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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Translating migrant Muslim men: strategies of conditional inclusion by Afghan interpreters employed by Western armies

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This article investigates refugees' labour to gain inclusion within the 'host' community, drawing on interviews with male Afghan former interpreters employed by Western armies. It makes an empirical contribution by centring them as active agents rather than as passive tropes in the racialised and gendered discourses of the 'War on Terror' and Western migration policies. It offers a synthesis between concepts from three fields: migration as translation, migrant masculinities and the battleground of conditional inclusion. By focusing on migrants' self-translations in dialogue with translations of their bodies and stories by host-country institutions, I trace three strategies: insertion, subversion and exemption. While Afghan interpreters largely fail to be recognised as needing protection from harm, their insertion and subversion of discourses of protection based on service are more successful. Finally, they counter their interpellation as dangerous bodies with a strategy of exemption that can be momentarily successful but remains ultimately precarious.

Key words refugees • masculinities • Muslim • Afghanistan • translation • interpreters

Key messages

- Migrant self-translations respond to their reading by host-country institutions.
- Migrant men struggle to be recognised as vulnerable in humanitarian discourses.
- Afghan male interpreters employed by Western armies translate themselves as earning protection as their need for protection is ignored.
- Employing their fluency in security discourses, male Afghan interpreters seek to exempt themselves from racial, gendered tropes.

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Introduction

This article investigates refugees' attempts to be granted inclusion within so-called 'host communities'. As Dina Nayeri (2019: 350) captures in her book *The Ungrateful Refugee*, these are shaped by efforts to exempt oneself from negative discourses and reassurances of loyalty and sameness: 'Hey, I may be dark and foreign, but I get you. Am not scary. I love God and America and pumpkin pie.' I focus on a particular refugee community – male Afghan former interpreters employed by Western armies – and ask how they frame their case for protection and acceptance. Afghan men have been hypervisible in racialised and gendered discourses of the so-called 'War on Terror' as assumed perpetrators of terrorist and gender-based violence (Shepherd, 2006). Hegemonic representations of Afghan men are constructed – to adapt Chandra Mohanty's (1988: 333) phrase – 'under Western eyes', but much less attention has been given to their own experiences as racialised men. Afghan local staff formerly employed by Western armies found themselves in the limelight during August 2021, when Afghanistan was taken over by the Taliban and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries engaged in last-minute evacuation efforts. While there is an emerging scholarship on policy and media responses to former local Afghan staff (Kristensen, 2019; Coburn, 2021; Coen, 2022; De Jong and Sarantidis, 2022; Sheikh et al, 2022), Afghan interpreters' own claims to rights have so far received limited attention (for exceptions, see Kremmel, 2016; Coburn, 2021; De Jong, 2023a; 2023b).

This article draws on and connects three subareas of study. The first is emerging scholarship on the 'hidden battleground of inclusion: the narrow ground on which minorities negotiate the conditions and parameters that determine who can be included, accepted, or be temporarily present in a given state and society' (Hackl, 2021: 990). The struggles and strategies pertaining to inclusion form an important area of investigation, which has so far been 'overshadowed [by the focus on the] overt politics of exclusion' (Hackl, 2021: 990). Second, the article draws on studies that understand migration and claims making as a form of translation. This literature discusses how migrants are translated by migration discourses, policies and services (Giordano, 2008; Chávez, 2009; Polezzi, 2012), as well as migrants' own agency in translating themselves (Demir, 2015). Madeleine Campbell developed the concept of 'subject formation in translation' in a study on the US diaspora of Iraqi interpreters formerly employed by the US Army. As she explains, this is 'the process of being translated – and translating oneself – across structures of power and recognition' (Campbell, 2016: 14). Finally, the article is embedded in scholarship on migrant and Muslim masculinities, which has recognised that 'migrant men are often cast in a negative and homogenizing light' in governmental, media and legal discourses (Charsley and Wray, 2015: 404; see also Huizinga, 2022).

I argue that it is productive to connect the scholarship on the battleground of inclusion, on translation in migration and on migrant masculinities. It first helps to understand that the gendered masculine self's legibility may be disrupted during resettlement, as norms around masculinities likely differ between countries of origin and host countries, and hence require translation. Second, men who migrate become 'translated men' (Bandia, 2014: 275), who are interpellated into intersectional tropes that combine masculinity with their migration status and religion. Many men face the shift from being 'majority men' (albeit from globally minoritised communities)

in their countries of origin to minoritised men in their countries of resettlement. Finally, it is important to consider how migrants respond to and translate themselves to gain 'conditional inclusion' (Hackl, 2021: 994). As Polezzi (2012: 347) argues, any analysis that 'joins translation with migration' needs to be mindful of the different types of migrants and correspondent policy and discourses, which can be widely divergent, as has been observed in comparisons between the Western reception of Ukrainian and Afghan refugees. As 'Ali★ ~ Left behind British Ally', a former Afghan local staff member denied relocation, decried on the Twitter profile @AtRiskAFG, which he deploys to draw attention to his plight, there are 'absolutely shameful double standards in treatment of [Ukrainian] refugees and [Afghan] and other refugees of color' (29 August 2023; cf De Coninck, 2023).

Former Afghan interpreters present an interesting case study: first, the role of interpreter required the harnessing of skills to navigate different life worlds; and, second, as civilian and marginal militarised men, they occupy a liminal position as martial workers, both within theatres of war and in relation to the employing states. I will argue that this background provided unique tools to narrate themselves within migration and rights discourses. Drawing on rich empirical data, I will discuss how Afghan former interpreters as a distinct group of rights claimants, mostly young, male and Muslim, translate themselves as deserving subjects. The first section on the 'untranslatability' of vulnerability will show that within the parameters of the gendered humanitarian framework, Afghan interpreters are set up for failure when claiming protection on the basis of vulnerability. In the second section, I will demonstrate that, by contrast, their translation of themselves as semi-insiders rather than outsiders to the 'host' nations, who have 'earned' protection through military service, aligns with dominant frames. The final section suggests that Afghan interpreters translate themselves as 'deserving' of protection, emphasising their 'safe' and 'faithful' profile against dominant discourses of Muslim men as security threats.

Gendered deservingness and conditional inclusion

Scholars at the crossroads of humanitarian, security and refugee studies have analysed refugees' and migrants' political reception, as well as their discursive rendering as, for instance, victims in need, security threats or fortune seekers. These discourses reflect both racialised and gendered stereotypes. The image of the refugee has changed from 'the heroic, political individual to a nameless flood of poverty-stricken women and children' (Johnson, 2011: 1016). The shift from the Cold War to the contemporary refugee was underpinned by: racialisation (from the white European to the non-white Global South refugee); victimisation (from the active political agent to the passive victim of war); and feminisation (from the male to the female refugee) (Johnson, 2011: 1016). This contemporary 'good refugee' is the 'defenceless Muslim woman [or] the innocent child', as demarcated from the 'male, single, healthy, and young' Muslim (Mavelli, 2017: 819–20). The narrow space of deservingness of protection is largely reserved for non-agentic, passive victims of unfortunate circumstances, presented as beyond Western control, despite the imperial roots of poverty and war. Able-bodied, young, racialised refugee men tend to be denied vulnerability, 'rendering their position as objects of humanitarian care uncertain' (Turner, 2019: 611).

The good and deserving refugee can only exist as exceptional and in contrast with the 'bad' refugee (Mavelli, 2017). Humanitarian vulnerability discourses (Turner,

2021) thus meet discourses at the migration–security nexus (De Jong, 2022a) and welfare policies. As prototypical ‘bad refugees’, racialised, young male refugees tend to be suspected of opportunistic economic motives and violent ideologies. A recent illustration can be found in a speech of Boris Johnson (2022), then Britain’s prime minister, justifying transferring to Rwanda asylum seekers arriving in the UK through irregular routes by alluding to the ‘striking fact that around seven out of ten of those arriving in small boats last year were men under 40, paying people smugglers to queue jump and taking up our capacity to help genuine women and child refugees’. Efforts to extend the category of ‘vulnerability’ by including refugee men fail to ‘cente[r] refugees’ own concepts, understandings, and knowledges’ (Turner, 2021: 17). Equally, there is a need to ‘she[d] light on the lived experiences behind [the] powerful tropes of conditional inclusion’ (Hackl, 2021: 989–90). This article responds to these calls by centring male Afghan interpreters’ discussion of their own deservingness.

Case study and methodology

Local interpreters faced targeted threats by the Taliban during and after their employment. Risks increased after August 2021, when the Taliban returned to power, as ‘article 11 of Taliban’s *Layeha* (code of conduct) orders the execution of individuals working for *Kofaar* (foreign infidels), including *Tarjoman* (interpreters)’ (European Asylum Support Office, 2021: 60). Migration is an important pathway to safety for former interpreters.

Between 2017 and 2022, I conducted 48 semi-structured interviews with Afghan interpreters and their advocates. All had left Afghanistan and now lived in the US, UK, Canada, France, Germany or the Netherlands. To contextualise former Afghan interpreters’ claims to inclusion within specific national policies and migration discourses, this article presents the qualitative thematic analysis of 24 interviews conducted in the UK between 2017 and 2022 (pseudonyms are used). They had come either through the asylum route or through the UK’s bespoke resettlement schemes for Afghan local staff (the Ex-Gratia Scheme and Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy [ARAP]). Some had arrived in the mid-2010s, while others were evacuated in the summer of 2021 or resettled via Pakistan in the subsequent months. The research also included interviews with 39 advocates and media and policy document analysis. Finally, this article is informed by informal relationships built over several years with Afghan interpreters and advocates through collective advocacy work and (participant) observation of advocacy, network and support events.

All the former Afghan interpreters interviewed for this study are male, reflecting the general profile of patrol interpreters in Afghanistan. As the wider research concerns the claims to protection and rights by Afghan interpreters and advocates, research participants were initially approached based primarily on their public profile and active political voice. Later interviews reflect snowball sampling and my own deepening connections with the Afghan interpreter and advocate community. The interviews addressed interpreters’ experiences during their employment and their subsequent resettlement. As a white female European Union (EU) citizen with no affinity with military institutions, I am an outsider to many of the experiences of former Afghan male interpreters, though I have gained more fluency in the vocabulary related to their work over the years. In the later interviews especially, I was no longer regarded as a stranger due to many years of engagement in the area as a co-founder of a UK

initiative that supports Afghan interpreters who worked for the British Army. Some participants got to know me while they were still in Afghanistan because they reached out to us for support with their resettlement; with others, I had shared connections. Informal contact often continued beyond the interview, as some chose to participate in collective community or outreach events, or reached out for advice on post-resettlement issues and informal chats.

A total of 14 interviews in 2021/22 were conducted in the presence of a British (racialised) male photographer, who is an Afghanistan veteran, military linguist and the child of a refugee himself (for more details, see [Chapman, 2023](#)), while I was unaccompanied in the other ten interviews. There was no obvious difference in the data collected with or without the presence of the veteran photographer. However, the interviews conducted post-August 2021 had a heightened, raw emotional intensity due to the recent (traumatic) evacuation and the Taliban takeover. The ethical challenges raised by this could not be addressed by a single approach but included not probing certain topics, signposting to mental health services set up for Afghan interpreters and the researcher providing support afterwards, for instance, with family-reunification applications. At the same time, it required recognising that some interpreters found it not only painful but also cathartic to share their experiences, with one stating after he had finished: “I think I can finally sleep tonight.” Feminist and migration studies scholars have questioned how far the effects of the researcher’s positionality can be known ([Rose, 1997](#)). Based on interpreters’ statements, I can only surmise that, in some cases, interpreters considered me as a fellow outsider to the UK and that it was therefore ‘safer’ to express criticism of the UK government. In other instances, they assumed I was British. Finally, the data need to be interpreted in a context in which we communicated in English, the hegemonic language of their employment; hence, the interpreters also literally translated themselves during the interview, with me potentially symbolically standing in for the Western publics to which they appealed.

Vicente [Rafael’s](#) (2007: 241) observation that ‘knowledge of the colonizer’s language has often endowed speakers with considerable privileges’ is still relevant for the neo-imperial setting of the war in Afghanistan and for the post-migration experience. Afghan interpreters’ relative proficiency in English affords them an advantaged position and aids their ability to translate themselves. They are generally not reliant on linguistic interpreters to access services and can hence act as ‘self-translators’ ([Polezzi, 2012](#): 350). Yet, at the same time, their bodies remain marked as Other. As [Rafael](#) (2007: 244) has described in relation to the paradoxical position of Iraqi interpreters who worked for the US Army, ‘they come across as alien presences that seem to defy assimilation even as they are deemed indispensable to the assimilation of aliens’. Some migrants can employ a ‘double vision’ derived from their position as insider-outsiders ([Bandia, 2014](#): 276), enhancing their ‘practices and competencies of being able to engage and translate’ claims for recognition ([Demir, 2015](#): 77).

The (un)translatability of vulnerability

Refugee men have limited access to protection based on vulnerability within the dominant humanitarian framework. Recently, humanitarian organisations, as well as feminist scholars, have sought to broaden the category of vulnerability to work against such exclusions ([Turner, 2021](#)). Indeed, it is easy to establish that men can also be

vulnerable to harm, such as men of military age being explicit targets for violence (Carpenter, 2003). Not only are Afghan civilian male interpreters at risk because of association with Western armies, but they have often also sustained psychological and physical injuries. However, in line with expectations of hegemonic military masculinity, they would often highlight their strength rather than vulnerability in the face of such experiences (De Jong, 2022b). Psychological distress also marks the post-migration phase; in most of the interviews I conducted in the aftermath of the fall of Afghanistan, interpreters cried when they talked about the Taliban takeover, the evacuation and left-behind family members in Afghanistan. ‘Vulnerability’, however, was almost completely absent from the UK’s policy discourse on Afghan interpreters. Only in June 2021, when the withdrawal of NATO troops had already started, did the UK Ministry of Defence (2021) once use the phrase ‘vulnerable Afghan interpreters’. The minister referenced vulnerability in his announcement that there would be an acceleration of relocations of interpreters under the ARAP, which had first been launched in April 2021 when NATO announced its withdrawal. However, as Lewis Turner (2021: 13) argues, simply adding refugee men to the category of vulnerable people, ‘risk[s] constituting an approach that could be summed up as “add ‘vulnerable’ men and stir”’, without interrogating the exclusionary logics of humanitarianism.

Turner’s critique of vulnerability also extends to its (un)translatability. He suggests that humanitarian and scholarly conceptualisations of vulnerability impose their own meanings on refugees, ignoring that this notion of vulnerability ‘does not derive from refugees’ own understandings of their circumstances, nor is it even a relevant term in many linguistic contexts’ (Turner, 2021: 11). In his study of Syrian refugee men, he explains that United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) documents employ an Arabic translation of ‘vulnerability’ but that this was never used by Syrian male refugees themselves. In Italy, the testimonies of African female migrants who were trafficked are often translated into a particular victim narrative (*denuncia*) by African cultural mediators/interpreters to gain access to services. This translation of victim testimony is not only linguistic but also stylistic to conform to the hegemonic system of meaning in the so-called ‘host country’. While the voices of the female migrants get lost in this act of translation, inserting themselves into this victim discourse ‘represents [for the women] the possibility of telling a story that can be traded for recognition and inclusion’ (Giordano, 2008: 599).

The combined findings of these studies provide interesting insights. First, these findings re-emphasise that the dominant discourse of vulnerability and victimhood is gendered. Second, they show that when migrants encounter this dominant discourse in institutions, policies and services, a linguistic and symbolic translation takes place. Third, this demonstrates that migrants’ and refugees’ degree of control over how they are being translated varies. On the one hand, their degree of control is dependent on their own linguistic and cultural fluency in the required representational language; on the other hand, it is dependent on their relative ‘fit’ with the dominant discourses. In other words, those who are likely to be interpellated into the victim frame, such as women and children, can strategically employ such a frame. Others, such as heterosexual, young men, remain incommensurable with this vulnerable victim frame and would fail to be credible speakers within it, even where they have the linguistic and cultural fluency to translate themselves.

This was demonstrated in the challenges that Afghan interpreters faced when applying for the so-called ‘Intimidation Scheme’, which ‘provide[d] a mechanism for supporting locally employed civilians who believe that their safety is threatened because of their previous assistance to the United Kingdom in Afghanistan’ (House of Commons Defence Committee, 2018: 13). The Intimidation Scheme’s remit mapped neatly onto the humanitarian understanding of ‘vulnerability-as-harm’ (Turner, 2021: 5) and ostensibly offered a pathway for male former employees to be considered in ‘imminent danger’, that is, vulnerable enough to warrant relocation to the UK. In reality, none of the 401 applicants to the scheme was considered in imminent danger and hence vulnerable enough to harm to be granted UK resettlement (House of Commons Defence Committee, 2018).

The impossibly high bar for resettlement under the Intimidation Scheme was part of the reflections in an interview with a former Afghan interpreter, Sayed, who had been resettled to the UK under an alternative scheme, the so-called ‘Ex-Gratia Scheme’, which allowed interpreters who had worked for more than 12 months in Helmand in front-line roles and who were made redundant as a direct result of the drawdown of British troops to come to the UK (House of Commons Defence Committee, 2018). Now a 29-year-old man, Sayed had joined the British Army as an interpreter when he was 17 years old. He had a large network of fellow interpreters, including many still in Afghanistan who did not meet the narrow criteria for relocation under either the Ex-Gratia Scheme or the Intimidation Scheme. While working in Afghanistan, he witnessed the interviews that British officials conducted with applicants to the Intimidation Scheme:

‘The people came [to the Intimidation Investigation Unit], and they had their interview, and at the end of the day, [the officials] just said: “Well, change your mobile phone number, change your car, move your house.”... [But] if someone’s life is in danger, if someone has been recognised by the enemy forces, they will get targeted anywhere in the country. [They just offer internal relocation in Afghanistan] except, as they said, if your life is in “imminent danger”. But I am still confused, and I still haven’t found the proper meaning of “imminent danger”. Because what does that mean? When he got shot or when his head is chopped off? They said, “If you’re in imminent danger, we’re going to help you.” So, what does imminent danger mean? When they get killed, and then they’re going to believe him?’

Sayed’s repeated question about the meaning of ‘imminent danger’ does not reveal a linguistic lack of understanding but instead points to the incommensurability between the realities faced by Afghan interpreters and the British officials’ risk assessment. While the setting of the interview was similar to the Italian *denuncia* described earlier, the possibility for Afghan interpreters to translate themselves ‘successfully’ into the vulnerability narrative was foreclosed.

Sayed’s account of the risk-assessment interviews conducted in the context of the British Intimidation Scheme resonated with the experiences of other Afghan interpreters who had tried to claim asylum in European countries, of which the majority got rejected after their first asylum interview. When I met Jamal in Germany, where he again tried to claim asylum after he had been threatened with deportation from Norway, where his asylum claim and appeal had been rejected, he asked: “Do

they expect me to carry my dead body and say, ‘I need protection?’” That only a dead interpreter can prove to be sufficiently at risk was reinforced by the seeming cultural untranslatability of what was regarded as evidence. The British bureaucratic expectation about the provision of evidence was incongruous, as the ‘threats [Afghan interpreters] face are more ambiguous, oftentimes made verbally to family members by community members who have connections with the Taliban’ (Coburn, 2021: 11). In the following sections, I will discuss two alternative strategies that Afghan interpreters employed to translate their right to inclusion beyond the humanitarian logic of vulnerability.

‘Shoulder to shoulder’: earning protection

This section will develop the argument that in contrast to Afghan interpreters’ relatively unsuccessful translation of themselves as vulnerable, their translation of themselves as worthy subjects who had ‘earned’ their protection aligned with UK policies and discourses. Until the launch of the UK’s ARAP resettlement programme in April 2021, the two legal resettlement routes available for Afghan interpreters were the Intimidation Scheme and the Ex-Gratia Scheme. As the first had not offered UK relocation to any applicant, the latter was the sole *de facto* resettlement option. Any offer under the Ex-Gratia Scheme was ‘based on recognition of service and *not on any future risk to LES* [locally employed staff]’ (Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office and Ministry of Defence, 2022: emphasis added). This disclaimer betrayed a nervous denial by the UK government of the post-employment threats faced by Afghan interpreters. Instead, the UK government placed ‘danger’ firmly within the employment time frame and put the responsibility for seeking risk on the interpreters themselves by stipulating that relocation was offered only to those ‘whom the UK government considers *to have put themselves* in the most danger *whilst* serving the UK government in Afghanistan’ (Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office and Ministry of Defence, 2022: emphasis added). Under the Ex-Gratia Scheme, UK settlement rights were thus offered not as a protection right but as a reward that one could earn, similar to arrangements for other racialised marginal military workers, such as the Nepalese Gurkhas (Ware, 2010). Relocation was also exclusively offered to those who had worked in Helmand, as they were considered as having served under the most challenging, dangerous circumstances.

In September 2020, Afghan interpreters who had been based in Kabul during their employment gathered in front of the UK embassy to protest their exclusion from the Ex-Gratia Scheme. Two developments had prompted them to take the risk to gather in a public space: first, the August 2020 release of ‘400 “hard-core” Taliban prisoners’ as part of the US–Taliban agreement of February 2020 (the so-called ‘Doha Agreement’) (Reuters, 2020); and, second, a change of rules in the UK’s Ex-Gratia Scheme that extended the relocation offer to interpreters who had worked for more than 12 months in Helmand and had resigned (rather than been made redundant). An interpreter who hid his face behind a mask, read out a letter:

Now, we are the forgotten men. We fall outside the British government’s latest policy change.... Kabul-based interpreters were the first ones who supported British forces.... Coalition forces said their presence in Afghanistan will make this country peaceful and stable, but after 19 years, there is no sign

of peace and stability.... It is the moral obligation of British forces [to resettle us]. The government speaks of front-line areas in its new policy.... When the British first came, Kabul was the front line, as your soldiers told us. The UK government had promised that it would protect all those that risked their lives helping and supporting British forces in a difficult situation. Kabul-based interpreters have been wearing the same uniforms and performed the same duties as British troops.... We helped you and saved many lives. Now it is your turn to save our lives. (Source: private video shared by a research participant)

In their statement, the protestors attempted to insert themselves into the limited and conditional inclusion framework of the British state, where protection could be earned based on service. In contrast to the victim and vulnerability framework, their strategy to demand rights based on the performance of uniformed duties aligned with the hegemonic framework of military masculinity. The long history of (mostly male) racialised martial Others who have been conditionally included in the nation state based on military service can be exemplified by the Hmong veterans resettled to the US (Vang, 2012) and the Nepalese Gurkhas, a special unit in the British Army rooted in the British Empire (Ware, 2010; Chisholm, 2014). With military service being a key duty associated with (male) citizenship, non-citizens performing military duties – albeit, in the case of interpreters, as civilian auxiliaries – are in a stronger position to claim inclusion in the nation state, yet their inclusion remains conditional.

I suggest that Kabul-based interpreters' translation/insertion of themselves into the policy framework reserved for Helmand-based interpreters was also a subversion of dominant discourse. The protester showed their ingenuity by mirroring the language of British forces: first, by highlighting that Kabul had originally been called the 'front line' and that their exclusion from the resettlement policy was therefore flawed; and, second, by reminding the British of their promises. With the first promise – bringing peace to Afghanistan – now showing its emptiness, they reminded the government to keep their second promise: protecting those that risked their lives to protect British forces. This shows that translation can be 'something other than an instrument of imperial power' and can possess 'a certain capacity to reshape the terms of hegemony' (Rafael, 2007: 242).

Racialised migrants' bodies are often read by host-country authorities as representing the three interrelated tropes of 'alien, criminal and parasite' (Chávez, 2009: 20). This is no reflection on their actual legal or 'moral' status but means that they are 'marked and translated without any acknowledgment of other possibilities of subjectivity' (Chávez, 2009: 21). Afghan interpreters distanced themselves from the figure of the 'alien' by highlighting their intimate connection with the UK, symbolised in the protestors' statement by the reference to wearing the same uniforms as British troops. Afghan interpreters also distinguished themselves from the 'parasite' by emphasising that sacrifice preceded their claims to rights. I will return to the 'criminal' in the next section, recognising that the 'criminal' has been reconfigured in the so-called 'War on Terror' as a terrorist.

The specific visa provided to interpreters resettled under the Ex-Gratia Scheme prevented them from accessing many of the rights that other refugees have, including family reunification and access to education. In an interview conducted in 2019,

Zabi, an interpreter who was resettled to Scotland under the Ex-Gratia Scheme, shared with me his discontent:

‘Every single interpreter who came to the UK, they have served this country before coming to this country. For years and years, they have fought against the Taliban and terrorist groups in Afghanistan, shoulder to shoulder with the British armed forces.... [But when I moved here, I realised that] there are people from every other background in the world coming to this country, getting refugee status or asylum, and they are getting treated better than us, who have served this country for years, for ages. And if they want to bring their family over, they can do it, no problem. If they want to go back to their country, they can go back, no problem.... We have helped this country, but we cannot study in this country.’

Zabi employed the dominant military tropes of “shoulder to shoulder” and service, emphasising his closeness to British soldiers. Interpreters’ use of military language emphasised their familiarity and faithfulness, counterbalancing their bodies’ likely translation as ‘alien’ and dangerous Others. His repeated reference to the “years and years” that Afghan interpreters worked for the British Army highlights that they earned their rights. Eventually, Zabi and other Ex-Gratia Scheme interpreters won the right to bring their wives and children to the UK and gained access to higher education in Scotland (Naysmith, 2018; Brown and Williams, 2019). Zabi’s distinction between Afghan interpreters and the asylum seekers or refugees without such an employment history risks implicitly reinforcing the tropes of the undeserving ‘aliens’ and ‘parasites’.

Discourses of exception and of rights earned through service are not unique to either the UK or contemporary times. The South Korean government classed Afghan interpreters who were evacuated from Afghanistan in August 2021 as ‘people of merit to the country’, which ‘separated Afghans from other Muslim refugees in the public mind’ and cast them as ‘worthy of support’ (Sheikh et al, 2022: 206). Alice Coen (2022: 2033) observed similar discourses in the US around the evacuation of summer 2021, when some politicians reframed refugee protection ‘as a reciprocal interaction and something owed in return for loyalty, service or demonstrations of fidelity’, and ‘protection [became] an earned outcome rather than a fundamental right of those fleeing persecution’. As the next section will show, conditional inclusion offers only ‘limited opportunities for ... developing strategic responses to the ever-present possibility of exclusion’ (Hackl, 2021: 990).

Screened and loyal: deserving protection

One key ground for exclusion facing Afghan male Muslim interpreters is to be translated as a potential threat to the host nation. With migration ‘increasingly interpreted as a security problem’ (Bigo, 2002: 63), asylum seekers and refugees, especially when they are male and Muslim, are presented in policy and discourse as endangering the so-called ‘host country’. This securitisation of migration was also apparent around the evacuation of Afghan interpreters. For instance, the UK government’s ‘Afghanistan resettlement and immigration policy statement’ (Home Office, 2022) stated: ‘The evacuation of eligible people from Afghanistan was a

humanitarian effort, but at every step of the process the security and safety of the UK and its citizens was front of mind.’

The NATO withdrawal announcement in April 2021 coincided with the launch of a more generous resettlement scheme, the ARAP, which replaced the non-functional Intimidation Scheme. However, Afghan interpreters who applied for resettlement continued to face stricter exclusion criteria than refugees in the UK. For refugees, exclusion criteria are set out in Article 1F of the 1951 Refugee Convention and relevant UK law, and pertain to those who have committed a war crime, a crime against humanity, another serious non-political crime or acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations. Initially, the ARAP programme excluded all interpreters from relocation who had been dismissed from their role. As many as 35 per cent of interpreters (1,010 out of 2,850) saw their contract terminated by the British Army, without right to appeal (Sulha Alliance, 2021: 4). After rules slightly relaxed in August 2021, dismissed interpreters were still excluded if their dismissal was: ‘(1) based on serious security concerns at the time, (2) for activities that would be criminal offences in the UK, or (3) activities or offences which either had or could have had “serious consequences”’, with decisions made at the discretion of the Secretary of State for Defence (Human Rights Watch et al, 2021).

Hamid, who started working for the British Army when he was 18 years old, is acutely aware of the securitisation of migration. I had been in regular contact with him about his resettlement application, which was initially rejected because he had been dismissed after three years of trusted service. One of his subsequent resettlement applications was eventually accepted, and he arrived in the UK in October 2021. Realising his proximity to the trope of security threat to the UK, Hamid was keen to distance himself from this. During the interview, he shared his view on how the UK government should approach immigration:

‘If they accept illegal immigrants, [it would be] much better if they accept those people who work for them and who were trusted by them for years. I know that in most of the countries, there is a need for a [migrant] workforce ... so if they bring the ... people that worked for them, who have been screened, they’ve been interviewed, then there is no [need for] adaptation, [or risk] that they behave the wrong way. The people who are coming illegally or just bringing people with no identifications are more dangerous than the people who are screened. They are safe, they are screened, and these people should be given a chance to be relocated to the UK.’

Hamid’s account echoes dominant discourses of migrants as ‘aliens’ and ‘criminals’. His emphasis on migrants as a potential workforce also indirectly annulled the figure of the ‘parasite’. At risk of being interpellated as alien and criminal himself, Hamid describes former Afghan locally employed civilians as people with long-term service and security vetting. He thereby delineates this group as familiar and lawful – the antithesis of the alien criminal. Hamid’s suggestion for British immigration policy accepts the trope that migrants are potential threats to the host country’s security by distinguishing between pre-screened immigrants like himself and immigrants whose background is unknown. His juxtaposition echoes dominant media discourses. For instance, the UK tabloid newspaper the *Daily Mail* ran a headline that contrasted Afghan interpreters with other migrants who entered the UK undocumented: ‘As

illegal immigrants flood in unchecked, Afghan interpreters abandoned by Britain are forced to pay people smugglers to escape revenge of the Taliban' (Williams, 2015).

Hamid's statement reinforces the idea that 'immigrants are "bad" by default until they prove themselves otherwise' (Shukla and Suleyman, 2018, quoted in Hackl, 2021: 994), in this case, by having been subjected to repeated security screenings. Despite Hamid's personal experience of initially being excluded from the resettlement programme for former staff, Hamid's strategy for inclusion was not to challenge the overall security frame but to suggest that the line is drawn in a way that positions him and his former colleagues on the 'right' side. This is a strategy of exemption rather than disruption or deconstruction, which leaves intact 'the overall logic of the migration–security nexus in which migrants are presented as threats to the security of Western host nations' (De Jong, 2022a: 228–9). This confirms that (barely) 'tolerated citizens' facing 'contingent acceptance' often become 'guardians of good citizenship' (Anderson, 2015: 74).

The question, 'How do people on the receiving end of empire, now settled within the metropole, appropriate metropolitan modes of representation?' (Bandia, 2014: 276) is especially relevant in the context of Afghan interpreters, who were already embedded in neo-imperial logics while working for Western armies. I argue that this employment history equipped Afghan interpreters with a fluency in neo-imperial security discourses. This makes them confident and intelligible translators who can make themselves legible both on the army base and at the refugee hotel. Former interpreters who worked in settings where different levels of security clearance were part of their everyday working lives are particularly 'fluent' in security discourse, as exemplified by Hamid's reference to 'screening'. Former interpreters also had a long history of having to precariously position themselves on the 'right' side in the polarised context of the so-called 'War on Terror'; the language of 'enemy and friend' and 'ally and threat' was ubiquitous in Afghanistan.

Murtaza, another former interpreter, arrived in the UK in August 2021. While he had only been in the UK for less than four months when I spoke to him, his more than decade-long employment record with Western forces appeared to have provided him with fluency in UK (anti-)immigrant discourses. Distancing himself from refugees, he said:

'I would call "refugees" people who are crossing the border illegally. And they come, and it takes the country a long time to get to know exactly who they are. Me, for example, I am already in the British system: every six months I was interviewed because of my [security army base] badge. You know, the British Army knows every single thing in my life. I am more than a refugee because I call myself part of. ... This is my second country. [B]ecause if we were bad people, we would have been fired. ... When we were badging [undergoing screening to renew their badges], they were asking for our wives' phone number. They know how many family members I have. They know who I am because every single day, when I was entering the camp, I was scanning my eyes. That's, in my opinion, why we are more than refugees.'

Like Hamid, Murtaza translated the security discourse with which he is familiar from his work in Afghanistan to the UK context. He transposed the boundary of the military base onto the border of the nation. On the one side of the boundary are

alien elements, unknown, as they are unscreened, and thus potentially dangerous; on the other side are those who are intimately known and thus verified as trustworthy. Murtaza turned the surveillance he and his family have been subjected to into an asset. The boundary he was allowed to cross by gaining entry onto the British military base should now give him privileged access to the British nation. The boundary constitutes not only difference but also a distinction that is hierarchical; Murtaza describes himself and his colleagues as “*more* than refugees”.

Murtaza’s strategy of inclusion hinges on two core elements: first, he draws a line between himself and Others, in this case, refugees. This strategy echoes that of Syrian male refugees in Egypt, who, despite being refugees themselves, ‘distance[d] themselves from the label of refugee’ (Suerbaum, 2018: 670). Whereas these Syrian refugees constructed a notion of respectable masculinity against the image of refugee dependency, Murtaza’s and Hamid’s ‘prototypes of unsuccessful masculinities against which they could position themselves as superior’ (Suerbaum, 2018: 683) focused on alien, dangerous and criminal masculinities.

Second, Murtaza draws a line around the British nation, in which he defines himself as internal to the nation, distancing himself from ‘the alien’, though knowing his body may be read as Other. He starts by saying that he calls himself part of Britain before stating more forcefully: “this is my second country”. He is not only a non-alien; he is a patriot. At the same time, Murtaza’s emphasis that he “is already in the British system” and that he has consistently passed every test of trust betrays a certain precarity. Murtaza is acutely aware that no record of faithful service completely protects him, as he is part of the community of people who can be considered “bad people” from one day to the other. Hamid’s and Murtaza’s strategy of exemption disrupts neither the negative tropes of the migration–security nexus, which casts especially male Muslim migrants as a threat, nor the migration–welfare nexus, which presents them as parasites. It momentarily allows Afghan interpreters to talk back to these tropes and make themselves intelligible in the post-migration setting by drawing on their fluency in discourses of military service and security, which structured encounters between Western troops and local interpreters in Afghanistan. However, inclusion strategies that retain a differentiation between themselves and ‘refugees’ remain precarious, as interpreters, their families and their former colleagues continued to be haunted by the same intersecting structures of racism, islamophobia, anti-migration and state surveillance. This included family members arriving by irregular routes being subject to inadmissibility rules and deportation, former colleagues excluded from relocation based on assumed employment offences without right to appeal, and their being subjected to racial abuse and police ethnic profiling in the UK. One interpreter, eventually accepted for resettlement in the UK after contesting his initial rejection from the relocation schemes, who had used social media to draw attention to interpreters’ plight, captures this precarity in his Twitter banner: ‘If you save someone’s life conditionally you are doing business, please save someone’s life unconditionally’ (@leftbehind69902).

Conclusion

This article has presented the self-translations performed by Afghan male interpreters to seek inclusion and rights in the countries that formerly employed them. It has made an empirical contribution by centring the voices of Afghan men, presenting

them as active agents rather than as passive tropes in the racialised and gendered discourses that gained prominence in the so-called 'War on Terror' and in Western migration policies. It has taken as its point of departure scholarship which has shown that migrants' narratives and bodies are translated when meeting the national discourses, policies and services of the host country, and it has drawn attention to the linguistic component of translation in migration, as well as its symbolic dimension. This article has contributed to this literature by foregrounding migrants' self-translations in conscious dialogue with host-country institutions. It has done so by focusing on a previously under-researched refugee community: Afghan former interpreters resettled to the UK. They occupy an ambivalent position: marginalised as migrant, Muslim men, their relative fluency in British language and culture and (liminal) relation to the British Army affords them an advantaged position to translate themselves.

This article has presented a productive synthesis between three fields: migration as translation, migrant masculinities and the battleground of conditional inclusion. This has allowed me to show that there is a complex interplay between the ways in which migrants' bodies are translated, their interpellation into policies and migrant self-translations to seek inclusion. I have suggested that this interplay contains contradictions and tensions: for instance, the hegemonic translation of the migrant Muslim male body of the Afghan interpreter as a threat is at odds with their self-translation as subjects under threat. While migrants with higher linguistic and cultural proficiency in the host country's language and norms have a higher degree of control over how their stories and bodies are translated, this control ultimately remains limited when marginalised migrants' own self-translations are incommensurable with the gendered and racialised hegemonic frameworks that they encounter. Hence, adult male Afghan interpreters largely failed to be recognised as in need of protection from harm due to the gendered and infantilising logic of vulnerability discourses. Instead, they had to pursue alternative claims to earn protection based on deservingness, specifically, through service and loyalty.

By focusing on migrants' self-translations in dialogue with the translations of their bodies and stories by host-country institutions, I have been able to trace the following strategies: insertion, subversion and exemption. While insertion constitutes an effort of inclusion in existing frameworks, for instance, as vulnerable victim, subversion offers an anti-hegemonic retranslation of dominant discourses. By mirroring the language of service, sacrifice and mutual loyalty, Afghan interpreters disrupted and challenged the boundaries of who earned and deserved protection. The strategy of exemption is the inverse of the strategy of inclusion. As dominant discourses were disposed to read Afghan interpreters' bodies as threatening, they attempted to distance themselves from this interpellation in their self-translations.

I have shown that the symbolic boundaries of unscreened/screened and bad/good, as well as the geographical boundaries of the military base, lend themselves to a transnational translation to the boundaries of insiders/outside of the nation state. Ultimately, however, this strategy of exemption remains a reactive strategy. It reinforces a discourse of exceptionality, which impedes solidarity with other marginalised migrant communities and upholds normative discourses of respectability and deservingness. The strategy of exemption also demonstrates that the dividing line between 'good' and 'bad' refugee is porous and unstable. While it gives opportunities to proficient migrants for self-translations that momentarily move them to the

‘right’ side of the dividing line between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ refugees, their position remains precarious.

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Conflict of interest

The author is a co-founder and trustee of Sulha Alliance CIO, which supports Afghan interpreters who have worked for the British Armed Forces.

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