

Empowerment without Emancipation: Performativity and Political Activism among Iranian Refugees in Italy and Turkey

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Abstract

This article examines the centrality of political activism in the identity of Iranian refugees and investigates how they perform and incorporate it by considering the interlocked pressure of international politics, personal networks, and the assistance provided by civil society organizations. The case of Iranian political refugees in Italy and Turkey is of particular interest because of the international visibility of the Green movement, the Iranian people's historical experience of emigration, and the fact that Iran is a subject of great interest for a number of human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs). It shows how the process of "being a refugee" works not only through classical forms of institutional pressure but also through "unexpected" forms such as NGO efforts to empower refugees politically. Despite the positive value attached to it, in this context political activism can force refugees into preestablished roles, such as "human rights defenders" or "Green movement activists." Paradoxically, refugees act within a context that dominates them even when it tries to empower them.

Keywords

Iranian refugees, political activism, Green movement, Italy, Turkey

Introduction

Political refugees are actors of growing importance in international politics, and scholars have devoted their attention to this subject producing a rich and diversified literature. Studies range from theoretical issues to sociological accounts of the refugees' everyday life, highlighting the concerns related to policy making, international, and human security.¹ The number of people applying to receive asylum has sharply increased and the relevant legislation has become more and more complex, distinguishing among different forms of international protection and "labels" of asylum.² Different national and international actors are involved in "managing refugees," from the

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application to get political asylum to the last stage of their new life in a foreign country, namely local integration. The world that refugees inhabit is highly institutionalized, and governmental or nongovernmental actors at both national and international level form a massive part of their life. This is true not only for the administrative process the refugees and asylum seekers must go through in order to get asylum. It is valid for their personal and everyday life as well, since local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and charity organizations often assist them in different fields of their lives, from job search to housing and mental health.

This article examines this institutionalized world and the relations of power that compose it by focusing on the process of identity construction among Iranian refugees in Turkey and Italy. It demonstrates that the contexts in which refugees live play a fundamental role in orienting this process and in shaping the refugees' identity. The article examines the incorporation of such an identity by the Iranian refugees through the analysis of the "microphysics of power" to which they are subjected³ as well as the subversion refugees may enact against these mechanisms.

A number of studies have already examined the idea of "a refugee" as a social and political construction rather than as a generalized definition.⁴ This essay draws from this literature, but examines in detail the construction of "refugeeness"⁵ by considering three different levels. First, the study focuses on the role of refugees' own network and connections, such as family and friends, in shaping a given definition of "a refugee." Second, it focuses on international politics, which has been enhancing the representation of Iranians as repressed, in particular after the 2009 uprisings and consequent regime repression. Third, the research looks at the role of NGOs, specifically voluntary and charity organizations assisting refugees at the local level, which socialize the refugees to "refugeeness" through everyday practices. In the case of Iranian political refugees, the interlocked effect of these three levels is particularly powerful in showing how "refugeeness" may be enhanced among, or imposed on, refugees. Indeed, the high number of Iranian political refugees around the world favors the flow of information toward Iran regarding political asylum and emigration, making this experience part of the collective psyche in Iran. Furthermore, the dominant idea that people from Iran flee from dictatorship informs both public opinion and the civil society organizations dealing with them.

The article examines two different aspects of the entwined play of these levels. First, drawing on Michel Foucault's notion of biopolitics,⁶ it contends that this complex system of national, international, governmental, and nongovernmental actors limit refugees' option for an autonomous process of identity construction, conflating their identity toward "refugeeness" which, in this case, is strongly linked to political activism.

Second, elaborating on Judith Butler's account of "performativity,"⁷ this research examines the mechanisms of subversion and criticism that the refugees put forth. It is observed that criticism is an option for refugees, who often claim autonomously their rights and oppose the current international policies on asylum and the NGOs' activities. Yet these claims are performed through reiterated "scripts of refugeeness," the ultimate element that legitimates any criticism. They do not reverse the "grammar of domination" they went through: acting in ways a refugee is expected to act remains what actually legitimates them and their claims.

Linking Agency and Structure in Refugee Studies

Refugees, and in particular political refugees, have significantly changed in numbers, origins, and social background over the last decades. Asylum legislation has changed along with international politics after the Cold War, and so has the way in which social sciences study political asylum and refugees, enlarging the topics under consideration and enriching the disciplinary approaches.⁸ Refugee studies constitute a growing body of literature that is under constant redefinition as a consequence of the crucial relationship they hold with policy making and public opinion.

Many studies underline the condition of extreme domination in which refugees live: forced to flee their own country, they are later subjugated to tight legislation in the receiving countries and often live in harsh conditions.⁹ Others studies underline the refugee's agency, arguing that a focus on their capacity of reaction is useful in order to avoid generalization and an incorrect representation of refugees as passive victims.¹⁰ Following this last strand, Carolina Moulin and Peter Nyers defined the contestations organized by refugees as actions of a "global political society," thus granting the refugees, "who are usually denied the status of political beings,"¹¹ with the capacity of critically review the asylum-related policies over a number of issues.

Other studies focus on legal, moral, and institutional implications of political asylum,¹² exploring the opportunity for enlarging its legal definition,¹³ and examining the impact of asylum policy on the international system.¹⁴ A separated but connected body of literature elaborates on the relation between refugees' movements and human security¹⁵ in the context of environmental degradation, where the refugees are both the cause and the consequence of environmental problems,¹⁶ poor food security,¹⁷ or ethnic conflicts.¹⁸

On one hand, the focus on refugees' political and social agency means that the conceptualization of the politics of asylum is centered on the refugees themselves. This approach underlines the refugees' capacity of choice and strategic thinking but neglects the degree to which refugees are merged in a context that often dominates them. On the other hand, the focus on the structure of political asylum, whether this analysis may be policy-oriented or legally driven, is very much centered on the structure of political asylum, neglecting the issues connected to refugees' everyday life, room for action and needs.

However, far from being two distinct spheres, refugees' agency and the political/legal structure of political asylum interact and are implicated in each other. This is particularly relevant if we consider how the refugees' individuality and agency are managed by international, national, and local legislations and actors, which compose a complex system of multilevel governance. In line with those studies arguing that the legislation and bureaucratic practices do not only norm reality but create the objects they aim to regulate,¹⁹ this article examines how institutions and organizations working with refugees also participate in creating the subject of their action and assistance.

Political refugees and asylum seekers deal with institutions at an international level, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), with international nongovernmental actors such as Frontline or Amnesty International, and with "closer" actors such as national governments, local NGOs, and policy makers receiving them in the host country. Recalling the Foucauldian idea of biopolitics, which roughly speaking refers to a set of institutionalized practices through which people's lives are (self) governed and (self) disciplined,²⁰ this article contends that it is within this context that the performativity of "being a refugee" takes shape and develops, bridging the refugees' agency and the political and legal structure of political asylum.²¹ In particular, international politics, the refugees' personal networks, and local NGOs assisting them provide a clear definition of "refugeeness," which is offered (if not imposed) to the refugees.

But this process does not only come about through classical forms institutional pressures, it also takes shape through the efforts of empowering the refugees politically. International politics, personal connections, and local NGOs play a significant role in setting political opportunities for refugees. In the case of Iran, the internationally dominant discourse of democracy and human rights has been particularly powerful in framing the political claims of the Green Movement and of the refugees coming from that context,²² somehow promoting a superficial identification of the Iranians leaving Iran after 2009 with "Green movement activists" or "human rights defenders." Relying on this same democratic rhetoric and political imaginary, the Iranian activists from the Diaspora, NGOs, and "civil society organizations" play a regulative role as well, often by providing to the refugees the necessary social capital in a new country for continuing with their political activities.²³ Although this context seems to offer political opportunities for action and criticism to the refugees,

empowering them to reclaim rights and “play strategically” with their status,²⁴ in reality it forces refugees in the clothes of “democratic activists and human rights defenders.” Instead of “liberating” them through political empowerment, such a context may produce a never-ending “performance of activism,” through which refugees are acknowledged with a status. This is similar to the notion of “gender performativity” as developed by Judith Butler, who understands gender as a social constructed identity formed and incorporated through fixed and reiterated performances or “gendered doings.” Such a performativity, Butler argues, can be subverted through a process of re-signification and reinvention of gender acting outside of the given scripts.²⁵ However, in this case study, not the process of “empowering refugees politically” nor refugees’ criticism to the policies they are subjected to result in a re-signification or in a contestation of “refugeeness” itself, despite the positive role attached to political agency. Quite to the contrary, contestations and empowerment foster the dominant relations of power that see refugees engaged in performing what a refugee is expected to be and acting as they are expected to act.

In order to bring evidences and shed light on these dynamics, the case of Iranian political refugees in Turkey and Italy will be examined. The choice of these two countries is motivated by the different conditions they offer. The Italian government recognizes Iranians as refugees, whereas Turkey still adopts the geographical limitations on political asylum. In Turkey, non-European refugees are granted as such by the local UNHCR branch only and wait for resettlement in a third country in Europe, North America, or Oceania.²⁶ Furthermore, because of the rollback of the welfare state, in Italy political refugees are assisted by charity organizations and NGOs that follow them in many aspects of their life, providing different services and expertise. In Turkey, the number of NGOs and civil society organizations assisting refugees is growing but still, they are less relevant to policy making, integration, and welfare policies than in Italy.²⁷ Such differences enhance the relevance of the three levels of analysis (personal connections, local assistance, and international politics) in shaping Iranians’ identity as political refugees. In the case of Italy, where Iranian refugees are less in number but have a greater access to rights, the role of local NGOs is very relevant to the process of identity construction. In Turkey, where many refugees or asylum seekers spend years waiting for resettlement, the importance of personal connections is enhanced. Family and friends can indeed provide information, the necessary social capital for connections within Turkey or outside of it, and this may speed up the process of resettlement. The relevance of the international level is present in both settings, and it acts powerfully by influencing the institutional and NGOs’ attitude toward Iranians and by shaping the refugees’ frames of behavior and self-representation.

Methodology

This article rests on semistructured interviews and fieldwork with Iranian refugees in Italy and Turkey conducted between 2009 and 2012. The fieldwork in these two countries has been preceded by fieldwork in Iran, where I conducted research on “civil society activism” and dissent between 2005 and 2008. Fifty-two interviews compose the main body of interviews, but many refugees have been repeatedly interviewed and a significant part of my fieldwork has been characterized by participant observation, since many refugees both in Turkey and Italy have shared with me their everyday life for a number of months. Like the majority of Iranian political refugees or asylum seekers, they share a general commitment to a democratic reform of the Islamic Republic, supported Moussavi or Karroubi’s candidature at the 2009 presidential election and oppose Ahmadinejad’s government.

This multisited field research in different countries and periods allowed me to follow the developments of successful and unsuccessful asylum applications, witness the refugees’ efforts to conform to the idea of “a refugee” and the exchange of suggestions on how to behave and what to say before the commissions granting the status of political refugee. However, teaching how to perform refugeeness does not only take place within the asylum seekers’ communities but also

through the relations the refugees hold with local NGOs and UNHCR. This relation was often characterized by references to the fact that “Iranians have struggled for democracy, everyone knows.”²⁸ I also witnessed refugees’ contestations against local policies as well as against NGOs’ behavior. I worked as social worker assisting Iranian political refugees for two Italian organizations between 2009 and 2012, and so I observed the shaping of refugees’ identity closely. As a matter of fact, I had an active role in it.

Furthermore, I conducted some interviews with privileged witnesses such as experts or social workers from organizations rescuing Iranian activists in The Netherlands and United States of America, in order to cross-verify the information I gathered in Turkey and Italy. Finally, I want to make clear that I am well aware of the ideological heterogeneity of the Iranian communities living outside of the Islamic Republic. However, the majority of the individuals I interviewed share a common support for the reformists. The Iranian Diaspora is indeed ideologically diversified and there are sharp contrasts among Marxists, liberals, monarchists, and reformists. This article does not overlook this political diversity but focuses on the reformists because those preferring this political allegiance seem to be the majority of those who left Iran in the aftermath of the 2009 crisis.²⁹ However, this might not be a case. According to the dominant perception, it is the reformists and the Green movement members who suffered the most because of the regime repression following the 2009 electoral crisis. Therefore, the reformists and “Greens” have become somehow the prototype of those forced to leave Iran because of their political beliefs.

Iranian Refugees in Turkey: The Relevance of Personal Networks and International Politics

Since the Islamic revolution, the image of the refugee has been crucial in identifying Iranians abroad. Iranian *réssortissants* are normally divided into different waves, the most relevant being the one following the 1979 revolution.³⁰ The biggest Iranian population outside of Iran is in the United States, followed by Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, Australia, and Sweden, where it is estimated that some four millions Iranians live in total.³¹ But beyond these Western countries, Turkey is another top destination for Iranians. According to Koser Akçapar,³² it was estimated that 300,000 to 1.5 million Iranians entered Turkey after the 1979 and stayed there until the end of the 1980s.

Since 1979 however other flows of Iranians have increased the ranks of “exiles” both in the Western world and in Turkey. During and after the 2009 protests, many have decided to leave Iran and became asylum seekers or refugees. According to the statistics of the Iranian Refugees’ Alliance,³³ in 2009, almost 16,000 Iranians applied for asylum worldwide and in 2011 the applicants were almost 25,000. Iranians constitute the highest number of asylum applicants in Turkey, and unofficial statistics estimate the number of Iranians currently living in Turkey as somewhere between 200,000 and 500,000.³⁴ According to the UNHRC, in 2010, the rate of new arrivals to Turkey from Iran increased from 7,840 in 2009 to 9,230. For the year 2013, the organization estimates that there could be over 25,000 people of concern in Turkey coming from Iran.³⁵

The issue of Iranian migration has undergone different waves of attention by the media and public opinion. Having the 2009 protests been broadcast all over the world, they appealed to the international public opinion and constructed a stereotyped image of the Iranian people as engaged in dissent. Those leaving the country have so been attached to the image of the opponents, generally represented as young, democratic, “modern,” and educated in contrast with a regime portrayed as backward, antimodern, and above all illegitimate.³⁶

For Iranians, emigration stands often in between a rational investment and a urgent necessity. Activists live in a highly hostile context and risk long-term imprisonment, but at the same time share with non-activists harsh economic and social conditions of life. Family and personal connections

play a relevant role in shaping and developing the idea of emigrating, and above all in addressing the *réssortissants* toward political asylum, which seems the best option available.

My family knows that I am here. But they are happy, somehow, they knew that I could not live in Iran. They educated me according to European standards. So I cannot live in Iran, and they are aware of this. My mother says I will have better chances in Europe and she is right. Before I left, we went to a lawyer and they explained me everything about political asylum.³⁷

Of course I miss my family. But they gave me so much money for leaving that now I cannot disappoint them. I would like to go back, but I cannot live according to the Islamic Republic's standard, I never could. That's why they supported my decision to leave.³⁸

I was a well-known activist in Iran, so my family was kind of prepared to this. Before me, my older brother left Iran because of politics [...]. So my parents knew that. I have always known that they have been saving money for the last years for this purpose [...]. I left for a better future: university, well paid job and decent life [...]. I knew from my brother and parents that all this is easier when you are a refugee.³⁹

Considering the role of the families and financial savings, emigration seems a real investment for a new, better life outside of Iran. This consideration echoes the studies arguing that migration is more and more interlocked with human rights abuses, highlighting the problematic nature of a practical differentiation between the "ordinary migrants," who theoretically have not been forced to emigrate, and refugees.⁴⁰ Indeed, the grip of the Iranian regime on society exerts a powerful pressure toward emigration by both sanctioning political activism and limiting social freedom. The poor economic performances of Iran are of course another pushing factor for emigration. The forced nature of emigration and the will of looking for a better existence abroad are two overlapping elements. Iranian refugees themselves waver between these two narrations. It is difficult to keep divided the ambition for a better life (find a good job, have access to education and language) and pure political commitment as the reason for leaving Iran. This seems more relevant if we consider that some of the most politically active interviewees stated that they would leave political activism when resettled in the third country, where they would think only to university to assure a bright professional future.⁴¹

Within the political economy of migration, be it forced or not, the arrival in the host country is an important moment. Generally speaking, having friends or contacts arranged by the family of origin means to be hosted in a place and easily get information about the process of asylum application. In the case of Iranian asylum seekers in Turkey, if there are no friends or relatives helping them, the smuggler plays a fundamental role by giving "survival information" about the country. But personal connections are also important to receive the right training: behaving and saying the right things before the UNHCR commission is often a major concern for Iranians. I participated in a trip to Van (Eastern Turkey) in November 2011 with a group of Iranian refugees who wanted to document their national fellows' conditions of life after the earthquake.⁴² One of the most frequently discussed topics within the Iranian community in Van was the application for asylum to the UNHCR, its time length and possible results. One of the refugees was particularly active in offering suggestions on how to perform "refugeeness" at best:

You need to know your rights [...] the UNHCR values this as an element indicating your previous political engagement. If you don't show them that you know what political asylum is, they will be sure that you are pretending to be an activist [...] And try to collect letters and statements that prove you have been doing political activities in Iran.⁴³

Another participant, a refugee waiting for resettlement in the United States, explained that:

Many people here do not have a strong *dossier* [meaning strong evidences that they were doing political activities in Iran] so they need to be the most convincing possible. For example, put forth a big name of Iranian politics is a good strategy [...] or saying that you were working for a human rights group, or reformists' electoral campaign ...⁴⁴

The political affiliation is a very important element in determining the success and the rapidity of the decision process on the asylum seekers' application:

It works like "bands" (*band-ha*): if you are a monarchist, you get the Pahlavi Foundation's support and they are powerful and care about you. Marxists are practically forgotten here, their resettlement takes many years. No country in the West wants them. For reformists, it depends on your connections [...] [for] those who were embedded in high-level political circles, life in Turkey is easy because they normally have money. And they leave Turkey quickly thanks to their contacts. [But even if you were generally supporting reformists without any affiliation] it is always better to say that you are a reformist and human rights activist.⁴⁵

This "preference" is somehow confirmed by a social worker of a charity organization based in Nevşehir: "we have precise policies and expectations [...] it is clear that our main goal is the respect of human rights [...] and the protection of human rights defenders [...] of course, we help anyone is in need."⁴⁶ This becomes clearer considering that the protection of human rights defenders is a top concern for the European Union, the United Nations, and for many other institutions elaborating policies or offering funding for humanitarian action.⁴⁷

The obtainment of the status of political refugee is not the only reason for performing the role of activist at best. Within the community of refugees, being recognized as a political activist determines inclusion or exclusion from the group. Those who benefit from such a reputation are well welcomed in the community, whereas those suspected of faking can be excluded. This is also evidenced by the internal differentiation determined by how refugees joined Turkey. Contrary to those who legally crossed the border, those who were obliged to turn to a smuggler for entering Turkey suffered harsh judiciary persecution in Iran and therefore enjoy a positive and sometimes a-critical reputation of activist.⁴⁸

Although it seems that by playing strategically with their status refugees exert an independent agency and elaborate options, the efforts of fitting the role of activist reproduce the existing set of relations of power according to which refugees have to perform a certain role in order to be accepted or considered as worth of help. "Refugeeness" thus becomes a performative process, which is embedded and negotiated within a net of unequal relations among different actors: the families expecting their efforts to be rewarded by a successful life abroad; the institutions granting political asylum, which expect the refugees to "fill out" the preestablished role of human rights activists; and the asylum seekers and refugees' communities, which internally teach how to behave and speak correctly, or in other words, how to perform refugeeness.

There are some peculiar elements helping Iranians in performing refugeeness. Considering the widespread international representation of Iranians as activists and the world-broadcast repression against the Green movement, political asylum is quite easily granted to Iranians. For example, it holds true that Iranians are political refugees because it is widely known that the Islamic Republic is a repressive regime, whereas Afghans are regarded as humanitarian refugees or migrants escaping from poverty caused by the enduring war and violence. Furthermore, the flexibility of the Green Movement in terms of internal organization leaves room for claiming a role within it, and the ambiguity of jobs or activities such as the journalist, a profession which is poorly qualified in Iran, or the blogger, may offer the opportunity of pretending a role. *I am a journalist* or *I am a human rights activist* are among the most popular answers to the question "why did you leave Iran?"⁴⁹

Regardless of a real engagement in political activities, the well-established representation of Iranians as freedom fighters allows single individuals to reclaim a role in and eventually feel like part of a wider, collective struggle for democracy. The relevance of “being a political activist” is such that sometimes Iranian refugees perceive themselves as more entitled of rights and protection than “ordinary migrants.” This process of differentiation is often performed at the expenses of other national groups.

There’s a huge difference between us, the Iranians, and for instance the Afghans. Afghans are migrants; they emigrate from Afghanistan because they look for work and possibilities to earn money. We do not leave Iran for this same reason. We were obliged to leave Iran because we are politically committed and struggled for democracy in our country. [But here in Turkey the Afghans] enjoy more rights than us [. . .] this is not fair from the point of view of what we sacrificed: we should enjoy more rights than Afghans, and the UNHCR should grant to us the rights it gives to Afghans.⁵⁰

We were told that the Italian government would look after us . . . we came to Italy and though that this was a first world country. They say us that because we enjoy free accommodation, free education and a small amount of money every week, we should be happy. They compared us to Somali! They said that those people have less than us. No free accommodation, for example. But we are not like them. They should not compare us to them! We are Iranians and they black people left their country because of hunger, not because of a struggle against dictatorship.⁵¹

I heard that a social worker compared Iranians to Somali . . . why she did it? It is normal that the Iranians got angry. [The social worker] must respect Iranians, she should not compare us to African people. We fought for freedom and were forced to leave Iran for this, while they did not . . . they left their countries because of poverty. And still in Italy Iranians enjoy less protection and respect than Somali do.⁵²

Even if these declarations can be considered as exceptional, the examples mentioned above are relevant in showing how the international representation of Iranians can become the dominant and only frame informing the refugees’ self-perception and self-representation. This mechanism is enhanced by the refugees’ poor living conditions, which may loosen their commitment to universal values such as human equality and rights, highlighting the dark side of refugeeness.

The Paradox of Political Empowerment: Refugees in Italy between International Politics and NGO Assistance

Beyond being subjected to mainstream representations and peers’ pressure, refugees are forced into predetermined roles through other means too. One of these, paradoxically, is political empowerment which, under certain circumstances, pushes the Iranian refugees into the preestablished category of “Green movement activists.”

In Italy and many other countries, NGOs and non-state actors have over the last two decades assumed a growing importance in substituting the rolling-back welfare states in many fields of social policies. Assistance to refugees is one of them.⁵³ NGOs and other civil society actors play a relevant role at the local level by mediating among the policy makers, public opinion, and the refugees’ communities. They often are the direct interlocutor for refugees and play an important role in shaping their identity. NGOs continuously frame the definition of “a refugee” by offering them services and establishing dependency and implicit reciprocity.⁵⁴ Furthermore, NGOs often have the political capital needed in order to structure the political field of action for refugees, thus heavily influencing refugees’ political capabilities and mobilization horizons.

This was particularly evident in the case of an Italian NGO which, in partnership with a network of European NGOs focusing on human rights, rescued some Iranian “human rights defenders” from

Iran and Turkey between late 2009 and early 2010. The refugees were indicated by a human rights NGO based in the United States as politically relevant within the Green movement and in danger of life. Their survival would have eventually been crucial for the future of Iran. The NGO's motivations for rescuing the activists wavered between a humanitarian concern over the lack of respect of human rights in Iran, and a more opportunistic will of "becoming an important voice on Iranian politics [...] because Iran stands at the very centre of the current Western political concerns."⁵⁵

In order to carry out a successful project, it was therefore quite important that the Iranian refugees did not abandon their political activism. Many studies have revealed how NGOs' assistance depoliticizes the refugees' personal biography, turning them into mere objects of care.⁵⁶ In this case study, on the contrary, "being an activist" was an element the NGOs wanted to protect and strengthen. For this reason, the Italian organization provided contacts and organized conferences by making available its social capital to the refugees, setting a *de facto* field of activism and determining political opportunities for the refugees. Among the NGO's workers and leaders, indeed, the shared idea was that the refugees needed their guidance in order to know how politics works in Italy, or for changing their own conditions as refugees and influence the Italian politics toward Iran.⁵⁷

Some scholars consider refugees' contestations, which normally revolve around issues related to asylum and welfare policy, as an evidence of growing empowerment and emancipation.⁵⁸ However, in the case study explored, the efforts for empowering politically the Iranian refugees have resulted in a further strengthening of the role they had to play, namely "being activists of the Green movement." Although this role was evidently becoming a too tight and uncomfortable identity, the refugees never criticized it directly. On the contrary, they perpetuated the embodiment of the profile of activists as expected by the NGO. This is of course partly linked to the rewarding aspects of "refugeeness": the label of political refugee may indeed grant some facilities, such as receiving financial support, education, or providing networks and contacts. However, the decision of conforming to the standard expected by the NGO in order to enjoy the connected advantages is only a pale expression of agency. Indeed, the strategy of noncooperation with the organization has a cost being far higher than the one of cooperation, and determines risks the refugees are unlikely to bare.

This mechanism was evident in the occasion of a conference organized by the NGO on the Green movement and human rights abuses in Iran held in June 2010 before the Commission for Human Rights of the Italian Senate in Rome.⁵⁹ Some refugees expressed their dissatisfaction with a number of issues revolving around the political strategy chosen by the NGO. Talking of their own political biography before the Parliament was not the political action they liked the most. They would prefer, instead, organizing public demonstration or sit-ins, in order to attract the people's attention on the ongoing repression in Iran. Institutions, according to them, would never act significantly against the Islamic Republic.⁶⁰ However, they were aware of the strategic importance that this event had for the NGO and, after receiving pressures and assurance by the organization that they would also receive advantages such as public visibility and political credibility from taking part in it, the event took place.

The refugees also contested the NGO's attempt at denying their abilities of pointing out a set of political opportunities autonomously. As a matter of fact, the NGO was very active in discouraging independent political initiatives, and even the refugees' contacts with media such as BBC Farsi or Voice of America were a source of tension and concerns for the NGO. The refugees expressed this discontent by repeatedly affirming their political credentials and the consideration they enjoyed in Iran as well-known activists and journalists. Further conflicts exploded because, prior the audition to the Italian Senate, the director of the NGO asked the refugees to read the drafts of their talks. This was interpreted as an attempt of controlling what they had to say and they felt "treated like children," whereas they enjoyed very high-level political contacts in Iran.⁶¹

Generally, the many meetings and conferences the NGO organized were criticized by the refugees on the basis of the fact that they were not acquainted with the NGO's political network.

Conflicts erupted in December 2010 as the NGO organized a charity Christmas dinner to raise funding for a project called "The Shelter," a program of protection for human rights defenders expected to provide future funding and assistance to the Iranian refugees as well.⁶² All the invitees were people acquainted with the NGO and part of its local network. The refugees would have performed the waiters, the parking attendants and the cooks, and during the dinner, they would have told their story to the invitees. The refugees' reaction was critical. Being at the center of the attention made them to feel uneasy, because they did not know "who the invited persons are" and whether these would be "on my same party if they were in Iran."⁶³ Similar remarks were made after their participation in another event, the Italian 2010 Peace March, where the refugees were invited as guest stars and told their story before the numerous participants on a public stage.⁶⁴

Although they felt quite imprisoned in the political proposal the organization set up for them, the Iranian refugees never subverted the "scripts of refugeeness" the NGO expected. Their claims were justified by their political past and by their present legal status, so that they did not radically review the NGO's expectation. The refugees were well aware of this, to the point that the few Marxist refugees assisted by the NGO never expressed publicly their annoyance with the overpresence of the "Green movement" and "reformist" rhetoric in every event and initiative on Iran.⁶⁵

The discontent the refugees voiced did not take place outside the performativity of refugeeness and perpetrated the existing unbalanced relation of power among the actors. On one side, the refugees did not feel entitled with the right of choice between acting politically or not. They limited their criticism to the practical aspects of the political initiatives the NGO designed for them, without questioning their activism. On the other side, the NGO kept on shaping the refugees' field of action, "demanding activism."

Conclusion

This article brings further evidence to confirm that refugees are merged in a context that dominates them. This domination takes two shapes: it determines the refugees' identity and limits their agency in modifying such identity. The first element is linked to the influence that the rhetoric related to democracy and democratization exerts on the refugees' identity and on the humanitarian agendas of international organizations and local NGOs. In particular, the insistence of international politics on the discourse of human rights and democratization and the Iranian Diaspora's capability of exploiting it, have played a crucial role in defining Iranian refugees as pro-democratic activists. Notwithstanding some differences, the case of Kurd refugees is similar to the Iranian one in that the Kurds also have refashioned their self-representation and ideal cause in terms of human rights, reacting proactively to the pervasiveness of such rhetoric.⁶⁶ Second, the context limits the refugees' agency in modifying the assumption that equates Iranian refugees to activists. Indeed, this article points out that refugees are subjected to a number of pressures that push them toward the incorporation and the performance of a role. Even if there is room for resistance and criticism, the emancipation from this type of domination is an overly hard task.

However, these two forms of domination change in terms of intensity according to the contexts in which the refugees are merged. In particular, the intensity of domination is linked to the presence of strong or weak ties.⁶⁷ In certain contexts, indeed, the refugees are freer to reject or criticize the label of political activists and to stress its extreme flexibility. This happens in those contexts in which the refugees have strong ties, hold personal relations and contacts with their respondents. On the contrary, it seems that the performativity of "being a political refugee" increases its strength and normativity in a context in which the refugees have weak ties.

For instance, in a context characterized by strong ties, such as the family, refugees seem to be allowed to downplay their identity of activists and to put on the clothes of young people willing to win better life conditions. As it has been pointed out in the article, the refugees' families are well

aware that getting political asylum could trigger further opportunities for education and work to their sons and daughters. Therefore, families often encourage them to leave the country and apply for political asylum. In such a context, the refugees are less pressurized to perform refugeeness, although such a performance remains crucial when dealing with the world outside that particular context. In the case of contexts characterized by weak ties, the refugees are less allowed to downplay their identity of activists. This is the case of local NGOs assisting refugees and of international organizations granting the status of refugee. In such contexts, refugees are obliged to perform a “plain” identity and to stick to the script of refugeeness which, in the case of Iranian refugees, has political activism at its core.

In the middle of these two contexts, we find the peers’ community which is characterized by a mix of strong and weak ties. Considering Granovetter’s definition, the ties characterizing the peers’ communities both entail and lack the elements making a tie strong (amount of time, emotional intensity, intimacy, mutual confiding, and reciprocal services).⁶⁸ Within these communities, refugees and asylum seekers are exposed to two opposite pressures. On one side, the label of refugee is quite criticized and it is not strictly taken as “actual” to the point that the refugees teach to each other how to perform refugeeness at best in order to convince the institutions granting the status. On the other side, “being an activist” is a matter which is taken rather seriously. The refugees’ communities are indeed normed by mechanisms of reward or punishment adopted in the case of well-known or “fake” activists, respectively, and these mechanisms push the refugees and asylum seekers to perform their identity of activists. In the context of the peers’ community, the label of refugee and the one of activist seem to distance one from the other to become independent. However, this does not mean that the refugees are able to increase their agency: as a matter of fact, their adherence to the identity of activists does not allow the emersion of a complete, complex identity.

The room for criticizing the labels and roles linked to political asylum thus changes according to the strength of the ties characterizing the context in which the refugees are merged. However, this does not result in a subversion of such labels and roles, because they prove to be strategic. In particular, this is true for those contexts characterized by weak ties, in which asylum seekers and refugees limit their actions and identity to the preestablished standards they are required to fit. Seen under this light, the political empowerment programs carried out by the organizations assisting the refugees seem to be even more paradoxical. On one side, these programs aim to norm a relevant part of the refugees’ life and suppose strong ties between the refugees and the organization personnel. As the article has suggested, controlling the political activities the refugees wanted to carry out autonomously was crucial to the NGO assisting them, which tried to impose to the refugees a predefined set of political opportunities for undertaking political activities. But on the other side, the establishment of such a close relation in terms of control was not rewarded by the possibility of letting a complex identity to surface. The Iranian refugees, indeed, were considered only as activists by the NGO plans and personnel. In conclusion, despite being normally associated to a positive function, political empowerment does not always entail emancipation.

List of Interviews

- A: 24, former member of the Central Committee of the *Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat* (anti-Ahmadinejad student union), political refugee. Interviewed in Van, July 2011.
- B: 26, member of the youngster section of the party *Mojahheddin-e Enqelab* (reformist party). Interviewed in Van, July 2011 and in Kayseri, April 2012.
- C: 25, member of the *Advar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat* (reformist organization) and of the One Million Signatures Campaign, member of the 2009 Karroubi’s presidential campaign, political refugee in Turin, Italy. Participant observation between March 2010 and February 2011.

- D: around 45, political refugee in Van, Turkey. Interviewed in November 2011.
- E: 28, journalist, member of Karroubi's campaign, political refugee in Turin. Participant observation between March 2010 and February 2011.
- F: former member of the International Campaign of Human Rights in Iran, former UNFPA National Project Director in Iran, former member of the Center for Women's Participation. Interviewed in January 2011.
- G: 25, journalist, civil society activist. Political refugee in Turin. Participant observation between March 2010 and February 2011.
- H: 33, activist and political refugee, Association of Solidarity among Exiles. Repeatedly interviewed in Eskisehir and Van, Turkey, between November 2011 and April 2012.
- I: 24, deputy for women's affairs in Karroubi's presidential campaign, political refugee in Turin. Participant observation between March 2010 and May 2011.
- J: 34, member of Moussavi's campaign, political refugee. Repeatedly interviewed in Eskisehir and Van, between July 2011 and April 2012.
- K: 33, former member of the United Front of Students, former Islamic Association of Students/Tabarzadi's group, political refugee. Repeatedly interviewed in Eskisehir and Van, between November 2011 and April 2012.
- L: 31, former member of the legal advisory group of the Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat, political refugee in Turin. Participant observation between March 2010 and February 2011.
- M: 30, former member of the Central Committee of the Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat, political refugee. Repeatedly interviewed in Eskisehir and Van, between July 2011 and April 2012. Social worker, human rights NGO, Nevşehir, Turkey, Interviewed on February 2012.

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Notes

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