

CHICAGO THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

**THE ARCHITECTURE OF RECONCILIATION
“RESTORATIVE JUSTICE FOR AFGHAN REFUGEE YOUTH”**

A THESIS

**SUBMITTED TO THE CHICAGO THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
FACULTY IN THE CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS**

BY

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

2026

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

To my luminous children, Nura and Siraj.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to honor the love and support that family and friends have shown me throughout this journey. My deepest gratitude goes to my mother, who has been my first and most constant teacher. So much of my lived theology comes from you. God bless your patience, resilience, and quiet strength. You truly carry the beauty of your name, Halima. My love and gratitude also go to my children, Nura and Siraj. You are my two bright lights. May Allah bless you, protect you, and fill your hearts with sincere love for Him and for His Beloved Messenger Muhammad ﷺ. When that love is present, everything else can fall into place. May Allah gather us with Al Habib in the hereafter.

I am grateful to my teachers, especially those at Bayan, who taught my classmates and me both in the classroom and through their lived experience. I am also thankful to my mentors for their steady guidance. I pray there is real benefit in this work. I want to thank all of my students and the youth I have worked with over the years. I learned from your questions, your honesty, and your presence. I am especially grateful to the youth at the Reda Center. I admire your resilience and the way you keep moving forward despite the challenges life throws your way. May Allah bless you and protect you always.

GLOSSARY

Islamic & Theological Terms

‘Adl

Justice

‘Afw

Forgiveness

Ahl al-Bayt

The Family of the Prophet Muhammad.

Ansar

The "Helpers," referring to the Medinan community that supported the emigrants, historically paired with the Muhajirun in a bond of brotherhood.

Fata

A young chivalrous person.

Fatwa

A religious decree issued by scholars.

Futuwwah

Spiritual chivalry

Ghayrah

"Protective jealousy," defined as care for the dignity of oneself and one's community.

Halal

Permissible according to Islamic law.

Haram

Forbidden according to Islamic law.

Hudud

Punishments in Islamic law.

Ihsan

Beneficence, excellence, or "doing what is beautiful."

Islah

Reconciliation

Ithar

Prioritizing others' needs over one's own.

Jihad

Struggle.

Muhajirun

The "Immigrants," referring to the Meccans who fled persecution, historically paired with the Ansar.

Qisas

Retribution or reciprocity

Rahma

Mercy

Salam

Peace

Sitr

Concealment; the practice of veiling faults to prioritize moral rehabilitation over public shaming.

Sulh

Reconciliation

Sunnah

The practice of the Prophet Muhammad.

Takfir

The act of declaring another Muslim an apostate.

Taqiyyah

The practice of hiding one's faith to survive persecution.

Tawbah

Repentance

Ummah

The global Muslim community.

Afghan Cultural & Social Terms**Badal**

Revenge, a core component of the Pashtunwali code requiring blood revenge or compensation.

De-Shi'atization

A state policy implemented in the late 19th century involving the coercion of Shia leaders to adopt Sunni practices and the destruction of Shia social distinctiveness.

Hazarajat

The central highlands region inhabited by the Hazara people.

Jirga

A tribal assembly used for decision-making and conflict resolution, characterized by participants sitting in a circle to emphasize equality.

Kuchis

Pashtun nomads.

Melmastia

Hospitality, a core component of the Pashtunwali code.

Mirs

Historically controlled the land and economy in Hazara feudal systems.

Nang

Honor, a strict component of the Pashtunwali code.

Pashtunwali

A strict code of conduct among Pashtuns revolving around honor, hospitality, and revenge.

Sayeds

Religious elites claiming descent from the Prophet Muhammad.

Shalish

Traditional community mediation utilized in Bangladesh, serving as a model for indigenous restorative justice.

ABSTRACT

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Degree Received: M.A. Islamic Education

Title: The Architecture of Reconciliation: Restorative Justice for Afghan Refugee Youth

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This thesis explores how a culturally grounded model of restorative justice can support Afghan refugee youth in Sacramento as they work through sectarian tension and the hardships of resettlement. It raises concerns about how the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) often measures success by paperwork rather than by the real, human work of meeting refugees' needs, and it highlights the deeper structural barriers these youth face. The thesis then offers a path through a focused initiative at the Reda Center, drawing on the decolonizing framework of Muhammad Asadullah and the Islamic ethic of futuwah, spiritual chivalry. By turning to Prophetic examples of reconciliation and building strong peer mentorship, this model imagines a living community practice that helps these youth rise above Sunni-Shia divides and grow into deeper, more genuine care for one another.

CHAPTER 1

HISTORICAL ROOTS OF CONFLICT IN AFGHANISTAN

Afghan refugee youth growing up in Sacramento carry more than the usual challenges that come with migration. Many also inherit pieces of Afghanistan's long history of sectarian tension, ethnic hierarchy, and political violence. These histories do not simply fade away when families resettle in the United States. They often remain present in quieter ways, passed down through family stories, memories, and the everyday dynamics of community life. For young Afghans growing up in a new country, these inherited tensions can shape how they see one another and how they relate across Sunni and Shia lines.

Because of this, understanding where these divisions come from is an important step toward thinking about reconciliation. The conflicts that once unfolded through state policies, tribal structures, and sectarian violence in Afghanistan continue to leave echoes in diaspora communities. Afghan youth in Sacramento often encounter these histories indirectly, through conversations at home, religious spaces, or the broader community around them. Even for those who have never lived in Afghanistan, these inherited narratives can still influence how identity, loyalty, and conflict are understood.

This chapter offers a historical overview of the religious, social, and political dynamics that shaped sectarian relations in Afghanistan. Looking at this history helps provide the background needed to understand why restorative justice approaches may be especially meaningful for Afghan refugee youth in Sacramento as they navigate both the challenges of resettlement and the inherited tensions of their community's past.

Sunni-Shia Intrafaith Dynamics

The religious landscape of Afghanistan carries a long history of sectarian tension that has shaped much of its social and political life. About 85 percent of the population identifies as Sunni within the Hanafi tradition, while roughly 15 percent follows Shia Islam.¹ The Shia community is made up mostly of Twelver Ja'faris, with a smaller Ismaili population. These sectarian identities often overlap with ethnic lines. The Sunni majority is largely Pashtun, Tajik, and Uzbek, while the Shia population is made up overwhelmingly of Hazara and Qizilbash communities.² As a result, the history of intrafaith dynamics in the country is tied closely to state formation and the struggle for political recognition.

Sectarian identity became especially politicized during the rule of Abdur Rahman Khan, who tried to consolidate power by using religion as a primary tool. He presented himself as the shadow of God and expected absolute obedience in return.³ This approach made it easy for the state to cast political resistance as religious deviance. The harshest example of this came during the campaign against the Hazarajat region from 1891 to 1893. To rally Sunni Pashtun tribes against the Shia Hazaras, Abdur Rahman gathered fatwas from Sunni scholars that labeled the Shia community as infidels, giving his military campaign a religious cover.⁴ This shift turned what was essentially a war for

¹ Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 28.

² *Ibid.*, 27.

³ Niamatullah Ibrahim, *The Hazaras and the Afghan State: Rebellion, Exclusion and the Struggle for Recognition* (London: Hurst & Company, 2017), 689.

⁴ Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 54.

territory into a so-called religious conquest, allowing the state to justify taking Hazara lands and enslaving their people under the banner of religious duty.⁵

After the Hazaras were militarily defeated, the state pushed a policy of what it called de-Shi'atization. Sunni scholars were placed in Shia regions to enforce Hanafi rulings, and Shia leaders were pressured to abandon their own practices and conform to Sunni norms.⁶ The state's goal was to erase the distinct social and religious identity of the Shia community, which left many Shias resorting to taqiyyah, or concealed practice, simply to stay safe. This era cemented a hierarchy in which the state aligned itself with Sunni Pashtun identity and pushed Shia communities into a lower, more vulnerable position.⁷

Through the early twentieth century, the Musahiban dynasty continued this pattern of exclusion. Their push for a Pashtun-centered nationalism kept Shia communities on the margins and reinforced the old hierarchy.⁸ In the mid twentieth century, Shia scholars began pushing for internal reform, trying to revive their community's identity while working within the limits imposed by the state. One key figure was Sayyed Mir Ali Ahmad Hojjat, who urged a move away from taqiyyah toward a more expressive Shi'ism. He encouraged public rituals, community visibility, and the building of mosques as a way to reclaim both dignity and presence.⁹ He encouraged this renewed confidence in Shia identity while still grounding it in a spirit of broader Islamic

⁵ Ibrahim, *The Hazaras and the Afghan State*, 690.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 693.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 694.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 704.

⁹ Ahmad Rashid Salim, "For the Sake of God and a Sense of Justice: Past Realities and Future Possibilities of Religious Reform in Afghanistan," *Afghanistan* 7, Supplement (2024): 139.

unity. He kept warm ties with Sunni scholars and consistently pushed back against sectarian division.¹⁰

Another key figure, Sayyed Ismail Balkhi, used both poetry and political activism to reach across sectarian lines. His message centered on justice and freedom, and he tried to bring Sunnis and Shias together in a shared struggle against the monarchy.¹¹ These efforts gradually opened the way for more positive connections, reflected in the fact that Zahir Shah took part in Ashura commemorations. Even so, discrimination in government jobs and education persisted, and full equality remained out of reach.¹²

The collapse of the state after the 1978 communist coup and the later invasion by the Soviet Union reshaped intrafaith dynamics in profound ways. In the early years, the idea of a shared jihad against the communist, God-denying regime created a rare point of unity for both Sunni and Shia mujahideen.¹³ However, that unity did not last. It broke apart as old ethnic and sectarian divisions resurfaced. Many Sunni groups received backing from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United States, while Shia groups turned to Iran for support.¹⁴

Within the Shia community, a struggle for leadership grew between the traditional scholars and a younger generation inspired by Ruhollah Khomeini. That internal tension eventually pushed various factions to come together and form Hezb-e-Wahdat, the Party of Unity, in 1989.¹⁵ Even after this unification, the Sunni mujahideen government that

¹⁰ Ibid., 140.

¹¹ Ibid., 141.

¹² Ibid., 140.

¹³ Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 23.

¹⁴ Ibrahimi, *The Hazaras and the Afghan State*, 724.

¹⁵ Ibid., 764.

operated in exile in Pakistan largely left the Shia out. They were treated as if they had little political weight, which kept old divisions firmly in place.¹⁶

The civil war of the 1990s turned sectarian identity into a weapon. In Kabul, especially during the Afshar massacre of 1993, forces tied to the Sunni led government of Burhanuddin Rabbani and his ally Abdul Rasul Sayyaf carried out brutal attacks on Hazara civilians.¹⁷ The rise of the Taliban in 1994 reshaped Sunni-Shia relations in a profound way. Guided by a strict ideological vision, they saw Shias not only as political opponents but also as theological outsiders.¹⁸ This culminated in the 1998 massacre in Mazar-e-Sharif, where the Taliban leadership carried out a brutal campaign that specifically targeted Shia communities.¹⁹

The post 2001 political order shaped through the Bonn Agreement brought new legal protections for the Shia community. The 2004 Constitution of Afghanistan included Article 131, which formally recognized Shia Ja'fari jurisprudence in matters of personal law. This marked a meaningful shift, since historically only the Hanafi school had been given official recognition.²⁰ This period also saw the rise of Muhammad Asif Mohseni, a Grand Ayatollah who dedicated himself to strengthening ties between different Islamic schools of thought and encouraging a more unified religious vision.²¹ He founded the Khatam-al-Nabieen Seminary and launched Tamadon TV, both of which welcomed Sunni scholars and worked to promote a shared Islamic identity. He taught that sectarian

¹⁶ Ibid., 766.

¹⁷ Ibid., 768.

¹⁸ Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 99.

¹⁹ Ibrahimi, *The Hazaras and the Afghan State*, 761.

²⁰ Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 27.

²¹ Salim, "For the Sake of God," 147.

division grows out of ignorance and believed that taking part in public life was a religious responsibility.²²

Even with these developments, the Shia community stayed vulnerable to attacks from extremist groups. The Taliban continued targeting Shia gatherings, including bombings during Ashura, which kept fear and insecurity alive.²³ These attacks made it clear that even as the state moved toward more inclusive policies, violent extremist groups were still active and kept undermining any sense of safety for Shia communities.²⁴

Sunni-Shia relations in Afghanistan have shifted back and forth over the past several decades. There have been periods of state-backed discrimination and attempts to erase Shia identity, alongside later efforts to build a legal framework that affirms religious equality. Some scholars showed what is possible when people work to build theological and social bridges. Even then, the long history of persecution and the ongoing presence of militant sectarianism still make intrafaith respect a difficult and fragile project.

Tribal Structures and Cultures

The social landscape of Afghanistan is shaped by a complex mix of tribal, ethnic, and regional identities that have often taken precedence over loyalty to the central state. The country brings together many different ethnic communities, including Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, and Turkmen. At the heart of this social world is the idea of qawm, a word that simply means group but carries a lot of nuance. Depending on the context, someone's qawm might be their extended family, their village, their clan or tribe,

²² Ibid., 152.

²³ Ibrahimi, *The Hazaras and the Afghan State*, 799.

²⁴ Ibid., 774.

or even their larger linguistic community.²⁵ This structure acts as a person's real safety net in a place where state institutions have often been fragile. An Afghan's primary loyalty is usually to this circle of solidarity, which provides protection and economic support in return for steady, unwavering commitment to the group.²⁶

The Pashtuns, the largest ethnic group in the country, have the most firmly structured tribal system. They trace their lineage back to an ancestor named Qais, who is believed to have lived during the time of the Prophet Muhammad.²⁷ This lineage system branches the Pashtuns into large tribal groupings like the Durrani and the Ghilzai, which then break down into many smaller clans.²⁸

The Pashtun social order is deeply shaped by its lineage system. Afghans often describe it with the saying: "Me against my brothers; my brothers and me against our cousins; my brothers, cousins, and me against the world." It captures how loyalty expands outward in layers, starting with family and stretching to the wider community.²⁹ This means that internal rivalries are common, often tied to disputes over land, marriage, or wealth. But when an outside threat appears, those internal tensions are usually set aside, and the group closes ranks again.³⁰ This pattern makes it easy for communities to mobilize quickly when an outside force threatens them, but it also makes long-term political unity difficult once that external pressure fades.³¹

²⁵ Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 18.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

In Pashtun society, every man is seen as the equal of any other, and no one is born with the right to command another.³² Leadership is not something someone automatically inherits. It has to be earned through courage, generosity, and the ability to hold a community together. That makes governing difficult because any leader is always being watched and challenged by others within the same lineage.³³ The main way Pashtun communities make decisions and resolve disputes is through the jirga, a tribal council. People usually sit in a circle to underline that everyone present has equal standing and no one sits above the rest.³⁴ Decisions are reached through consensus rather than simple majority vote, since the goal is to preserve the collective honor of everyone involved and ensure no one walks away feeling overruled.³⁵

In contrast, the Turkic communities of northern Afghanistan, including the Uzbeks and Turkmen, have historically followed a more hierarchical social model. Rooted in the steppe traditions of Central Asia, their social order grew out of a Turko-Mongolian heritage that accepted inherited authority as a natural part of leadership.³⁶ In this model, political authority often rested with certain elite lineages, including those who claimed descent from Genghis Khan. Because hierarchy was already accepted in their social world, these groups were able to build more stable forms of governance, with followers accustomed to taking direction from their commanders and khans.³⁷

³² Ibid., 126.

³³ Ibid., 127.

³⁴ H.M. Yousufzai and Ali Gohar, *Towards Understanding Pukhtoon Jirga* (Peshawar: Just Peace International, 2005), 45.

³⁵ Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 127.

³⁶ Ibid., 24.

³⁷ Ibid., 25.

The Tajiks, who are Persian-speaking Sunnis, follow a different kind of social structure. Unlike the Pashtuns or the Uzbeks, they are not organized around lineage-based tribes. Their sense of identity grows more from place and community, shaped by the regions and towns where their families have lived for generations.³⁸ A Tajik's identity is usually tied to his village or valley, such as being from Panjshir or Badakhshan. Because Tajiks have long held a strong presence in the cities and in government administration, they often functioned within a more settled, urban style of social life, which stands in contrast to the tribal world of nomadic and mountain communities.³⁹

The political history of Afghanistan is shaped by the blending of these different social models. The Durrani Pashtuns, who established the modern Afghan state in 1747, held power in part by adopting the administrative practices of the Persian and Turkic empires they absorbed, creating a hybrid system that drew from multiple traditions.⁴⁰ While they kept their Pashtun identity, the Durrani elite moved away from the village-style jirga system and embraced a dynastic form of monarchy instead.⁴¹ This shift created long-standing tension within the Pashtun community, as the Durrani ruling class moved toward a centralized monarchy, while the Ghilzai Pashtuns in the east held tightly to their tradition of social equality and often rose up against the central government.⁴²

The Hazaras, a Persian-speaking Shia community living in the central highlands, were traditionally led by local nobles called mirs and by religious leaders known as sayeds.⁴³ The mirs oversaw the land and local economy, while the sayeds, who traced

³⁸ Ibid., 18.

³⁹ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 121.

⁴¹ Ibid., 123.

⁴² Ibid., 133–134.

⁴³ Ibrahimi, *The Hazaras*, 78.

their lineage to the Prophet Muhammad, held religious authority within the community.⁴⁴ This older social structure was heavily damaged during the state-building campaigns of the late nineteenth century. When Amir Abdur Rahman Khan conquered the Hazara region in the 1890s, much of the traditional Hazara leadership was destroyed, leaving the community deeply weakened.⁴⁵ By the late twentieth century, this loss of traditional leadership created space for a new class of intellectuals and revolutionary scholars to step in. Their push to challenge older authority structures sparked internal tensions and brought significant social restructuring within the Hazara community.⁴⁶

Across all these communities, social order is maintained mostly through customary law rather than formal state courts. In Pashtun regions, this takes the form of Pashtunwali, a strict code centered on honor, hospitality, and the obligation to seek justice when wronged.⁴⁷ Crimes like murder are not seen as offenses against the state, but as wrongs committed against the victim's family and tribe. Restoring balance usually requires either blood revenge or an agreed form of compensation.⁴⁸ This restorative approach aims to restore harmony within the community, rather than isolating and punishing the individual.⁴⁹ Mechanisms like the jirga make this possible, giving community elders a space to mediate disputes and enforce decisions through collective agreement and social pressure.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Ibid., 79.

⁴⁵ Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 154.

⁴⁶ Ibrahimi, *The Hazaras*, 124.

⁴⁷ Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 25.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 26.

⁴⁹ Muhammad Asadullah, "Decolonizing Restorative Justice: A Case Study of Pakistan," *Journal of Decolonization of Criminology and Justice* 3, no. 1 (2021): 376.

⁵⁰ Yousufzai and Gohar, *Towards Understanding Pukhtoon Jirga*, 376.

The strength of these tribal and community structures has profoundly shaped Afghan history. Whether confronting the British, the Soviets, or the Americans, people have repeatedly turned back to their qawm networks as their deepest source of protection and survival.⁵¹ These structures offer people a sense of identity and a system of justice that the central state has never been able to match. Because of this, attempts to govern Afghanistan without taking these deep cultural and tribal realities into account have repeatedly fallen short. Loyalty to kin and community runs far deeper than any allegiance to a distant state capital.⁵²

Conditions Causing Conflict and Oppression

The roots of conflict and oppression in Afghanistan are deeply structural, shaped by the country's long history of state formation and the politicization of ethnic identities. Although Afghanistan is often described as the graveyard of empires because of its resistance to foreign powers, its internal story is one of ongoing tension between a centralizing state and a fragmented society. A major driver of conflict has been a model of state-building that prioritized domination over genuine governance. The modern Afghan state, consolidated under Abdur Rahman Khan, was built through internal conquest and coercion. He created a centralized administration by crushing regional autonomy and forcing the religious establishment into obedience, a form of internal imperialism that treated Afghanistan's diverse communities not as people to serve, but as populations to control.⁵³ His approach shaped the generations that followed, as later rulers came to

⁵¹ Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 221.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 340.

⁵³ Ibrahimi, *The Hazaras*, 54.

believe that political unity could only be achieved through strict centralization. Any alternative vision was treated as a danger to national stability.

This centralization, though, was often more imagined than real. Historically, the only Afghan rulers who managed to hold things together used what you could call a Swiss cheese model of governance. They kept direct control over the cities and fertile regions, while the mountains, deserts, and the people who lived in them were left mostly to manage their own affairs.⁵⁴ Conflict often broke out when modernizing regimes, such as the rule of King Amanullah or the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) in 1978, tried to push state control and social reforms deep into rural areas without the administrative strength to make those changes work. These top-down efforts to reshape rural life triggered massive backlash and, in many cases, helped bring about the collapse of the state itself.

Conflict has also been fueled by the politicization of ethnic identity and the creation of ethnic hierarchies. The state-building projects of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were closely tied to Pashtun political dominance. The Durrani Empire and the governments that followed used a system of selective distribution and representation, offering certain Pashtun tribes privileges such as land grants and tax exemptions in return for military backing, while placing heavier taxes and granting fewer rights on other ethnic groups.⁵⁵ This dynamic developed a sense of entitlement among Pashtun elites and deep resentment among non-Pashtuns, especially the Hazaras, Uzbeks, and Tajiks.

The oppression of the Hazara people is one of the clearest examples of this pattern. During the state-building campaigns of the 1890s, Abdur Rahman Khan launched

⁵⁴ Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 67-68.

⁵⁵ Ibrahimi, *The Hazaras*, 21.

a campaign against the Hazaras that was genocidal in its impact. It led to mass killing, enslavement, and the seizure of Hazara lands, which were then handed over to Pashtun nomadic groups.⁵⁶ This history created a caste-like hierarchy in which Hazaras were pushed to the lowest social tier. Because of that, the civil wars of the late twentieth century were not only chaotic power struggles. They were also battles for recognition and dignity by communities that had been marginalized for generations.⁵⁷ The rise of the Taliban in the 1990s, and then their return after 2001, was seen by many as an effort to reassert historic Pashtun dominance. This contributed to brutal campaigns of ethnic cleansing, including the massacre of Hazaras in Mazar-e-Sharif in 1998.

Economic weaknesses have also played a major role in driving conflict. For much of its modern history, Afghanistan has functioned as a rentier state, depending heavily on foreign aid rather than domestic taxation to fund its government and security forces.⁵⁸ From British support in the nineteenth century to Soviet backing in the twentieth and American funding in the twenty-first, Afghan rulers have long depended on outside powers to stay afloat. This dependence separates the state from its own people. Since the government does not rely on its citizens for revenue, it carries little real accountability to them. When foreign aid is cut or reduced, the state often falls apart, and civil war follows.

The war-centered lens through which Afghanistan is usually viewed also hides the way foreign aid has unintentionally rewarded violence. After 2001, international donors often directed development funds to unstable areas as part of a hearts and minds counterinsurgency strategy. This created a situation in which violence drew resources

⁵⁶ Ibid., 54.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 21.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 11.

while peaceful regions, such as the central highlands, were overlooked. The flood of foreign funds also fueled state-destroying corruption, as officials diverted funds for personal gain rather than building strong institutions. This weakened public trust and pushed many rural communities toward supporting rebellion.⁵⁹

The breakdown of traditional social structures created a vacuum that was eventually filled by radical ideologies. The core unit of Afghan social life, the *qawm*, had long provided protection and a sense of justice, but decades of war weakened the authority of the old khans and mirs. In their place rose a new class of commanders shaped by conflict. The Soviet Afghan war of 1979 to 1989 pushed this shift even further, since the resistance was framed as a *jihad*. This wave of religious mobilization, supported by the United States and Saudi Arabia and managed through Pakistan, strengthened Islamist factions over traditional leaders.

The rise of the Taliban was one outcome of this new landscape. They blended a strict Islamist worldview with Pashtun tribal codes and built their power on what some describe as an autoimmune disorder within Afghanistan, where the tools and fighters once mobilized to resist foreign invasion were eventually turned inward against the people themselves.⁶⁰

Although these conflicts unfolded within Afghanistan, their effects did not remain there. Many Afghan families carry the memory of these histories with them when they resettle in other countries. Among Afghan refugee youth growing up in places like Sacramento, traces of these past divisions can still shape how identity is understood, how relationships develop, and how community life takes form. Recognizing this background

⁵⁹ Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 342.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

helps explain why approaches centered on reconciliation and restorative justice can be especially meaningful within diaspora communities.

Why This Matters to Me

As a Sunni Imam, the work of building bridges between Sunni and Shia Afghan refugee youth is not just a social preference for me. It feels like a theological responsibility shaped by the Quranic command toward justice. My faith teaches that justice is a core value, one that God asks us to uphold even when it challenges our own interests or those of our families.⁶¹ I am grounded in the Hadith Qudsi where the Prophet Muhammad relays God's words: "O My servants, I have forbidden oppression for Myself and made it forbidden among you, so do not oppress one another." This teaching sits at the heart of why this work matters to me so deeply.⁶² With this teaching in mind, I see the work of upholding justice as a priority, especially in the spaces where we actually have influence. This commitment matters to me because Islam defines the Muslim community through shared belief and ethical responsibility, not through tribe or sect. When the Prophet Muhammad built the early community in Madina, he created a bond of brotherhood between the Muhajirun, the immigrants, and the Ansar, the helpers, and he placed that bond above the tribal loyalties that dominated their society at the time.⁶³ Inspired by that example, I see the unity of the Ummah as a real priority. I cannot view

⁶¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al., eds., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), Commentary on 4:135.

⁶² Yahya ibn Sharaf Al-Nawawi, *Riyad as-Salihin* (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, n.d.), 83.

⁶³ Dawud Walid, *Futuwwah and Raising Males into Sacred Manhood* (Birmingham: Maktabah al-Ahmediyya, 2020), 129.

Shia Muslims as an other. I have to see them as brothers and sisters in faith, whose blood, property, and honor are sacred, just as the Prophet taught.⁶⁴

I am especially inspired by the spiritual tradition of futuwah, or spiritual chivalry, which teaches that the character and generosity of a young person, the fata, should reach every part of God's creation.⁶⁵ For Afghan refugees who carry the weight of displacement and war, creating a just environment where every young person feels seen and valued is essential. The spirit of futuwah calls us to mend any harm we have caused, to place our brother's needs before our own, and to treat their rights as something sacred.⁶⁶

I try to approach these youth with the ethic of good character, which asks us to answer harm with kindness and to hold on to the bonds of brotherhood even when it feels hard to do so.⁶⁷ My hope is to help build a community where young Muslims are safe from one another's tongues and hands, which is the very standard the Prophet gave us for what it means to be a true Muslim.⁶⁸ By treating Afghan Sunni and Shia youth with the same care and encouraging them to do the same for one another, I am trying to help heal the wounds of a fractured nation while also fulfilling my duty to God, who loves those who act with fairness and balance.

⁶⁴ Al-Nawawi, *Riyad as-Salihin*, 100.

⁶⁵ Abu 'Abd al-Rahman Al-Sulami, *The Book of Sufi Chivalry: Lessons to a Son of the Moment*, trans. Tosun Bayrak (New York: Inner Traditions International, 1983), 26.

⁶⁶ Walid, *Futuwwah*, 30.

⁶⁷ Adil Salahi, *Muhammad: His Character and Conduct* (Leicestershire: The Islamic Foundation, 2013), 270.

⁶⁸ Al-Nawawi, *Riyad as-Salihin*, 105.

CHAPTER 2

REFUGEE INTEGRATION IN THE U.S.

General Integration

The United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) has been held up for decades as a symbol of American humanitarian concern, bringing more than three million people to safety since 1980. But once you look closely at what resettlement actually feels like on the ground, the picture becomes more complicated. The program is built around the state's paperwork and timelines, while refugees are trying to rebuild their lives in real time with real wounds. The scholarship on recent arrivals, whether Burmese, Bhutanese, Iraqi, Somali, or Afghan, shows a clear pattern. The system pushes people quickly toward low-wage jobs and basic bureaucratic checklists instead of offering deeper, steadier support. What stands out most is the resilience of the refugees themselves. In the long run, many reach stability and belonging through their own determination and community networks, often not because the system carried them, but because they carried each other.⁶⁹

Refugee integration in the United States is largely handled by a network of non-governmental Resettlement Agencies. These groups work through a public-private partnership where the government provides funding for each person they receive, and the agencies are expected to build the rest of the support around that.⁷⁰ This kind of funding setup puts the agencies in a difficult spot. They never know how many refugees will be

⁶⁹ David Dyssegaard Kallick and Silva Mathema, "Refugee Integration in the United States," Center for American Progress (June 2016): 1.

⁷⁰ Molly Fee, "Paper Integration: The Structural Constraints and Consequences of the US Refugee Resettlement Program," *Migration Studies* 7, no. 4 (2019): 478.

approved in a given year, since that depends on whoever is in the White House at the time, so they are always living with a sense of financial uncertainty. Because of that, the caseworkers on the ground, those doing the everyday work, often do not have what they need to offer refugees the kind of full, steady support the situation deserves.⁷¹

Sociologist Molly Fee points out that this lack of resources pushes caseworkers into what she calls paper integration. In order to avoid federal penalties and keep their funding, caseworkers end up focusing more on documenting that a service happened than on whether the service actually met the needs of the people they serve.⁷² For example, a refugee's case file has to prove that they met certain deadlines for things like job placement and health screenings. When a person's real needs do not line up neatly with those requirements, caseworkers often separate what the policy demands from what the situation actually calls for. The paperwork creates the appearance of compliance, while the caseworker tries to handle the urgent needs in whatever small, flexible ways are available. This focus on forms and checklists ends up hiding how uneven the real support can be, and it turns integration into a matter of managing files as opposed to caring for people.⁷³

The main goal of US refugee policy is to get people working as quickly as possible. But that push for immediate employment often comes at a cost. It leads to what scholars call 'human capital discounting,' where the degrees and professional experiences refugees bring with them are set aside or ignored. Nguyen Tu Tran and Alejandra Lara García point out that even though groups like the Burmese, Iraqis, and Bhutanese arrive

⁷¹ Ibid., 481.

⁷² Ibid., 487.

⁷³ Ibid., 488.

with very different levels of education and professional backgrounds, their early outcomes in the United States end up looking surprisingly similar. The system flattens those differences because it prioritizes fast employment over meaningful recognition of who people were before they arrived.⁷⁴ This shows that the US job market tends to treat refugees as if they arrive with no history at all, placing them in low wage work no matter what skills or professional standing they had before coming here.⁷⁵ This pattern is especially hard for highly educated refugees, including many Afghans, who run into major obstacles when trying to validate their degrees in the United States. As a result, they often end up in jobs far below their skill level and earn less than their American-born peers, even though they bring strong professional backgrounds with them.⁷⁶

Even with these early challenges, long-term data show that refugees make real economic strides over time. David Dyssegaard Kallick and Silva Mathema found that groups like the Burmese and Somalis may begin their lives in the United States with very low wages, but after about a decade, they see major growth in their incomes and overall stability.⁷⁷ Refugees also show incredible levels of entrepreneurship. Bosnian communities, for example, have a business ownership rate of 31 per 1,000 workers, which is on par with people born in the United States. This kind of initiative not only helps families move upward, but it also breathes life back into cities like St. Louis and

⁷⁴ Van C. Tran and Francisco Lara-García, "A New Beginning: Early Refugee Integration in the United States," *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 6, no. 3 (2020): 118-119.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁷⁶ Carl Stempel and Qais Alemi, "Challenges to the Economic Integration of Afghan Refugees in the U.S.," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47, no. 21 (2021): 4874.

⁷⁷ Kallick and Mathema, "Refugee Integration in the United States," 2.

Utica, where new refugee populations have slowed population decline and sparked fresh economic growth.⁷⁸

However, economic integration does not look the same for everyone. Gender gaps are still very real. Afghan refugee women who enter the workforce navigate a mix of challenges, including the sharp contrast between the gender norms they grew up with and those in the United States, along with lower English proficiency among many older arrivals. Men, on the other hand, often end up working at higher rates than American-born men, pushed forward by the responsibility to provide for their families and to pay back their federal travel loans.⁷⁹

Beyond the economic side of things, integration also means learning how to move through the complicated social landscape of the United States. For many refugees, that journey is shaped by the weight of displacement and the sting of discrimination. Research on Afghan communities in Northern California shows a clear pattern. When people feel targeted or singled out, often because of Islamophobia, their levels of psychological distress rise in very real and measurable ways.⁸⁰ This kind of distress hits even harder for those who carry heavy trauma from before they arrived. It shows that the tide of xenophobia they meet in their new home can reopen old wounds and deepen the impact of what they lived through during war and displacement.⁸¹

Food security is another important but often overlooked part of what it means to settle into life here. For many Muslim refugees, especially Afghans, the shortage of

⁷⁸ Ibid., 17.

⁷⁹ Stempel and Alemi, "Challenges to the Economic Integration," 4876.

⁸⁰ Qais Alemi and Carl Stempel, "Discrimination and Distress among Afghan Refugees in Northern California: The Moderating Role of Pre- and Post-Migration Factors," *PLoS ONE* 13, no. 5 (2018): 2.

⁸¹ Ibid., 4.

accessible Halal options and the sheer unfamiliarity of the American grocery landscape become immediate challenges. Families who rely on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and who are still learning how the financial systems work often find themselves stuck choosing between proper nutrition and their cultural or religious commitments.⁸²

Even with all these barriers, refugees draw on what scholars call Community Cultural Wealth, the hope, languages, and strong family networks that already live within their communities. These resources help them find their way in a new place. Youth programs, including simple peer tutoring circles, often become spaces where a collective newcomer identity takes shape. Young people from very different countries begin to support one another, turning their shared migration stories into a source of strength and solidarity.⁸³ This resilience also shows up in long-term markers like citizenship and homeownership. After about twenty years in the United States, more than three-quarters of Somali, Burmese, Hmong, and Bosnian refugees become naturalized citizens. Over time, Burmese and Bosnian families even reach homeownership levels that rise above those of U.S.-born households, which speaks to how deeply they eventually put down roots.⁸⁴

The story of refugee integration in the United States is really a story of people pushing forward despite an imperfect system. The resettlement program has saved countless lives and has helped the country grow in stability and diversity, but it still

⁸² Zahra Goliaei et al., "Post-Resettlement Food Insecurity: Afghan Refugees and Challenges of the New Environment," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 20, no. 5846 (2023): 2.

⁸³ Jane Pak, Jyoti Gurung, and Amy Argenal, "Refugee and Immigrant Youth Leaders: Strengths, Futurity, and Commitment to Community," *Social Sciences* 12, no. 640 (2023): 4.

⁸⁴ Kallick and Mathema, "Refugee Integration in the United States," 3.

struggles with limited funding and a narrow focus on checking boxes instead of offering full, human-centered support. Refugees often face steep early setbacks, discrimination, and the challenge of learning how to move through entirely new systems. However, even then, the long-term picture is unmistakable. Refugees do not simply blend into American society. They strengthen it. They revive local economies, fill crucial gaps in the workforce, and eventually reach or surpass U.S.-born rates of citizenship and homeownership. If the country wants to honor the promise of resettlement, policy needs to move beyond a survival-based model and start truly investing in the strengths and experiences refugees already carry with them.⁸⁵

Afghan Challenges When Integrating in the U.S.

The integration of Afghan Muslim refugees into the United States sits at a difficult crossroads of structural barriers, cultural tension, and the lingering trauma of long years of conflict. While the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) is designed to help newcomers become economically self-sufficient, the reality for many Afghan refugees is far more complicated. They have to move through a bureaucratic system that often overlooks the value of the skills and knowledge they bring, while also adjusting to a society where religion is not woven into daily life the way it was back home and where Islamophobia shapes many of their interactions.

One of the biggest challenges Afghan refugees face is human capital discounting, where the education and professional experience they earned before migration does not

⁸⁵ Donald Kerwin, "The US Refugee Resettlement Program — A Return to First Principles: How Refugees Help to Define, Strengthen, and Revitalize the United States," *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 6, no. 3 (2018): 206.

translate into equal employment here. Studies show that the first major wave of Afghan refugees arrived with relatively high levels of formal education, even higher than groups like the Hmong or Vietnamese, yet many still ended up working in low-wage sectors.⁸⁶ This downward shift is especially sharp for those who earned their degrees outside the United States. Highly educated Afghan women who arrive after the age of thirty, for example, tend to have much lower employment rates and incomes than those who came at a younger age, even when their qualifications are similar.⁸⁷

This economic struggle is made even harder by the way the US resettlement system is structured, since it prioritizes getting people into any job quickly rather than helping them rebuild their careers over time. As a result, many educated Afghans are effectively declassified, taking work far below their skill level, such as driving taxis or working retail, which makes it difficult for them to build wealth or grow the social capital they once had.⁸⁸ Afghan women also have some of the lowest employment rates compared to other refugee groups. This is shaped not only by the sharp differences between gender norms in Afghanistan and those in the United States but also by the absence of clear economic niches that readily support women's employment, unlike what Vietnamese refugees were able to build through the nail salon industry.⁸⁹

Another major, though often overlooked, challenge for Afghan refugees is food insecurity, which is tied closely to both religious practice and the unfamiliar food environment they enter here. For most Afghan refugees, halal food is not optional. Eating meat prepared according to Islamic guidelines and avoiding pork and alcohol is a core

⁸⁶ Stempel and Alemi, "Challenges to the Economic Integration," 4874–4875.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 4886–4887.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 4887.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 4888.

religious requirement.⁹⁰ But in many resettlement areas, including parts of California's San Joaquin Valley, halal meat is limited and often much more expensive than regular options. This pushes families to spend a large share of their already limited food assistance on basic protein, and many end up running out of benefits well before the month is over.⁹¹

The difficulty goes beyond cost. Many newly arrived refugees feel real fear and confusion when navigating American grocery stores, unsure how to identify safe ingredients in packaged foods. Because avoiding haram foods is a core part of their religious practice, many Afghan families hesitate to use food pantries or food banks, worried that what they receive may not meet their religious standards.⁹² This hesitation is not just a personal preference. It is a spiritual necessity, as eating halal is tied to both the believer's physical and spiritual well-being. Because of this, many refugees end up relying on costly ethnic markets or settling for whatever is available, which can mean compromising on nutrition. Over time, this can lead to health issues like obesity as families adjust to a diet heavy in processed American foods.⁹³

Integration also becomes harder because Afghan society is traditionally built around the *qawm*, a kinship-based circle of solidarity tied to family, village, or tribe. This group has always been where people have found their primary sense of identity and protection.⁹⁴ In the United States, that social fabric is often weakened. Refugees still draw on their communities' cultural wealth, but the Afghan community here does not have the

⁹⁰ Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 41.

⁹¹ Goliaei et al., "Post-Resettlement Food Insecurity," 5–6.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 6–7.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁹⁴ Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 18–19.

same level of established social capital as larger groups, such as the Vietnamese, have built over time. This makes it harder to form strong support networks and leaves many families feeling isolated as they try to rebuild their lives.⁹⁵

The Afghan community is far from monolithic. It is shaped by ethnic diversity, like Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek, as well as by sectarian differences between Sunni and Shia. These divisions, which have historically driven conflict back home, can surface again in the diaspora. The Hazara minority, for example, carries a long history of persecution and exclusion in Afghanistan, and that legacy can shape social interactions even after resettlement.⁹⁶ Although the shared experience of displacement can help nurture a broader Afghan identity, old prejudices and the wounds of civil war still linger beneath the surface. On top of that, moving from a society where Islam shapes nearly every part of life to a secular Western environment requires a deep psychological adjustment, one that many refugees navigate slowly and with real difficulty.⁹⁷

The mental health of Afghan refugees is deeply affected by the tide of xenophobia they encounter when they arrive, adding another layer of strain to what they are already carrying.⁹⁸ Research on Afghan refugees in Northern California shows a clear link between perceived discrimination, often tied to Islamophobia, and higher levels of psychological distress. This impact is even stronger for those who lived through intense trauma before resettlement, including war, displacement, and loss, which makes the hostility they encounter here feel even heavier.⁹⁹ For many refugees, the trauma they

⁹⁵ Stempel and Alemi, "Challenges to the Economic Integration," 4877.

⁹⁶ Ibrahimi, *The Hazaras*, 214.

⁹⁷ Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 41.

⁹⁸ Alemi and Stempel, "Discrimination and Distress," 4.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

carry from the past makes the sting of present-day discrimination even sharper. That burden is made heavier by how Islam is politicized in the United States. Afghans are often seen first and foremost as Muslim, rather than simply Afghan, which exposes them to Islamophobia in daily life. At the same time, strong ties to their own ethnic community do not always ease this pain. In some cases, those deep connections keep them emotionally tied to the ongoing suffering and turmoil back home, which can intensify their distress rather than ease it.¹⁰⁰

The integration of Afghan refugees shows a remarkable resilience in the face of deep structural and social challenges. The US resettlement system offers a necessary lifeline, but its focus on quick self-sufficiency often misses the lived realities that shape a refugee's day-to-day life, including the difficulty of finding affordable halal food, the loss of professional status through credential discounting, and the emotional weight of discrimination. For Afghan refugees, real integration means far more than securing a job. It means learning how to hold on to their faith and history while trying to survive in an environment that can feel economically harsh and socially isolated.

These challenges are not only abstract patterns found in research studies. They appear in everyday life within Afghan refugee communities across the United States, including in Sacramento, California, which has become home to one of the largest Afghan populations in the country. Many of the youth growing up in this community are navigating the pressures of resettlement while also inheriting the historical narratives and social tensions their families carry from Afghanistan. Differences of ethnicity, tribe, and religious interpretation do not disappear simply because families resettle in a new

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 11.

country. Instead, they sometimes reappear in quieter ways among young people who are still forming their identities. One place where these dynamics become visible is the Reda Center in Sacramento, where Afghan refugee youth from both Sunni and Shia backgrounds regularly gather for mentorship, education, and community activities.

CHAPTER 3
RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

Restorative Justice and Engaging Muhammad Asadullah's Work

Restorative justice offers a very different path from the traditional, punishment-centered criminal justice model. Instead of focusing mainly on the violation of a law and the need to impose penalties, restorative justice centers on the repair of harm and the rebuilding of relationships. Scholars and practitioners describe it as a process that brings together everyone affected by an offense: the victim, the person who caused the harm, and the wider community, to decide how to address what happened and what it means moving forward. Its core principles highlight the importance of the victim's experience, voluntary participation, genuine restoration, mutual respect, and empowering all participants in the process.¹⁰¹

Restorative justice can take several forms, including victim-offender meetings, family group conferences, and peacemaking circles. All of these approaches prioritize bringing the person who was harmed, their support network, and the person who caused the harm into the same space for an honest, face-to-face process.¹⁰² The theoretical grounding for these practices often draws on the work of Howard Zehr, who describes the different lenses through which we understand justice and helps distinguish the retributive model from the restorative one.¹⁰³ Another key voice in the field is John Braithwaite,

¹⁰¹ Catherine S. Kimbrell, David B. Wilson, and Ajima Olaghere, "Restorative Justice Programs and Practices in Juvenile Justice: An Updated Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis for Effectiveness," *Criminology & Public Policy* 22 (2023): 161–62.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 161.

¹⁰³ Howard Zehr, "Reflections on Lenses," *Restorative Justice: An International Journal* 3, no. 3 (2015): 460–67, cited in *Journal of Moral Education*, "References."

whose work on reintegrative shaming and responsive regulation argues that accountability should bring a person back into the community rather than mark them with lasting stigma.¹⁰⁴

The field also draws on critical scholarship that highlights the gap between restorative justice ideals and what actually happens in practice. Kathleen Daly has studied participants' real experiences and found that, while young offenders often actively engage in the process, the sincerity of their remorse can vary widely. Her work shows that victims are especially attuned to the offender's attitude. Many want reassurance that the harm will not be repeated and want the chance to express how the offense truly affected them.¹⁰⁵ At times, victims doubt whether an offender's remorse is genuine, and that hesitation can slow or complicate the healing process. It shows how challenging it can be to reach true consensus in restorative justice settings.¹⁰⁶

Recent large-scale reviews, including the work of Catherine S. Kimbrell, David B. Wilson, and Ajima Olaghere, have sought to measure how effective these programs really are. Their findings show that restorative justice tends to produce a modest but meaningful reduction in delinquency when compared to the traditional juvenile justice approach.¹⁰⁷ These studies highlight how specific elements of restorative justice, such as restitution and reparation, play an important role in achieving positive outcomes.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ John Braithwaite, *Restorative Justice and Responsive Regulation* (Oxford University Press, 2002), cited in *Community Justice Centres Mainstreamed*, "References."

¹⁰⁵ Kathleen Daly, "Mind the Gap: Restorative Justice in Theory and Practice," in *Restorative Justice and Criminal Justice: Competing or Reconcilable Paradigms?*, eds. A. von Hirsch et al. (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2003), 219–36, cited in David R. Karp et al., "Reluctant Participants in Restorative Justice? Youthful Offenders and Their Parents," *Contemporary Justice Review* 7, no. 2 (June 2004): 202.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Kimbrell, Wilson, and Olaghere, "Restorative Justice Programs," 176.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 173.

Muhammad Asadullah's work offers a distinctive comparative lens on restorative justice, looking closely at how these practices emerge and take shape in different cultural and geographic settings. His doctoral research, *Restorative Justice in British Columbia, Nova Scotia and Bangladesh: Comparative Community Praxis from Vision to Practice*, examines how restorative justice is understood and carried out in three very different contexts the Canadian provinces of British Columbia and Nova Scotia, and the nation of Bangladesh.¹⁰⁹

A central part of Muhammad Asadullah's work is his focus on what he calls Community Praxis. He looks at how genuine community involvement becomes the bridge between an ideal vision of justice and the way it actually unfolds on the ground. His research explores the roots and influences behind these programs and asks how local visions of justice turn into real, lived practice.¹¹⁰ By placing the Canadian experience alongside that of Bangladesh, Muhammad Asadullah pushes the field toward a more decolonized understanding of criminology. He shows how non-Western and indigenous models of justice, including the Bangladeshi shalish, interact with or mirror formal restorative justice practices. His use of sources on the role of community-based organizations in local Bangladeshi governance points to his focus on grassroots structures as real engines of justice and accountability.¹¹¹

One part of Muhammad Asadullah's comparative work looks at the practical details of how RJ conferences actually run, including whether facilitators use written

¹⁰⁹ Muhammad Asadullah, "Restorative Justice in British Columbia, Nova Scotia and Bangladesh: Exploring Genesis and Praxis" (PhD diss., Simon Fraser University, 2019), 253.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ M. Bhuiyan, S. Hassan, and K. Islam, "Role of Community-Based Organisations in Promoting Democratic Local Governance at the Grassroots in Bangladesh," *Journal of Development Policy and Practice* 3, no. 2 (2018): 215–24, cited in Asadullah, "Restorative Justice," 221.

scripts. His research shows a clear difference across regions. In British Columbia, there is an active debate about the value of scripted facilitation, with opinions ranging widely on whether it helps or hinders the process. In Nova Scotia and Bangladesh, however, written scripts barely come up at all, suggesting that practitioners there rely more on local custom and facilitator experience than on a prescribed script.¹¹² This close look at scripted versus more organic facilitation shows his commitment to understanding the practical mechanics of how justice is carried out across different cultures. Muhammad Asadullah also explores the relationship between Indigenous justice traditions and contemporary restorative justice. In collaboration with scholars such as Alana Abramson, he examines where these frameworks overlap and where they diverge. His work stresses the importance of recognizing the difference between state-run restorative justice programs and the sovereign, community-rooted traditions of Indigenous justice, cautioning against folding the latter into the former in ways that erase their distinctiveness.¹¹³ Through his comparative lens, Asadullah calls for a community of praxis that is reflective, grounded in local culture, and aware of its own assumptions. He challenges the idea that a single, standardized restorative justice model can or should be applied everywhere.¹¹⁴

Restorative Justice from the Quran and Prophetic Tradition

Restorative justice, usually described as a process that brings together everyone affected by harm to address needs, obligations, and accountability, has deep resonance

¹¹² Asadullah, "Restorative Justice," 196.

¹¹³ Muhammad Asadullah et al., "Indigenous Justice and Restorative Justice: Exploring Perceptions of Convergence and Divergence in British Columbia and Saskatchewan," *The International Journal of Restorative Justice* (2023), cited in Asadullah, "Restorative Justice."

¹¹⁴ Asadullah, "Restorative Justice," 239.

within Islamic theology and history. While Western criminology often treats RJ as a modern alternative to the state's punitive system, scholars point out that its core values, such as reparation, reconciliation, and the restoration of relationships, are woven throughout the Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad. The Islamic legal tradition, especially through the concepts of *adl*, or justice, *ihsan*, or beneficence, and *sulh*, or reconciliation, offers a rich framework that goes beyond punishment and seeks to repair the spiritual and social fractures caused by wrongdoing. The Quranic vision of justice works on several levels at once, balancing reciprocity, forgiveness, and even altruism. As Recep Şentürk notes, the Quran sets *qisas*, or measured reciprocity, as the minimum standard for maintaining social order, making sure punishment never exceeds the harm done. At the same time, the text calls believers toward *afw*, or forgiveness, and *islah*, the work of setting things right and restoring harmony.

The Quran teaches that “the repayment for a wrong is a wrong equal to it, but whoever forgives and seeks reconciliation, their reward rests with God.”¹¹⁵ The verse affirms the victim's right to measured retribution, yet it lifts up the restorative path by tying forgiveness and reconciliation to a Divine reward. This reflects the spirit of *ihsan*, often understood as doing what is beautiful or striving for excellence. Justice, or *adl*, is required, but *ihsan* invites a person to offer more than what is owed or accept less than what is due, turning the pursuit of justice into a spiritual act.¹¹⁶

The Quranic idea of *diyah*, compensation for cases of homicide or bodily harm, functions as a restorative path. Instead of requiring the execution of the offender, the

¹¹⁵ Recep Şentürk, "Futuwwah in the Qur'an and the Sunnah," in *Futuwwah: The Way of the Spiritual Warrior*, (Istanbul: Ibn Haldun University Press, n.d.), 86.

¹¹⁶ Omid Safi, *Radical Love: Teachings from the Islamic Mystical Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), xxxvi.

Quran allows the victim's family to accept compensation, preserving a life while making space for restitution. The scripture describes this option as an alleviation from your Lord and a mercy, highlighting its role in easing harm rather than escalating it.¹¹⁷ This approach shifts the emphasis away from state imposed punishment and toward victim centered repair, which is one of the core principles of modern restorative justice. The call for community based conflict resolution is also clear in the Quran, which instructs believers that "if two groups among you fall into dispute, make peace between them."¹¹⁸ The Quran returns again and again to the idea of *islah*, urging the community to step in not simply to punish, but to help mend the broken ties between those in conflict.

The life of the Prophet Muhammad is the living expression of these Quranic ideals. His *Seerah* is full of moments where he chose restorative engagement instead of retributive punishment. The Quran describes him as a mercy to all the worlds, and that spirit shaped the way he judged disputes and guided his community.¹¹⁹ A defining example of restorative justice in Islamic history is found in the Conquest of Makkah. After twenty years of persecution, exile, and open warfare from the Quraysh, the Prophet re entered the city as a victor. By the norms of that era, and even by modern ideas of treason, mass punishment would have been the expected response. Instead, the Prophet Muhammad asked them, "What do you think I will do with you?" When they appealed to his character, he replied, "You may all go free. You are all pardoned." For a community that had harmed him so deeply, this act of mercy became a lasting model of restorative justice lived through prophecy.¹²⁰ This general amnesty was more than an act of kindness.

¹¹⁷ *The Study Quran*, 2:178 commentary.

¹¹⁸ *The Study Quran*, 49:9.

¹¹⁹ *The Study Quran*, 21:107.

¹²⁰ *Salahi, Muhammad: His Character and Conduct*, 35.

It was a deliberate restorative move that pulled former enemies back into the community and broke the cycle of inherited blood feuds that had long defined pre-Islamic Arabia.

The Prophet's personal interactions also show the heart of restorative practice. In one well-known incident, a Bedouin grabbed the Prophet's cloak so roughly that it left a mark on his neck while demanding money. Instead of reacting with anger or letting his companions discipline the man, the Prophet smiled and instructed that he be given a gift.¹²¹ This kind of response diffused the tension completely and restored dignity to the moment. It reflects the Quranic teaching to "repel evil with what is better, and the one who was your enemy may become as close to you as a friend."¹²²

The Prophet's handling of financial disputes also reflected this restorative spirit. When Jabir ibn Abdullah could not repay a debt to a Jewish creditor because his harvest had failed, the Prophet did not simply insist on strict enforcement. He stepped in as a mediator, personally visiting the creditor to ask for more time and helping ensure the debt was settled in a way that honored the agreement while safeguarding Jabir's livelihood.¹²³ This reflects a relational understanding of justice, in which the goal is to preserve social harmony and keep relationships intact rather than merely enforce rules in the abstract.

These principles later grew into the tradition of futuwah, or spiritual chivalry, which laid out an ethical code centered on altruism, known as ithar, and the practice of forgiveness. Futuwah teaches that while seeking justice is a rightful path, the highest form of moral behavior is to answer harm with goodness.¹²⁴ The fata, the young person of

¹²¹ Ibid., 69.

¹²² Şentürk, "Futuwah in the Qur'an and the Sunnah," 98.

¹²³ Salahi, *Muhammad: His Character and Conduct*, 94.

¹²⁴ Şentürk, "Futuwah in the Qur'an and the Sunnah," 83.

chivalry, is described as someone who reaches out to those who cut ties with them, gives to those who hold back generosity, and forgives those who have wronged them.¹²⁵

This tradition shows that restorative justice in Islam is not only a legal tool but a way of shaping character that reflects the Divine Names. Since God is Al Ghaffar, the Ever Forgiving, and Al Halim, the Forbearing, believers are encouraged to mirror those qualities in their own conduct. As noted in the *Riyad al-Salihin*, “God increases the honor of the one who forgives,” reminding us that forgiveness is an expression of strength, not a sign of weakness.¹²⁶

Contemporary scholars such as Muhammad Asadullah argue that these indigenous and religious traditions constitute a form of Community Praxis that should play a central role in decolonizing modern justice systems.¹²⁷ In Bangladesh, for example, the traditional shalish, or community mediation process, draws on these Islamic and cultural foundations to resolve disputes at the local level, functioning much like restorative circles elsewhere.¹²⁸

At the same time, the tradition makes room for the use of state force when restorative options fail or when a crime threatens the safety of the wider community, such as in cases of persistent violence or highway robbery. The Prophet’s statement that he would even hold his own daughter accountable if she were to steal shows that while

¹²⁵ Ibid., 95.

¹²⁶ Imam An-Nawawi, *Riyad as-Salihin*, trans. Tughra Books Press (Clifton, NJ: Tughra Books, n.d.), 189.

¹²⁷ Muhammad Asadullah, "Community Praxis: Exploring a Community Engagement Framework for Restorative Justice in British Columbia, Nova Scotia, and Bangladesh," *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being* 5, no. 3 (2020): 110–11.

¹²⁸ Muhammad Asadullah et al., "Community and Restorative Justice Practices in India, Nepal, and Bangladesh: A Comparative Overview," in *Comparative Restorative Justice*, ed. Theo Gavrielides (Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2021), 224.

mercy is the starting point, justice remains the foundation that protects society from falling into disorder.¹²⁹ Yet even when penalties are applied, the purpose is still purification and the protection of the community, not vengeance.

The Quran and the life of the Prophet Muhammad offer a full and rooted framework for restorative justice. By lifting up *islah*, or reconciliation, over simple retribution, and *ihsan*, or excellence, over bare obligation, the Islamic tradition views justice as an act of healing. It shifts the focus away from a state-centered, punitive model and toward a community-centered, relational one, where the real success is not the offender's downfall but the restoration of the human bond.

The Metaphysics of Prophetic Restorative Justice

Beyond the legal framework of *qisas*, or measured retribution, the Prophetic tradition adds a deeper spiritual layer to restorative justice. Its ultimate aim is not just to balance the scales but to reach a place where love grows between people, making strict justice no longer needed.¹³⁰ Imam Al-Ghazali relates a powerful narration about two men standing before God on the Day of Judgment. One pleads for justice, asking that the man who wronged him repay what is owed. God instructs the offender to make restitution, but the offender replies that he has no good deeds left to give. God then tells the victim to lift his gaze toward a magnificent palace in Paradise. When the man asks who could ever own such a place, God responds that it belongs to whoever pays the price. The victim, overwhelmed, asks who could possibly afford it. God replies, “It is within your reach by

¹²⁹ Salahi, *Muhammad: His Character and Conduct*, 173.

¹³⁰ Hamza Yusuf, *Purification of the Heart: Signs, Symptoms and Cures of the Spiritual Diseases of the Heart* (Sandala, 2004), 163.

forgiving your brother.” When he offers that forgiveness, God says, “Take your brother by the hand and lead him into Paradise.”¹³¹ This narration reveals a divine model of mediation, in which the true price of justice is paid not through the offender's suffering but through the healing of a broken relationship.¹³²

A key part of the Prophetic approach was the principle of *sitr*, or concealing a person's faults, which places moral rehabilitation above public shaming. Restorative justice shares this same instinct, aiming to bring the offender back into the community without the stigma that defines a retributive system. The Prophet Muhammad often avoided imposing *hudud* punishments by encouraging repentance rather than confession. In one case, a man came to him confessing a sexual wrongdoing and insisted on being punished. The Prophet repeatedly looked away and did not probe further. Instead, he recited the verse, “Truly, good deeds erase bad deeds” from the Quran. When someone asked whether this applied to that man specifically, the Prophet replied that it applied to his entire community.¹³³ This approach shifts the focus away from punishment and toward spiritual repair, giving the offender a path to regain their moral footing through good actions rather than through physical penalties.¹³⁴

Restorative principles even extended into moments of open conflict, where ethics are often set aside. Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Prophet's cousin and the fourth Caliph, laid down rules of engagement that centered on reducing harm, which is a core value of restorative justice. During the Battle of Siffin, he instructed his soldiers, “Do not start the

¹³¹ Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, *Al-Ghazali on the Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, trans. David Burrell and Nazih Daim (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1992), 140–41.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 141.

¹³³ Şentürk, *Futuwwah*, 126.

¹³⁴ Jinan Yousef, "Reflecting on the Names of Allah," 202

fighting... do not kill the wounded who cannot defend themselves... and do not chase down or kill those who flee.”¹³⁵ This guidance was meant to slow the cycle of violence and keep open the door for future reconciliation. It treated the enemy not as someone to be erased, but as a brother who had strayed and might one day return.

The Prophetic biography also shows how the victim’s agency matters in the restorative process. After the conquest of Khaybar, a woman named Zaynab bint al-Harith poisoned a lamb that was offered to the Prophet Muhammad, and the poisoning led to the death of one of his companions. When she was brought forward, she admitted what she had done and said she wanted to test whether he was truly a Prophet. Even with the seriousness of the attempt on his life, the Prophet did not punish her for the harm done to him personally. Instead, he pardoned her for the injury she directed at him.¹³⁶ While the reports differ on what eventually happened to her in relation to the companion who died, the Prophet’s immediate response focused on understanding her motive and setting aside any personal desire for vengeance. His reaction reflected the ethic that no one forgives except that Allah increases their honor.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ *Nahjul Balagha: Sermons, Letters, and Sayings of Imam Ali*, 255.

¹³⁶ Adil Salahi, *Muhammad: Man and Prophet*, 286–87.

¹³⁷ Jinan Yousef, "Reflecting on the Names of Allah," 114.

CHAPTER 4

IMPLEMENTING RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AT THE REDA CENTER

The Reda Center in Sacramento serves as a gathering place for many Afghan refugee youth in the region. The center hosts religious programming, mentorship opportunities, and educational activities aimed at helping young Muslims navigate life in the United States while remaining connected to their faith and cultural heritage. Many of the youth who attend are children of families who arrived in the United States after years of displacement caused by war and political instability in Afghanistan. They are growing up between worlds, shaped both by the social realities of American life and by the histories and memories carried by their parents.

The Afghan community itself is far from uniform. Youth at the center come from a range of ethnic and sectarian backgrounds, including Pashtun, Tajik, and Hazara families. Some are Sunni and others are Shia. While many of the youth form friendships easily across these lines, the deeper historical tensions that shaped Afghanistan's past sometimes remain present beneath the surface. These attitudes are often not created by the youth themselves but are inherited indirectly through family conversations, community narratives, and the memories of conflict carried by older generations.

As an imam working with these youth, I regularly see how these dynamics play out in small but meaningful ways. The young people themselves are often open to one another, yet they also navigate expectations and assumptions that come from outside the youth space. Because of this, moments of interaction between Sunni and Shia youth can

reveal both the possibility of genuine connection and the lingering influence of inherited divisions.

One small moment illustrates how these inherited tensions can appear in subtle ways. Because the Shia Maghrib prayer time occurs slightly later than the Sunni, the prayer was scheduled at a time that allowed both groups to participate. I led the prayer myself as a Sunni imam, hoping the shared experience would help nurture a sense of unity. For the first few times we did this, the youth prayed together without hesitation. After a short time, however, some of the Sunni students stopped attending the congregational prayer. When asked about it, they explained that their parents were uncomfortable with them praying alongside Shia youth. Rather than joining the communal prayer, they preferred to pray later at home. Moments like this reveal how historical sectarian narratives can quietly shape the lives of young people growing up far from the conflicts that originally produced them.

Building a restorative justice program at the Reda Center for Afghan Sunni and Shia refugee youth calls for a thoughtful blend of modern criminological insight and deep theological grounding. It cannot simply copy Western mediation models. It has to be decolonized and shaped by the cultural, social, and spiritual realities of the youth it hopes to serve. By drawing on the frameworks developed by Muhammad Asadullah and grounding the work in the ethos of the Quran and the Seerah of the Prophet Muhammad, the Reda Center can cultivate a living Community Praxis that rises above sectarian divides and speaks directly to the wounds and challenges of displacement.

Muhammad Asadullah argues that simply copying Eurocentric restorative justice models into non-Western settings can be ineffective and even harmful. He offers a

Decolonizing Framework for RJ, using the image of a tree to explain it. The roots of this tree must be anchored in a do-no-harm ethic, trauma-informed care, and an anti-oppressive approach that protects the dignity of everyone involved.¹³⁸ For Afghan refugee youth in Sacramento, who carry the trauma of war along with the pressures of resettlement like food insecurity, financial strain, and discrimination, a standard punitive model or even a generic Western restorative approach is likely to fall short.¹³⁹

The foundation of the program has to be the Islamic principle of rahma, or mercy. Asadullah stresses that a trauma-informed approach begins with the recognition that many conflicts grow out of wounds that have never been healed.¹⁴⁰ This mirrors the Prophetic tradition. When the Prophet Muhammad returned to Makkah as a victor, he did not seek revenge against those who had persecuted him. Instead, he asked them, “What do you think I will do with you?” When they appealed to his character, he said, “You may all go free.”¹⁴¹ This general amnesty was a restorative act that broke the cycle of inherited violence. At the Reda Center, the Roots phase means training staff to see the behavior of refugee youth not as delinquency but as trauma surfacing in real time. It calls for a Prophetic response shaped by sitr, the protection and concealment of a person’s faults, and a commitment to rehabilitation rather than public shaming or exclusion.

A major challenge in working with a diverse group of Afghan youth is the potential for Sunni-Shia tension. The program’s Roots must be firmly grounded in the

¹³⁸ Muhammad Asadullah, "Decolonization and Restorative Justice: A Proposed Theoretical Framework," *Decolonization of Criminology and Justice* 3, no. 1 (2021): 47.

¹³⁹ Z. Goliaei et al., "Post-Resettlement Food Insecurity: Afghan Refugees and Challenges of the New Environment," *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health* 20 (2023): 5846

¹⁴⁰ Asadullah, "Decolonization and Restorative Justice," 49.

¹⁴¹ Adil Salahi, *Muhammad: His Character and Conduct* (London: The Islamic Foundation, 2012), 35.

unity of the Ummah. The Amman Message, a global consensus among Islamic scholars, makes it clear that Muslims cannot declare takfir on one another and that both Sunni and Shia legal traditions are fully valid within Islam.¹⁴² Using this framework, the Reda Center can set shared ground rules that honor the spiritual identities of both Sunni and Shia youth. The program can also build on the common love and respect Muslims have for the Ahl al Bayt, the Family of the Prophet. As mentioned in the Musnad of Ahl al-Bayt, love for the Prophet's family is understood as an essential part of faith for all Muslims.¹⁴³ By centering stories that both communities honor, such as the teachings of Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib, who reminded people that others are either their brothers in faith or their equals in creation, the program can anchor youth in a shared moral language that rises above sectarian lines.¹⁴⁴ The program can create a theological safe space where real dialogue becomes possible.

The Trunk in Asadullah's framework represents the local and indigenous experts whose leadership gives the whole effort its strength and direction.¹⁴⁵ For the Reda Center, this means the program cannot rely only on outside professionals. It has to elevate cultural brokers and trusted leaders from within the Afghan community itself.

Asadullah draws a distinction between the horizontal community, meaning the informal bonds between neighbors and peers, and the vertical community, which refers to institutions and formal agencies.¹⁴⁶ The Reda Center serves as the bridge between these

¹⁴² "The Amman Message," *The Amman Message*, 16.

¹⁴³ "Musnad of Ahl al Bayt 40 hadith," 212.

¹⁴⁴ *Nahjul Balagha: Sermons, Letters, and Sayings of Imam Ali*, Letter 53.

¹⁴⁵ Asadullah, "Decolonization and Restorative Justice," 47.

¹⁴⁶ Muhammad Asadullah, "Community Praxis: Exploring a Community Engagement Framework for Restorative Justice in British Columbia, Nova Scotia, and Bangladesh," *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being* 5, no. 3 (2020): 116.

two spheres. To strengthen the horizontal community, the Center can draw on the futuwwah model of youth leadership. Futuwwah is an old pedagogical tradition rooted in the example of the Prophet and Ali ibn Abi Talib, teaching that true morality is grounded in who a person becomes, not just what they learn.¹⁴⁷ It prioritizes service, loyalty, and generosity.

Creating a futuwwah guild for young men, along with a parallel space for young women, can help rebuild the rites of passage that are often lost or disrupted in the refugee experience.¹⁴⁸ This helps address the crisis of masculinity and the broader identity loss that often shows up in diaspora communities. By presenting restorative justice facilitators not as neutral mediators but as *fata*, the chivalrous youth shaped by futuwwah, the program leans into a cultural ideal of the young spiritual warrior who protects the vulnerable and offers forgiveness instead of seeking dominance. This framing resonates far more than the Western notion of detached facilitation.¹⁴⁹

The move to Sacramento comes with real economic and social strain. Many studies show that Afghan refugees often experience downward mobility and a sense of isolation as they try to rebuild their lives here.¹⁵⁰ The Prophet's pairing of the Muhajirun, the Meccan emigrants, with the Ansar, the helpers in Madina, sets a powerful precedent for peer support rooted in faith.¹⁵¹ The Reda Center can build a peer to peer mentorship system where Afghan youth who are already settled here serve as the modern Ansar,

¹⁴⁷ Recep Şentürk, "Futuwwah in the Qur'an and the Sunnah," in *Futuwwah: The Way of the Spiritual Warrior* (Istanbul: Ibn Haldun University Press, 2022), 109.

¹⁴⁸ Dawud Walid, *Futuwwah and Raising Males into Sacred Manhood* (United Kingdom: Kube Publishing, n.d.), 8.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 108

¹⁵⁰ Stempel and Alemi, "Challenges to the economic integration," 4873.

¹⁵¹ Salahi, *Muhammad: His Character and Conduct*, 22.

supporting the newer arrivals as their Muhajirun. This meets Asadullah's call for shaping community as circles of care, where support stretches beyond the mediation room and shows up in real material and emotional ways.¹⁵² This builds a strong, layered community fabric that can absorb conflict early on, long before it ever reaches the point of police involvement.

The Branches in Asadullah's model represent lessons to be drawn from justice practices in other cultures with similar experiences and values.¹⁵³ Rather than relying on a standard victim-offender conference, the Reda Center can adapt the traditions of jirga or shalish, shaping them to protect fairness and give a real voice to the youth involved.

A powerful teaching tool for the Reda Center is the Prophet's resolution of the dispute over the Black Stone at the Kaaba in Mecca. When the Meccan clans were on the brink of fighting over who would place the stone, the Prophet Muhammad did not take sides. He put the stone on a cloth and asked a representative from each clan to lift it together.¹⁵⁴ This moment captures the heart of restorative practice. It shifted the conflict from a zero-sum struggle over fairness to a shared, relational victory where justice meant holding the community together.¹⁵⁵

At the Reda Center, when tensions arise between youth groups, whether rooted in ethnicity, sect, or neighborhood, the response should mirror this idea of lifting together. The facilitator does not hand down a verdict. Instead, they create a shared mechanism, the equivalent of that cloth, where every side takes part in shaping the solution. This

¹⁵² Asadullah, "Community Praxis," 113.

¹⁵³ Asadullah, "Decolonization and Restorative Justice," 52.

¹⁵⁴ Salahi, *Muhammad: His Character and Conduct*, 12.

¹⁵⁵ Jennifer Llewellyn, "Restorative Justice: Thinking Relationally about Justice," in *Being Relational: Reflections on Relational Theory and Health Law*, eds. J. Downie and J. Llewellyn (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), 97, cited in Asadullah, "Decolonization and Restorative Justice," 50.

reflects Asadullah's observation that the most effective restorative work in Bangladesh came from hybrid models that blended NGO-supported mediation with the traditional shalish, rather than relying solely on Western frameworks.¹⁵⁶

While traditional jirgas can be dominated by elders and shaped by patriarchal norms, Asadullah calls for wise practices that recover the heart of Indigenous justice while removing the cultural elements that cause harm or exclusion.¹⁵⁷ For the Reda Center, this means that any shura, or consultative council, used for restorative work must include the voices of youth and women. This is grounded in the Prophetic example of seeking women's counsel and the Quranic teaching that believing men and believing women are guardians of one another.¹⁵⁸

The Fruit represents the actual practice that emerges, and it needs to fit the cultural and social realities of the community it serves.¹⁵⁹ Implementation at the Reda Center should follow a phased approach:

- Phase 1: The Circle of Hospitality (Prevention). Before any conflict resolution can take place, the Center has to build trust through real hospitality. Food insecurity is one of the biggest stressors facing newly arrived Afghan families, and the Prophet Muhammad taught that feeding people is one of the clearest ways to spread peace. The Center can host weekly meals that double as gentle check ins, guided by the futuwah ethic of serving others. These gatherings become a form of preventative

¹⁵⁶ Muhammad Asadullah et al., "Community and Restorative Justice Practices in India, Nepal, and Bangladesh: A Comparative Overview," in *Comparative Restorative Justice*, ed. T. Gavrielides (Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2021), 235.

¹⁵⁷ Asadullah, "Decolonization and Restorative Justice," 32.

¹⁵⁸ Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al., eds., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 9:71.

¹⁵⁹ Asadullah, "Decolonization and Restorative Justice," 53.

restorative justice, building a relational bank that the community can draw from when harm arises.

- Phase 2: The Circle of Accountability (Intervention). When a young person causes harm, whether through fighting, bullying, or minor theft, the response should not be suspension or exclusion. Instead, the Center can convene a Circle of Accountability that brings together the youth who caused the harm, the person affected, and respected community elders who embody the futuwwah code.
 - The process should follow the Quranic guidance that says, “If two groups of believers fall into conflict, then make peace between them.”¹⁶⁰
 - The outcome should aim for islah, the work of setting things right. If a young person has stolen, for instance, restitution should involve more than simply paying something back. It should include an act of service that helps restore their dignity and reconnect them to the community. The Prophetic example of the woman who stole during the conquest of Mecca shows this clearly. Even though the law of hadd existed, the Prophet often preferred to avoid harsh punishment through intercession and sincere repentance whenever possible, placing the focus on restoring the person’s spirit rather than crushing them.¹⁶¹
- Phase 3: The Circle of Reintegration (Restoration). Asadullah explains that reintegrative shaming is a core part of restorative justice, meaning the community condemns the harmful act while still honoring and caring for the person who

¹⁶⁰ *The Study Quran*, 49:9.

¹⁶¹ *Salahi, Muhammad: His Character and Conduct*, 226

committed it.¹⁶² In the Islamic tradition, this idea shows up in the concept of tawbah, repentance, which literally means returning. When a young person completes their obligations, the community should bring them back in fully, without keeping their past hanging over them. The Prophet's treatment of Wahshi, who killed his uncle, and Ikrimah ibn Abi Jahl, the son of one of his fiercest opponents, offers a clear model. Once they embraced the community, their past was set aside and they were spoken to with dignity and honor.¹⁶³ The Reda Center can hold a simple, formal ceremony when a youth completes an RJ agreement, symbolizing that the mistake has been washed away and the slate is clean.

Asadullah cautions against the McDonaldization of restorative justice, where it turns into nothing more than a bureaucratic checklist.¹⁶⁴ To avoid that trap, the Reda Center needs to maintain strong ties with its vertical community partners, such as schools, police, and probation officers, while still protecting its horizontal, grassroots identity, which keeps the work real and grounded.¹⁶⁵

The US refugee resettlement system often narrows its focus to quick economic self-sufficiency, pushing refugees to meet short-term benchmarks that rarely reflect their actual needs or realities.¹⁶⁶ The Reda Center can step in as the extended case management that so many families lack. By introducing its restorative justice program to local schools

¹⁶² Brenda Morrison, Muhammad Asadullah, and Colleen Pawlychka, "Juvenile Justice and Restorative Justice in British Columbia: Learning through the Lens of Community Praxis," in *Youth at Risk and Youth Justice: A Canadian Overview*, eds. J. Winterdyk and R. Smandych (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2020), 456.

¹⁶³ Salahi, *Muhammad: His Character and Conduct*, 113.

¹⁶⁴ Asadullah et al., "Community and Restorative Justice Practices," 238.

¹⁶⁵ Asadullah, "Community Praxis," 116.

¹⁶⁶ Molly Fee, "Paper Integration: The Structural Constraints and Consequences of the US Refugee Resettlement Program," *Migration Studies* 7, no. 4 (2019): 479.

as a culturally responsive alternative, the Center can become a referral point for Afghan youth who might otherwise face suspension. This fits well with California's broader push toward restorative practices in education.¹⁶⁷

There is always a tension between justice, understood as retribution, and forgiveness. The Prophet taught that justice means putting things in their proper place, while generosity means lifting them beyond their original destiny.¹⁶⁸ The Reda Center should help youth understand that while victims have the right to seek justice through *qisas*, the Quran lifts forgiveness, *afw*, as the path that draws a person closer to piety.¹⁶⁹ At the same time, forgiveness can never be pushed or expected. As Asadullah points out in his critique of colonial models of RJ, encouraging someone to forgive without first addressing the power imbalance can actually create a second layer of harm.¹⁷⁰ For that reason, the Center has to make sure the truth-telling stage of the restorative process is strong and genuine. Victims need the space to fully express their hurt before any conversation about forgiveness can even begin.

To strengthen the restorative impact at the Reda Center, the program should actively bring the ethical code of *futuwwah* into its daily practice and cultivate a spirit of conviviality that counters internal fragmentation. *Futuwwah* offers a powerful alternative to the toxic masculinity and gang-style culture that can attract youth who feel sidelined or disconnected.¹⁷¹ The way of the *fata*, the young hero, is rooted in the example of Prophet

¹⁶⁷ "Teacher Perspectives on Effective Restorative Practice Implementation: Identifying Programmatic Elements that Promote Positive Relational Development" (PDF), 1136.

¹⁶⁸ Walid, *Futuwwah*, 108.

¹⁶⁹ Şentürk, "Futuwwah in the Qur'an and the Sunnah," 112.

¹⁷⁰ Alana Abramson and Muhammad Asadullah, "Decolonizing Restorative Justice," in *Decolonization and Justice: An Introductory Overview*, ed. Muhammad Asadullah (Open Book Press, 2022), 373.

¹⁷¹ Walid, *Futuwwah*, 12.

Ibrahim breaking the idol of the ego and in Prophet Muhammad's generosity and openheartedness.¹⁷²

The Reda Center can build a curriculum that teaches youth that real strength grows out of *ithar*, or altruism, rather than dominance or intimidation. As some scholars point out, the highest level of Islamic ethics is not simple reciprocity through *qisas*, but the deeper work of responding to harm with what is good, the path of *ihsan*.¹⁷³ In practice, this means training youth mentors to see themselves as guardians of their community, the kind of people who reach out to those who pull away and who forgive those who have wronged them.¹⁷⁴ This reframes restorative justice not as a soft or lenient option, but as a heroic discipline that demands real spiritual strength. It calls a person to absorb harm without striking back, reflecting the well known example of Imam Ali, who refused to kill an enemy warrior when he realized his impulse had shifted from principle to personal anger.¹⁷⁵

While the idea of the Ummah points to a single, united community, the reality is that it can sometimes hide the racism and sectarianism that exist within Muslim communities themselves.¹⁷⁶ Many young Muslims in the US feel a gap between the ideal of a united Ummah and the exclusion they actually encounter, and that disconnect can push some of them to step back from religious spaces altogether.¹⁷⁷ The Reda Center has to intentionally cultivate conviviality, the steady, everyday practice of living with

¹⁷² Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami, *The Book of Sufi Chivalry: Futuwwah*, trans. Tosun Bayrak (New York: Inner Traditions International, 1983), 21.

¹⁷³ Şentürk, "Futuwwah in the Qur'an and the Sunnah," 122.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁷⁵ Al-Sulami, *The Book of Sufi Chivalry*, 13.

¹⁷⁶ Haleema Welji, "Reclaiming a Diverse Ummah: Social Justice and Community among Young Muslims in the United States," *Anthropologica* 63, no. 1 (2021): 2.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

difference in a way that protects one another's dignity.¹⁷⁸ This means creating spaces where Sunni and Shia youth are not just tolerating each other, but actively standing up for one another. The HEART model used in Nepal, which focuses on healing, empowerment, accountability, restoration, and transformation, offers a helpful example. It reminds us that real restoration also involves reshaping the structural dynamics that produced the harm in the first place.¹⁷⁹ By openly naming and challenging prejudices like anti Blackness or sectarian bias within the safety of the restorative circle, the Center can nurture a community of genuine conviviality that stays grounded even under the weight of outside Islamophobic pressure.¹⁸⁰

The Reda Center's restorative justice work also needs to uphold the *karamah*, the dignity, of everyone involved. Restitution should be framed not as a punishment, but as a path of purification and growth.¹⁸¹ The Prophet Muhammad's interaction with the Jewish creditor, in which he insisted that the debt be repaid with something better than what was owed, shows that justice is meant to strengthen relationships rather than simply balance the books.¹⁸² The Prophetic tradition also stresses the importance of *sitr*, concealing a person's faults, so that they are not marked or stigmatized in ways that harm their future.¹⁸³ Asadullah's research shows that in many South Asian settings, women play a central role as facilitators in effective restorative processes. Empowering Afghan women to take on this role at the Reda Center is essential for both cultural legitimacy and the

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁷⁹ Asadullah et al., "Community and Restorative Justice Practices," 231–32.

¹⁸⁰ Welji, "Reclaiming a Diverse Ummah," 18.

¹⁸¹ *The Study Quran*, 17:70 (commentary on dignity/*karamah*).

¹⁸² Imam An-Nawawi, *Riyad as-Salihin*, 212.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 148.

program's overall success.¹⁸⁴ By grounding the program in these specific Prophetic examples, the Reda Center can ensure its restorative justice work does not feel imported or foreign. Instead, it becomes a revival of the community's own highest ethical heritage, something already familiar in spirit and rooted in their tradition.

To make sure the restorative justice program is not just a band-aid over deeper structural wounds, the Reda Center has to confront the broader forms of violence Afghan refugees face in California. Asadullah cautions against the McDonaldization of restorative justice, in which it becomes a set of standardized checklists that ignore the lived realities of the community.¹⁸⁵ Similarly, Molly Fee critiques the US resettlement system as a form of paper integration, where officials focus more on checking boxes and producing documentation than on supporting the real well-being of the people they serve.¹⁸⁶

Research on Afghan refugees in the United States shows a painful pattern of declassing, where highly educated professionals are pushed into low-wage work, like doctors who end up driving taxis just to survive.¹⁸⁷ This loss of status puts heavy pressure on families and can create real intergenerational tension, often feeding the very behavioral issues that restorative justice is meant to address. The Reda Center has to ensure it does not repeat the same pattern of paper integration and instead uses its restorative circles to confront the deeper roots of harm.¹⁸⁸ The Center can also serve as a hub for building bridging social capital, connecting declassified Afghan professionals with

¹⁸⁴ Asadullah et al., "Community and Restorative Justice Practices," 235.

¹⁸⁵ Asadullah et al., "Community and Restorative Justice Practices," 238.

¹⁸⁶ Fee, "Paper Integration," 478.

¹⁸⁷ Stempel and Alemi, "Challenges to the economic integration," 4877.

¹⁸⁸ Fee, "Paper Integration," 490.

mentorship networks that help restore their dignity, confidence, and economic stability.¹⁸⁹ This approach reflects the Prophetic teaching to seek what you need with self respect and dignity.¹⁹⁰

Recent research from California's San Joaquin Valley shows that many Afghan refugees struggle with serious food insecurity, made worse by the limited availability of affordable halal options and the challenge of navigating unfamiliar American grocery systems.¹⁹¹ Food insecurity is not only a biological hardship. It becomes a spiritual and social strain, weakening a community's sense of connection. Because of this, the Reda Center's use of Asadullah's idea of community as circles of care needs to include a strong food-sovereignty component that supports families in a real, steady way.¹⁹² Following the Prophetic example, where feeding the hungry is directly tied to spreading peace, the Center can treat food support as a core part of its restorative mission rather than an optional add-on.¹⁹³ The Center can organize halal food pantries or cooperative buying groups. Offering this kind of practical support becomes its own form of restorative intervention, easing the everyday stress that so often fuels conflict within families and among youth.¹⁹⁴

Finally, the Reda Center needs to equip youth with the tools to navigate an external environment that can feel openly hostile. Research shows that, unlike some other minority groups, many Afghan refugees do not arrive with well-developed cultural repertoires to help them understand or push back against the discrimination they

¹⁸⁹ Asadullah, "Restorative Justice in British Columbia," 233.

¹⁹⁰ Walid, *Futuwwah*, 120.

¹⁹¹ Goliaei et al., "Post-Resettlement Food Insecurity," 3.

¹⁹² Asadullah, "Community Praxis," 113.

¹⁹³ Yousef, "Reflecting on the Names of Allah," 316.

¹⁹⁴ Goliaei et al., "Post-Resettlement Food Insecurity," 8.

encounter.¹⁹⁵ This vulnerability to discrimination significantly increases psychological distress.¹⁹⁶ The restorative justice program should include narrative circles where youth can process their experiences of Islamophobia and racism together. By drawing on the futuwah idea of protective jealousy, or ghayrah, which is a vigilant concern for one's own dignity and the community's dignity, young people can shift their response to discrimination from passive endurance to a grounded, dignified resilience.¹⁹⁷ This reflects the Prophet's teaching that the strong believer is the one most beloved to God, with strength defined not by physical force but by the steadiness to hold on to one's faith and dignity under pressure.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁵ Qais Alemi and Carl Stempel, "Discrimination and Distress Among Afghan Refugees in Northern California: The Moderating Role of Pre-and Post-Migration Factors," *PLoS One* 13, no. 5 (2018): 13.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁹⁷ Walid, *Futuwwah*, 58.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

This thesis has shown that, while refugee resettlement in the United States is built on good intentions and the language of protection and self sufficiency, it often operates within a bureaucratic pattern of paper integration that does little to address the deep psychological, social, and spiritual wounds carried by Afghan refugee youth. By examining both the structural limits of the US Refugee Resettlement Program and the specific cultural realities of the Afghan community in Sacramento, this study proposes a restorative justice model tailored for the Reda Center. Drawing on the work of Dr. Muhammad Asadullah and the Islamic tradition of futuwah, spiritual chivalry, this project outlines a path that goes beyond survival and aims toward real healing and a more genuine, shared sense of community.

The examination of the USRP shows a sharp divide between what the policy claims to offer and what refugees actually experience. As scholars like Molly Fee point out, the resettlement system is shaped by a kind of bureaucratic formalism where success is judged by completed paperwork and quick employment, not by the genuine well-being or long-term stability of the people it is meant to support.¹⁹⁹ This system's paper-based integration turns caseworkers into street-level administrators who are pushed to prioritize documentation over real engagement. As a result, the deeper trauma of displacement often goes unaddressed, hidden beneath a stack of completed forms.²⁰⁰ For Afghan

¹⁹⁹ Molly Fee, "Paper Integration: The Structural Constraints and Consequences of the US Refugee Resettlement Program," *Migration Studies* 7, no. 4 (2019): 478-481.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 488.

refugees, this bureaucratic erasure is made even heavier by human capital discounting, where their education, skills, and social standing from back home are treated as if they no longer exist in the American job market.²⁰¹

The impact of this structural failure hits Afghan youth especially hard. They grow up watching their families pushed into downward mobility, with highly educated parents taking low-wage jobs just to get by. This shift unsettles traditional family roles and often contributes to a broader crisis of masculinity that many young people struggle to make sense of.²⁰² Research by Alemi and Stempel shows that Afghan youth often carry a heavy burden of psychological distress, made worse by discrimination and by feeling disconnected from the intra ethnic identity that once anchored them.²⁰³ The emotional weight of war does not disappear once refugees arrive; it often transforms into internal conflict and social isolation. A resettlement system that prioritizes quick economic placement while overlooking these deep identity struggles falls short. Data shows that although refugees may eventually reach economic self-sufficiency, the early years are often marked by downward mobility and profound distress, highlighting the need for interventions that provide immediate social and spiritual support.²⁰⁴

To address this gap, this thesis proposes implementing a Decolonizing Framework for Restorative Justice at the Reda Center, using Muhammad Asadullah's "tree" metaphor

²⁰¹ Van C. Tran and Francisco Lara-García, "A New Beginning: Early Refugee Integration in the United States," *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 6, no. 3 (2020): 119, 142.

²⁰² Carl Stempel and Qais Alemi, "Challenges to the economic integration of Afghan refugees in the U.S.," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47, no. 21 (2021): 4877.

²⁰³ Qais Alemi and Carl Stempel, "Discrimination and Distress among Afghan Refugees in Northern California: The Moderating Role of Pre- and Post-Migration Factors," *PLoS ONE* 13, no. 5 (2018): 11-12.

²⁰⁴ David Dyssegaard Kallick and Silva Mathema, "Refugee Integration in the United States," *Center for American Progress* (June 2016): 3; Tran and Lara-García, "A New Beginning," 119.

to guide a culturally grounded and responsive approach.²⁰⁵ Standard Western approaches to restorative justice, often limited to generic victim-offender conferences, risk turning into a form of McDonaldization, with rigid checklists that ignore the local culture and lived realities of the community.²⁰⁶ Instead, the proposed program grows out of the participants' specific cultural and theological context.

The Roots of this framework are anchored in Islamic ethics, especially the principles of rahma, mercy, and ihsan, doing what is beautiful. Asadullah emphasizes that a trauma-informed approach must recognize that conflict often stems from wounds that have yet to heal.²⁰⁷ By grounding the restorative justice process in the Prophetic tradition, which highlights the sacredness of brotherhood and the duty to repair harm, the Reda Center can provide a model of justice that feels both understandable and legitimate to Afghan youth.

The Trunk of the model positions the Reda Center as a key cultural broker, bridging the vertical community of formal state institutions and the horizontal community of informal social ties.²⁰⁸ This means empowering local leaders and drawing on the principles of futuwah to help rebuild a positive, service oriented model of masculinity. Futuwah provides a counter narrative to the toxic masculinity that can emerge from

²⁰⁵ Muhammad Asadullah, "Decolonization and Restorative Justice: A Proposed Theoretical Framework," *Decolonization of Criminology and Justice* 3, no. 1 (2021): 29.

²⁰⁶ Muhammad Asadullah et al., "Community and Restorative Justice Practices in India, Nepal, and Bangladesh: A Comparative Overview," in *Comparative Restorative Justice*, ed. T. Gavrielides (Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2021), 238.

²⁰⁷ Asadullah, "Decolonization and Restorative Justice," 36.

²⁰⁸ Muhammad Asadullah, "Community Praxis: Exploring a Community Engagement Framework for Restorative Justice in British Columbia, Nova Scotia and Bangladesh" (PhD diss., Simon Fraser University, 2020), 116.

disenfranchisement, giving youth a model of the spiritual warrior whose true strength is rooted in *ithar*, or altruism, and in protecting those who are vulnerable.²⁰⁹

A key finding of this research is the need to address divisions within the community, especially the Sunni-Shia tensions that have long affected Afghan society. The thesis argues that the Reda Center must intentionally cultivate conviviality, which is the steady, daily work of living together with difference. By using a hybrid approach that combines modern restorative justice methods with the spirit of traditional practices like the *jirga*, the Center can create safe spaces for meaningful dialogue.²¹⁰

The proposed peer-to-peer mentorship system, inspired by the Prophetic pairing of the *Muhajirun* and *Ansar*, helps restore the strong, interconnected community fabric that is often frayed during the refugee experience. This mentorship goes beyond practical support; it is a spiritual practice of circles of care that extends help beyond the mediation room, addressing challenges like food insecurity that deeply affect dignity and community cohesion.²¹¹ By creating spaces where Sunni and Shia youth do more than simply coexist, actively upholding and protecting each other's dignity, the Reda Center can bring to life the Quranic vision of a united *Ummah* that rises above sectarian divides.

The lessons of this study go far beyond Sacramento. They call on the wider field of refugee resettlement to see that integration is not just about being absorbed into the host economy, but about a two-way process that restores agency and dignity. Evidence shows that when refugees are given bridging social capital, meaning connections that link

²⁰⁹ Walid, *Futuwwah*, 108.

²¹⁰ Asadullah, "Decolonization and Restorative Justice," 53.

²¹¹ Zahra Goliaei et al., "Post-Resettlement Food Insecurity: Afghan Refugees and Challenges of the New Environment," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 20, no. 5846 (2023): 2; Asadullah, "Community Praxis," 152.

declassified professionals with mentorship networks, they can reclaim economic independence and rebuild stability within their families.²¹²

This thesis also argues that religious literacy is not optional but central to effective social work with Muslim communities. As research in Critical Refugee Studies highlights, refugees should be seen not just as victims of violence, but as people with their own knowledge, strengths, and resilience.²¹³ The futuwah model shows how traditional religious ethics can be applied to address modern challenges like alienation and youth violence. It moves away from a deficit approach, which treats refugee youth as problems to manage, toward an asset-based approach that sees them as young heroes, or *fata*, capable of leadership and ethical renewal.²¹⁴

Ultimately, the framework for reconciliation outlined here is a framework of hope. It recognizes that the shadows of worldly struggles and the weight of trauma can obscure the universal knowledge and goodness that exist within the human soul.²¹⁵ By carefully applying restorative practices that respect their faith and history, Afghan youth can be supported in rediscovering their inherent dignity and sense of self-worth.

The Reda Center occupies a pivotal moment. By moving beyond the empty promises of paper integration and embracing a decolonized, spiritually grounded approach to restorative justice, it can offer Afghan youth more than a safe space; it can

²¹² Muhammad Asadullah, "Restorative Justice in British Columbia," 233

²¹³ Yen Espiritu et al., *Departures: An Introduction to Critical Refugee Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022), 11, cited in Jane Pak, Jyoti Gurung, and Amy Argenal, "Refugee and Immigrant Youth Leaders: Strengths, Futurity, and Commitment to Community," *Social Sciences* 12, no. 640 (2023): 2.

²¹⁴ Recep Şentürk, *Futuwwah: Codifying Youth Ethics from the Sunnah with Reference to Sulami's Kitab Al Futuwwa* (Istanbul: Ibn Haldun University Press, 2021), 112.

²¹⁵ Afifi al-Akiti, *A Treasury of Rumi: Guidance on the Path of Wisdom and Unity* (Leicester: Kube Publishing, 2020), 37-38.

offer a true new beginning. This beginning does not erase the past, but weaves together their Afghan heritage and American future, shaped by the principles of futuwwah. As they learn that real strength comes not from dominance but from maintaining dignity under pressure, they live the Prophetic lesson that the strong believer is one who embodies resilience and high moral character.²¹⁶ In this way, they not only heal themselves but also help restore the wider community, showing that even from the fractures of displacement, a foundation of unity and justice can emerge.

²¹⁶ Walid, *Futuwwah*, 8.

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