt collapse of the republic and the reimposition of an Islamist regime known for its draconian rule and long record of human rights abuses.

Online, some compared the scene to the “Falling Man” photographed during the attacks of September 11, creating a grim, symbolic bookend to the U.S.-led War in Afghanistan.⁴⁵³ Those who fell in 2021 were barely children and some, like Zaki, not even born when the U.S. and its allies invaded two decades earlier. Among the many tributes to them was a drawing posted on social media (See Figure 15) depicting a lone figure standing on an empty plain, gazing upward as a person falls from the belly of a departing aircraft. Midway through their descent, they transform, wings sprouting from their back as they steady themselves above the mountainous horizon, never touching the ground. In a way, the image gestures toward something beyond victimhood. Perhaps a refusal of a fatal end, or a defiant reimagining of agency amid conditions that foreclose almost every other possibility. It captures the tension between desperation and determination that captured the experiences of many Afghan civilians in the months and years that followed, as they struggled alongside their advocates through different means and strategies to navigate the complex and often unforgiving channels that govern refugee protection and mobility.

The deaths of Zaki Anwari and countless others remind us of not only the extraordinary lengths to which individuals will go to secure safety but also the extent to which states and institutions work to foreclose it. Such moments sharpen global attention to the relationship between conflict and displacement. Attention that, in the case of Afghanistan since the late 1970s, has extended beyond the nation’s borders as neighboring states and countries abroad demonstrated reluctance to accept new arrivals and the responsibility to provide protection was unevenly distributed across the international system. For those seeking refuge, visas are routinely denied, applications mired in bureaucratic complexity, and processing times extended for months if not years. Yet the visibility afforded by such crises is often fleeting. For those left behind, the *longue durée* after the spectacle has passed is characterized less by recognition than by precarity

⁴⁵² Gannon, “After Afghans Fell from Plane, Families Live with Horror.”

⁴⁵³ Michaelson and Majidi, “He Saw the Panic.”

and obscurity, as lives are consigned to the margins of international concern and public memory. In moments like these, when the world briefly listens, powerful reverberations are possible with sudden surges of empathy and political will. Yet as in the armonia, the sound fades unless sustained by continuous airflow, by advocates who keep pressing against the stops that constrain movement. The *armonia effect*, then, is not only an analytic but an aspiration, to understand how resonance might be sustained, and might still be heard, even after the world stops listening.

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