Article

From Sex Offenders to National Heroes: Comparing Yemeni and Afghan Refugees in South Korea

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Abstract
This article examines discourses that shaped different outcomes for Yemeni refugees in 2018 and Afghan special contributors in 2021 in South Korea. Following the country's mission to evacuate its Afghan interlocutors in 2021, Afghans are fast-tracked for social integration through the creation of emergency enforcement ordinances, with South Korean society broadly welcoming them as national heroes and recognizing them as "special contributors" rather than refugees. In contrast, Yemeni refugees arriving in 2018 were subjected to Islamophobic and legal abuse, constructed as potential sex offenders and terrorists, and accused of being fake refugees. In both cases, refugee protections according to South Korea's 2013 Refugee Law were withheld as Yemenis and Afghans were processed through alternative systems. This article concludes that Muslim refugee issues in South Korea are masculinized and delves into the multi-faceted complex factors at play when analyzing the differences between the reception of Afghan evacuees and Yemeni refugees in the South Korean context.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Assessing Ground Realities for Refugees in South Korea

South Korea has an incredibly restrictive refugee system. Despite joining the Geneva Convention in 1992 and enacting a stand-alone Refugee Act in 2013, it has the second lowest acceptance rate amongst the G20. Between 2010–2020, the South Korean refugee acceptance rate was a mere 1.3%, though the country processed 50,218 applications for refugee status, out of which 655 were successfully granted ("Hanguk, nanmin," 2021). Despite taking progressive steps towards establishing a humane protection system, in reality, South Korea lacks standardized guidelines, often performs biased screening interviews designed to reject asylum claims, does not offer applicants legal aid, and places heavy burdens on the asylum seeker to prove the risk of persecution levied at them in their home countries (NANCEN, 2021). Coupled with the fact that public and political perceptions towards refugees are largely negative, South Korea offers potential refugees a hostile environment. This research situates itself in this complex and understudied context and works across several intersections of study and observation. Specifically, we look at how social discourses—defined here as how public and political perceptions are shaped—and note the impact of gendered and Islamophobic stereotypes on refugee policy. We examine the very real-life consequences and outcomes for refugees in South Korea, especially when these are Muslim and male. An intersectional research project,

we deal with issues of gender, racism, Islamophobia, and social perception as vital factors that shaped how the Yemeni Crisis on Jeju Island in 2018 was handled in comparison to the arrival of Afghan "special contributors" evacuated to South Korea following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021.

The authors highlight from the outset that the nature of this research is preliminary and grounded in an understanding of the local context. Grounded theory approaches are essential for gaining insights into the competing factors that are shaping social perceptions, legal instruments, and political concerns that eventually led to two very different outcomes for two similarly vulnerable groups of people needing similar protections. To this end, the situation on the ground in terms of policy is still under debate and we base our propositions on analytical observations of pro and anti-refugee demonstrations that took place in 2018 against Yemenis, public meetings with ministers, the reception of Afghan special contributors, newspaper articles, and more. With this article, we aim to lay the groundwork that is desperately needed in English-speaking academic contexts, shedding light on public, legal, political, and social discourses that shape local perspectives on refugee issues, and in doing so, bring largely unheard Korean perspectives to the table.

In the Yemeni case, we emphasize how gendered discourses about Muslim male refugees constructed them as potential terrorists, sex criminals, and fake refugees whereas Afghans were constructed as victims of Islamic terrorism and, due to their status as "helpers" to the South Korean mission in Afghanistan, national heroes worthy of protection. The regional focus on South Korea adds value to the study of migration, especially from Muslim perspectives, which are severely lacking in the field. Lastly, this research expects to spark further conversations about refugee reception and attitudes towards Muslim men in non-western contexts, and extends works already conducted in familiar European settings at the time of the Syrian Refugee Crisis in 2015 (Hobbs, 2021; Ingvars & Gíslason, 2018; Scheibelhofer, 2017), offering researchers opportunities to explore crossovers and comparisons of refugee issues across regional contexts.

1.2. Afghan Special Contributors and Yemeni Refugees: What's the Difference?

In 2018, approximately 500 mostly male Yemeni asylum seekers arrived on Jeju Island seeking refuge from war. The road to South Korea was long and arduous, with a considerable amount of time spent in Malaysia, where it was impossible to establish stable lives because Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention. Coincidently, direct flights aimed at increasing tourism to South Korea opened up, giving Yemenis the opportunity to board flights visa-free to Jeju Island, where they could finally apply for formal refugee status as South Korea recognizes international refugee laws (Sheikh, 2020).

Unfortunately, Yemenis faced intense hostility in South Korea with rumors that they were rapists, anti-women, and potentially terrorist criminals due to their cultural and religious identities as Muslims spreading across online spaces, propagated by diverse groups of anti-multiculturalists, radical feminists, and far-right Christian groups. This, along with a reliance on fake and exaggerated news stories about the negative impact of accepting refugees in European societies eventually snowballed into a fully-fledged anti-refugee movement in South Korea (Sheikh, 2021). Widespread anti-refugee campaigns eventually forced the government to respond resulting in the implementation of discriminatory policies that continue to affect the lives of Yemeni refugees to date. Despite clear signs of war in Yemen, most Yemeni asylum applications were rejected; instead, the majority were issued with temporary, renewable humanitarian permits. These permits restricted most Yemenis to hard labor industries including fishing and farming, leaving them with little financial support or long-term prospects to put down roots in South Korea.

Memories of the mishandling of this crisis still fresh, the South Korean government chose to pursue an alternative course of action for its recent Afghan arrivals. Following the Taliban's seizure of power in Afghanistan in August 2021, the South Korean government joined global missions to evacuate local interlocutors comprised of a variety of professionals including interpreters, medical doctors, IT specialists, and vocational trainers (Jeong, 2021). This was South Korea's first-ever mass evacuation on humanitarian grounds, airlifting approximately 390 Afghan interlocutors and their families to the country. Taking great care to avoid repeating the same debates and mistakes made with the Yemenis in 2018, the government has kept Afghan special contributors mostly out of the public eye, drip-feeding updates to the media and providing assurances to South Korean citizens that their security is not being compromised. Upon arrival, Afghans were placed together in a closed facility that usually serves as a training center for government officials in the city of Jincheon. They were held in quarantine and then put through various crash courses in the Korean language and culture. This is not all: Stressing their contribution as "helpers" to the state, Afghan special contributors are being fast-tracked for social integration through various mechanisms designed to ease them into South Korean society far more efficiently than the Yemenis who suffered many systemic and social injustices before them.

Most importantly for our comparative discussion is that unlike the Yemenis pushed haphazardly through the asylum system, when responding to the Afghan issue, the government bypassed established systems altogether, instead enacting a special enforcement ordinance creating a brand-new legal category—the *Teugbyeolgiyeoja* (special contributor)—applicable only to this set of Afghan arrivals. As we will see later, this category was designed specifically and only for this small group of

Afghan evacuees, and is not to be confused with the existing category of *Teukbyeulgongnoja*, which has completely different criteria for recognizing people as special contributors of "special" merit (e.g., Nobel Peace Prize winners). These terms go beyond issues of semantics. The variation in labeling has left deep implications for Afghans and Yemenis who remain in precarious situations as they share the common challenge of being left unprotected by international and local refugee laws.

In our critical perspective, by categorizing Afghans as "special contributors" instead of categorizing them using existing asylum systems, the South Korean government has made its position on refugee issues clear: First, it reveals that the country is not prepared to handle the political risk and backlash associated with accepted Muslim refugees given the negative public sentiments expressed against Yemenis in 2018. Second, by going to exceptional lengths to avoid any re-emergence of refugee issues in public discourse, the government has created a new legal category for Afghans which not only supports faster integration but also opens pathways to long-term residency unlike many Yemenis who continue to be restricted by humanitarian permits that need to be renewed regularly.

As refugee discourse has evolved from one of fear of so-called Yemeni fake refugees, sex criminals, and terrorism to one of Afghan heroes, the question of who "deserves" protection has arisen in the field. Leaning on our observations and critical analysis of the discourse about refugees, we propose that Afghans were deemed worthy of South Korean protection as a return favor for serving the South Korean nation and for being familiar with its cultural norms. This approach has led to inequality amongst refugees, and concerningly, we can see the emergence of a new hierarchy within refugee communities depending on their proximity to South Korean causes. Interestingly, as new discourse emphasizes the need to save Afghans from the clutches of the Taliban emerges, we can see the construction of benevolent and hospitable public attitudes toward them based on a mutual fear of being crushed by "Islamic terrorism." Despite the increased hospitability extended towards Afghans over Yemenis, in both cases Islamophobic and gendered attitudes have shaped the discourse from one of "criminals and fake refugees" to "national heroes."

1.3. Methodology

It is important to highlight that refugee issues in South Korea, especially in the English language, are severely under-studied and this is reflected by the existence of limited academic materials at our disposal. Recognizing this, rather than attempting to prove or disprove a particular concept or theory in an already sparse field, we employed inductive research methods, underpinned by grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) working with primary and secondary data sources available at the time of writing through a critical discourse analysis (CDA) per-

spective. As highlighted by Ralph et al. (2014), grounded theory approaches are also useful and necessary when gathering data that includes documents, moving the focus from more popular forms of data such as interview content. Keeping the focus on documentation, we lean on the CDA methodological framework proposed by van Dijk (2004, p. 352) who suggests that CDA research primarily studies "the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in social and political contexts." Given our primary focus on the content of speeches, online commentary, documents, and so on, this approach is useful for unearthing presumptions, stereotypes, and attitudes hidden within the language (Machin & Mayr, 2012) used to talk about Afghan special contributors and Yemeni refugees, particularly teasing out gendered assumptions about Muslim men. Similar methodologies were used to explore gender stereotypes in political media discourse, focusing on documentary evidence by Sriwimon and Zilli (2017) with similar efforts exerted to overcome criticisms of this methodological framework, such as clearly marking out the materials used so that future researchers can follow and test our trajectory. The majority of our materials are comprised of documentary data—minutes of ministry meetings and speeches, newspaper articles, and commentary, combined with our own scholarly observations of online public discourse. In doing so, we assess how discourse about Muslim refugees is rapidly changing through the lenses of Afghan and Yemeni communities respectively.

1.4. Data

Data used for this study includes a range of policy and legal documents, political speeches, surveys, academic papers, and our own reflective observations of public discourse about Muslim refugees between 2018–2021. Specifically, we examined the minutes of the Korean National Assembly, considered official government documents. The particular focus of these minutes was the ministers' responses to inquiries regarding refugees made by lawmakers from the Legislation and Judiciary Committee and the Foreign Affairs and Unification Committee. These documents can assist in understanding the government's position on the refugee issue and its political implications. We also scrutinized annual statistics published by the Immigration Service of the Korean Ministry of Justice, as well as the enacted and amended legal articles and enforcement ordinances that practically define, categorize, decide, and control the status of refugees. In addition, we looked at various primary sources such as public petitions to the Cheong Wa Dae (until early 2022, the executive office and official residence of the South Korean president), official statements made by the Korean Association of Church Communication, press editorials and comments gleaned from both conservative and progressive media, such as the *Chosun Ilbo*, *Joongang Ilbo*, *Hankook*

Ilbo, *Yonhap News Agency*, and *Hankyoreh*, broadcast media materials, and various statistical data released by the government and private organizations including the Immigration Service of the Korean Ministry of Justice and the NANCEN Refugee Rights Center. Finally, Our lines of investigation are informed by the following research questions:

1. What comparisons can be drawn from the 2018 Yemeni refugee crisis and the evacuation of Afghan special contributors in 2021?
2. How can the different responses at the social, legal, and political levels be analyzed and what were the outcomes for Yemenis and Afghans respectively?
3. What role do gender and nation play a role in shaping the discourses about Yemeni refugees and Afghan special contributors?

1.5. Analysis

In line with the principles of CDA, we gathered the documents along with our observation notes and organized them thematically along our lines of inquiry. We performed several close readings and coded the data using qualitative NVivo software before noting the main themes that emerged from our data. We cross-checked our findings with other available refugee studies in South Korea before arranging our findings in categories of various discourses, explained in detail below.

2. Social Discourse, Islamophobia, and Gendered Perceptions of Muslim Men

The 2018 anti-refugee demonstrations declared that Yemeni men were fake refugees, sexual predators, and potential terrorist threats (Sheikh, 2021). Much of this opposition was captured in a controversial online petition to Cheong Wa Dae (National Petition no. 269548), with over 700,000 signatures demanding that South Korea withdraw from the Refugee Convention (the online petition platform has since been dismantled). The same petition also expressed fear that the security of the South Korean people was being compromised by the arrival of potential "criminals" under the guise of refugee law. A core part of the opposition discourse was the notion that Yemenis were a threat to the safety of Korean women. Many young women, especially radical feminists drove the narrative that they were at risk of sexual violence at the hands of Yemeni men because they followed Islam—erroneously perceived as a religion that condoned violence against women and was incompatible with South Korea's social norms (B. Kim, 2019; Sheikh, 2021).

Conversely, in 2021, there was a huge outpour of support for the resettlement of Afghan special contributors. 390 Afghan special contributors were deliberately separated from other refugee communities in South Korea, stating that special contributors already evidenced their

contribution to society by supporting the Korean mission on the ground in Afghanistan. It helped that having worked with South Koreans and being somewhat familiar with the Korean language and culture, these Afghans were not perceived as invaders coming to the country for benefits but as people who needed to be saved from the tyranny of Islamist terror. These sentiments are broadly captured in a Realmeter survey conducted almost immediately after the evacuation mission. The results indicated that 68.7% of respondents were in favor of providing Afghan special contributors who had served the South Korean government with pathways to long-term visas and employment (Hong, 2021).

Notably, unlike Yemeni refugees, who had also fled a war and were met with hostility, South Korean people flocked to support Afghans through a "buycott." In a show of solidarity with the people of Jincheon, the city where Afghan special contributors were first placed by the government, South Koreans showed their support by purchasing specialist, local products through the city's official homepage, expressing their pride in Jincheon residents for providing Afghans with safety by leaving supportive online comments with purchases (Y. Oh, 2021). To note, although Afghans were initially placed in Jincheon, the location itself is rather insignificant as it was never intended to be a permanent place of residence. It was expected that the Afghans would relocate to areas with better employment prospects once they had undergone screenings, quarantine, and completed crash courses in the Korean language and culture. For example, currently, more than 40% of Afghans are settled in Ulsan, Korea's largest industrial city where there are plenty of factory jobs (Paik, 2022).

3. The Impact of Christian Communities on Refugee Discourse and Muslim Men

Despite this obvious change in public and political sentiment, we propose that Islamophobia and gendered framings of Muslim men are common themes that run through both episodes albeit with different outcomes. For example, Korea's large, influential, and very active Christian community often raises concerns about Korea becoming an "Islamized" country by stealth through the introduction of halal food, or the presence of refugee communities and their potential risk to Korean women (Sheikh, 2021). Nami Kim shows how fundamentalist Christian groups are the main propagators of Islamophobia in South Korea, re-creating the narrative of Korean women needing to be "saved" from the clutches of Muslim—particularly brown Muslim—men (N. Kim, 2016; Ryu, 2019). This narrative was very obviously activated in the case of Yemeni refugees, but in the Afghan situation, we suggest that Islamophobic narratives actually contributed to a more hospitable discourse towards Afghan refugees based on mutual fear of the Taliban.

Fear of the Taliban is also one of the early catalysts for the spread of Islamophobia in contemporary South

Korea. In July 2007, the Taliban abducted 23 Korean missionaries from the Bundang Saemmul Church of Gyeonggi Province. South Korean churches and wider society expressed their horror as the Taliban went on to murder two of the missionary hostages in one of Afghanistan's desert areas (H. Kim, 2021). Vivid memories of this episode instigated fear amongst Christian groups that the Taliban would once again persecute Afghan people, expressing their concerns through a Christian lens. For example, the pro-Christian newspaper *Kookmin Ilbo* stated that "the Taliban are an extremely anti-Christian group," and commented that attacks on Christians would increase throughout Afghanistan (Seo, 2021). Citing anonymous local sources, some South Korean media outlets reported that the Taliban were terrorizing Afghan Christians by executing them if they were found to have a Bible app on their smartphones ("Talleban, gagahoho," 2021). In this context, we saw an increase in calls for the church to accept and assist Afghan evacuees. One pertinent example is the Christian Ethical Movement Korea, which released the following statement on 23rd August 2021:

> As seen in the Yemeni refugee case in 2018, the general public's rejection of foreign refugees is also strong. However, in the face of a major international disaster, Korea now has to bear the responsibilities that befit its international status….Individual churches or church associations should be able to receive and help Afghan refugees by providing facilities and finances. (Na, 2021)

Additionally, even the usually conservative United Christian Churches of Korea stated that "the Afghan people are obviously at risk, so we appreciate allowing them to enter Korea from a humanitarian point of view" (B. Oh, 2021). These are unusual statements as conservative and radical Korean Christian communities were very open about their opposition to the acceptance of Muslim refugees (J. Yoo, 2018). For example, on 17 May 2018, the Korea Association of Church Communication (KACC), the main representative of conservative church communities, published a commentary entitled *Is Korea Becoming a Gathering Place for Refugees?* Here, KACC outlined its position against accepting Yemeni refugees based on "clumsy relativism" and "paternalism" (KACC, 2018). Furthermore, KACC's spokesperson, Lee Eok-ju, suggested that an influx of Yemeni refugees would have a negative impact on safety and security in South Korean society. He believed that Yemenis could not be viewed simply as refugees when Yemen has a GDP per capita of approximately $2,200 ("Nanmin suyong," 2018), indicating suspicions that they were economic migrants, therefore "fake" refugees. At the same time, the Christian community was divided, with progressive groups expressing a positive stance on accepting refugees from a humanitarian point of view, while conservatives as a whole took a negative view of the accepting of Yemeni refugees

(W. Choi, 2018). On the other hand, when it comes to Afghan refugees, not only progressives but conservatives as well maintained a unified position regarding accepting refugees. Through this differentiated reaction of the South Korean church community, it is clear that Yemenis were viewed through lenses of Islamophobia and suspicion compared to positive reactions towards Afghan special contributors.

4. Observing the Discourse: Same Religious Identity, Different Reactions

We observed that Afghans, despite sharing the same religious identity as Yemenis, did not trigger the same concerns about the economy, fake refugees, the introduction of Islamic law, or the risk of sexual or terrorist violence. In part, this is because Afghans were perceived as people who had fled their homeland due to persecution by the same Islamists also feared by Korean society (B. Oh, 2021). On the other hand, with little exposure to the realities of the conflict and dangers of life in Yemen, Yemeni refugees on Jeju Island were subjected to similar racist stereotypes and violent Islamophobic narratives that shaped the reactions to Muslim male refugees in the 2015 European context (Sheikh, 2021), with attacks on their sense of masculinity, accusing "healthy, young men" of cowardice coming to South Korea for economic benefit rather than asylum. Furthermore, leaning on fake news from western sources, Yemeni refugees were consistently framed as potential criminals that needed to be securitized (Choi & Park, 2020). This is a heavily gendered discourse that focused on the perceived "risks" of accepting Muslim males into South Korean society whilst marginalizing the voices of refugee women arriving at the same time and in the same communities. This feeds into dangerous discourses that Muslim women are invisible with a lack of agency as they continue to be left without voice or support.

5. Social Discourse and Divergent Government Responses to Refugees

Given how social discourse shifted from fake refugees to special contributors, the South Korean government responded by crafting a different refugee policy. For Yemeni refugees, South Korea strived to find solutions that would strike a balance between anti-refugee public opinion and the fulfillment of its humanitarian responsibilities. For example, Minister of Justice Park Sang ki, who oversaw the refugee issue, expressed his will to pursue rational policies that could fulfill international responsibilities while taking care to avoid the negative consequences that occurred during the period of large-scale refugee acceptance in the West (J.-S. Lim, 2018). In reality, led by public opinion, the government created policies that were primarily focused on protecting South Korean people rather than Yemeni refugees. Minister Park, who attended the National Assembly on 19 July

2018, offered the following explanation to alleviate people's concerns:

> While acknowledging people's concerns about the refugee issue, Korea is a signatory to the [Geneva] Refugee Convention, and has also enacted the Refugee Act. Therefore, fulfilling our international responsibilities cannot be neglected, so we are struggling to come up with a way to harmonize the two….Above all else, the protection of our people is our top priority. (Korean National Assembly, 2018, pp. 12–13)

From this point of view, by accepting the pressure of social discourse surrounding "fake refugees," it is correct to argue that Korean policymakers sought a response to Yemeni refugees based on the conviction that the protection of citizens should be prioritized. Therefore, it could not be expected that the Korean government would promote a friendly policy towards Yemeni refugees in a situation where they needed to respond to the pressures of widespread anti-refugee social discourse.

Afghan refugees, on the other hand, benefited from the Korea–US alliance and the growing positive discourse surrounding special contributors in US-led military intervention in Afghanistan, which created the logic that refugee protection came first. That is to say, as an ally of the US, for the past 20 years, South Korea has been participating in the international community's efforts to establish lasting peace in Afghanistan by providing more than $1 billion in aid with the dispatch of the Korean troops (Korean National Assembly, 2021b, p. 2; Y. Yoo, 2006, p. 19). As a result, the South Korean government has found it difficult to ignore the humanitarian crisis generated by the sudden withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. This narrative was further strengthened given the fact that the US helped South Korea during the Korean War (1950–1953). The fact that the response to the issue of the Afghan refugees was considered within the context of the Korea-US alliance is reflected in the following remarks by the People Power Party Congressman Cho Tae-yong:

> Regarding Afghanistan [refugees], in fact, this is related to the Korea-US alliance….Those who have worked with the dispatched troops or reconstruction teams and their families, although it doesn't seem like a large number, I know that our government is making various efforts to bring them back to Korea. Regardless of the Taliban's statement that they issued a pardon for Afghans who cooperated with Western countries, including Korea, I believe that continuing efforts to promote the [rescue] plan are very necessary to make Korea trusted by the international community. (Korean National Assembly, 2021a, pp. 6–7)

Furthermore, labeling Afghan refugees "special contributors" created unintended consequences as voices crit-

ical of the progressive Moon Jae-in administration used the situation as ammunition to criticize its policy towards North Korea. While the discourse of "fake refugees" surrounding Yemeni asylum seekers did not provide ammunition for the right to criticize the Moon government, the Afghan issue had real potential to feed into concerns about Moon's policy towards North Korea. Considering this context, the government hastened its policy to silence refugee controversy in South Korea. Given the sensitive and ever-present nature of the North Korean issue, South Korea's right-wingers tried to politicize the Afghan refugee crisis in order to win points in the court of public discourse. In response, the South Korean government strived to pursue a more friendly policy toward the Afghan refugees to avoid the escalation of domestic political controversy.

The political turmoil that ensued after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan led to right-wing voices exclaiming that the peace treaty signed between the Trump administration and the Taliban on 29 February 2020, in Doha, was rendered useless. They criticized the Moon administration's appeasement policy toward North Korea, arguing that the limitations of the Afghan peace agreement should serve as a warning and that attempts to convert the armistice agreement with North Korea into a peace treaty should be stopped. For example, conservative People Power Party Congressperson Jeong Jin-seok asked Korean Minister of Foreign Affairs Chung Eui-yong at the National Assembly:

> Watching the devastation at Kabul Airport and the Taliban's bloodless entry into the Afghan presidential palace, our people's hearts are very confused….The Moon administration has a goal to convert the armistice agreement into a peace agreement following the 2018 Panmunjom Declaration. As the Afghan crisis demonstrates, I think that an unripe peace treaty without substantial denuclearization can be a double-edged sword that threatens peace. (Korean National Assembly, 2021a, p. 12)

Moreover, some South Korean right-wingers are concerned that the government's obsession with the policy of appeasement toward North Korea could stimulate the withdrawal of US forces from South Korea, abandoning its commitment to security on the Korean Peninsula, just like Afghanistan. As for the issue of whether it is the US's turn to withdraw from South Korea after Afghanistan started to arise, Cha (2021) emphasized that withdrawal from Afghanistan would never lead to withdrawal from South Korea. As a result, the Moon administration was forced to pay attention to the direction of public discourse in the wake of rising political controversy in Korean society after the Afghanistan crisis. As in the case of Afghanistan, it was argued that the Moon administration's hasty efforts to declare an end to the Korean War and a peace treaty with North Korea have a risk of making South Korea a second Afghanistan (M. Ha,

2021). In this sense, it can be said that the Moon government tried to calm the controversy by promptly emphasizing the need to protect "special contributors" amid growing criticism of its policy toward North Korea from right-wingers right after the Afghan crisis.

6. The Impact of Discourse on Policy and Legislation Outcomes for Afghans and Yemenis

6.1. Jeju Island vs. Incheon Airport: Why Did It Matter for Yemenis?

The discourses presented in this article led to very different policy and legislative outcomes for Afghans and Yemenis. The Yemeni crisis swiftly resulted in stricter Jeju border regulations. Originally, Yemenis were able to use a B-2 (tourist/transit) visa according to a 30-day visa-free entry policy to South Korea through Jeju Island (National Geography Information Institute, 2014, p. 497). This quickly became a source of outrage amongst citizens believing that Jeju's open visa policies left the country open to abuse by false and mass claims for asylum.

The Ministry of Justice quickly responded by enacting a series of orders: On 30 April 2018, Yemen was added to the list of countries banned from entering Jeju Island visa-free. From June 1st, Yemeni asylum seekers were forbidden from leaving Jeju Island, so they were unable to travel to the mainland. Lastly, on September 2nd, another 24 "risky" countries were added to the Jeju visa-free ban. Through these measures, the government tried to placate public fears of any further attempts from refugees to seek asylum in South Korea through Jeju Island. However, in practice, this policy did not work well, instead resulting in serious side effects. First of all, not all Yemenis had actually utilized the B-2 visa system; among 1149 Yemenis, 382 applied for a C-2 short-term business visa. Also, a key fact left out of the discourse about Yemeni refugees is that before 500 or so Yemenis landed on Jeju Island, 587 other Yemeni asylum seekers actually sought protection upon arrival at the border at Incheon Airport (Immigration Division of Ministry of Justice, 2019). Despite the intense reactions towards Yemeni refugees on Jeju Island, in reality, 48.8% of all Yemeni refugee applicants came through Incheon airport without any public backlash or negative reactions. This speaks volumes about Islamophobic attitudes in South Korean society that branded Muslim men coming through its borders via Jeju Island as system abusers as well as potential women abusers (Sheikh, 2021).

Furthermore, directly tackling anti-refugee discourse stating South Korean citizens did not want to support "healthy young men," the authorities granted Yemenis permission to work in restricted industries on temporary Humanitarian permits. Yemeni refugees also experienced several violations of due process during their asylum applications. Despite fast-tracking the asylum evaluation system for Yemenis, the Ministry of Justice later admitted that the Seoul Immigration Office often fabricated reports of immigration interviews conducted in Arabic. Furthermore, the courts judged that these screening interviews were too short, improperly recorded, and poorly translated with staff manipulating or mistranslating applicant responses. Eventually, all Yemeni applicants who had undergone screening in Arabic were offered an opportunity to reapply (NANCEN, 2018). In 2019, only four Yemenis received official refugee status and 647 were granted temporary humanitarian status. Among 1,071 applicants, only 864 were examined, 99 were re-evaluated, and 98 were still queued (NANCEN, 2020). Only 0.4% of Yemeni asylum applications were officially granted full refugee status (S.-H. Yim, 2021a). As a result, 425 Yemenis consisted of 83% of the year's humanitarian status gainers (Immigration Division of Ministry of Justice, 2019).

6.2. Conceptualizing Afghans as Teugbyeolgiyeoja

The Afghan case is extraordinary. Attempting to avoid a rehash of the debates about Muslim male refugees in 2018, the government labeled Afghans *Teugbyeolgiyeoja* (people of merit to the country). This strategy separated Afghans from other Muslim refugees in the public mind, as they accepted that Afghans contributed to South Korean missions abroad and were worthy of support.

We note that attempts were made to grant Afghans immigration status as *Teukbyeulgongnoja* (which also translates as "special contributor") from within the existing "persons of merit" system. However, the latter, granted by Presidential Decree, provides the holder with an automatic right to naturalization and is used in very rare, uncontroversial cases (S.-H. Yim, 2021b). Since the enforcement of the Korean Nationality Act of 1948, only nine foreign nationals hold this status. Avoiding the sensitive issue of giving Afghans the automatic right to naturalize over other foreign nationals who have also assisted South Korean missions, snap legislation was passed to create a "lesser special contributor" category—the *Teugbyeolgiyeoja*, defined as people of merit applied only to Afghans rescued in South Korea's evacuation mission in 2021 (J. Ha, 2021). Unlike the Yemeni's humanitarian permits, this status guarantees long-term residence, right to employment, and life security. Minister Park made a clear distinction between Afghan special contributors and other refugees:

> Refugees have to go through a complicated process of application and examination. But since these refugees are helpers who contributed to the Korean national interest in Afghanistan, they will be given more consideration in terms of living costs, settlement support, and education than [other] refugees. (J. Ha, 2021)

By constructing Afghans as "national heroes," the government was able to bring them into South Korea with little public opposition. Having learned from the Yemeni

refugee crisis that Korean society holds deep-seated Islamophobic attitudes which hindered the process of granting vulnerable Yemenis asylum, this strategy completely bypassed that negative discourse by emphasizing Afghan contributions to the state. Furthermore, it was emphasized that Afghans escaped from the same violent enemy that South Korea was battling with its US ally, therefore, the Muslim part of their identities did not come into question. Plus, creating a special category for Afghans helped the authorities to avoid repeating issues of screening interviews, flawed processes, corrupt staff, and humanitarian permits versus refugee status—all of which caused South Korea great embarrassment on the international stage. Creating distinctively beneficial circumstances for Afghans, 372 Afghanis were granted an F-1 (visiting or joining family) visa this year. This visa provides many advantages including stable residence, job-seeking support, and access to social services. Contrastingly, only ten Yemenis among 1,081 residents in South Korea hold the same status.

The gender composition of both groups is also likely to have affected visa status. The entire Yemeni community in question was comprised of 863 males and 218 females compared to 547 Afghan males and 290 females. Discrimination and differences established by visa type amongst both groups are notable. If we consider an additional 225 Afghans who arrived in Korea just before the evacuation mission in 2021, only 84 out of a total of 837 Afghans were granted a G1 (miscellaneous) visa on humanitarian grounds compared to 746 out of a total of 1,081 Yemenis. The majority of Yemenis are either G1–5 holders (refugee applicant/asylum seeker status) or G1–6 grantees (humanitarian status), restricted in their residency, opportunities to build a permeant life in South Korea, and barred from accessing many services (Immigration Division of Ministry of Justice, 2022). In the context of anti-refugee discourse, most importantly, the issue of public security was addressed clearly in the Afghan case. From this perspective, the authorities cherry-picked a handful of heroes from a place riddled with "dangerous" Muslims, selecting them for protection and training for a new life in South Korea. However, keeping them out of the refugee system also allows for policy changes and arbitrary deportation. In this way, Afghans and Yemenis share the same precarity as they are left outside the protections of the international refugee system, constantly subjected to the whims of political change and public discourse.

7. Discussion

In the line of Cresswell (2012), who emphasizes the need to link discourse with experience in the study of migration and refugees, and MacDonald's (2017) argument that media attention influences the social exclusion of young refugees, we have outlined a variety of discourses rooted in social, political, and legal concerns that are instrumental for understanding the different responses to Yemeni and Afghan arrivals in South Korea with long-lasting effects on their future lives.

Müller-Funk's (2018) proposition that the entire construction of Muslim refugees as a culturally inferior other is important when we consider how the South Korean government took great strides to soothe the fears of its people through oppressive and restrictive policies on Yemeni and Afghan refugees, emphasizing how the protection of Korean citizens was a top priority. Similarly, we can see how South Korea is constructed as a place with a unique and exclusive culture that needs measures to protect itself from outsiders, especially when those outsiders are perceived as risky Muslim men. Despite the broadly benevolent attitudes towards Afghans, they were still placed in closed facilities, kept away from society, and assigned tasks designed to reassure the South Korean public that the government are in control of potential security risks whilst simultaneously training the new arrivals on how to live "proper" South Korean lives. Little has been mentioned about the specific needs or traumas suffered by Afghans kept in closed quarters after evacuation or indeed about the Yemenis forced to sleep hungry in the streets of Jeju Island in the face of nationwide anti-refugee demonstrations in 2018.

In short, the Muslim identity of Afghan special contributors is downplayed in the discourse to ensure that the focus remains on their training as model minorities in South Korean society compared to Yemeni refugees who were wrongly accused of violence towards women on Jeju Island (J.-H. Lim, 2018) constructed as drug-taking, lawless foreigners with a religion that encourages backward behavior abhorrent to Korean cultural norms and values (Sheikh, 2020, 2021). As proposed by Ghorashi (2021), gender plays an important role here, outlining how refugee men are viewed as a "risk." Similarly, Hobbs (2021) highlights how male refugees are demonized based on masculinities, and perhaps most significantly, Olivius (2016) explains how refugee men are represented as potential troublemakers and perpetrators of violence and discrimination. Sheikh (2021) demonstrates how public condemnation of Yemeni refugees constructed them as cowards for "abandoning" their country, branded as parasites attempting to benefit from Korea's economic success by utilizing the visa-free system on Jeju Island. In doing so, we can see how Olivius's proposition that refugee men's masculinities are pathologized plays out in real life.

On the other hand, Afghans were spared much of this hatred, framed as people of merit, who had assisted the Korean mission in Afghanistan, contributing to their status as "heroes" rather than villains. Unlike the Yemeni situation, public discourse highlighted the presence of women and children amongst Afghan special contributors, further softening public reactions toward their arrival.

We believe that at the core of this discourse remains the problematic notion that masculinity, especially Muslim masculinities, equals threat. It is also

important to highlight that refugee women (Afghan and Yemeni) have been completely ignored in existing discourse. There is almost zero field access to the women who sought asylum in 2018 or 2021 to gauge their concerns or needs. In the line of Scheibelhofer (2017), the focus on masculinized Muslim refugee issues has allowed politics and negative stereotypes to create gendered images of difference, particularly, as Olivius (2016) argues, that problematic constructions of refugee masculinities represent men as violent wrongdoers. We propose that this positioning is clearly visible in the powerful mainstream discourse that framed Yemeni refugees as "fake" and "criminal" and Afghan special contributors as "heroes," shaping Muslim refugee issues in South Korea as primarily masculine.

8. Conclusion

This article examines the impact of social discourse on the different approaches to and outcomes for Yemeni and Afghan refugee issues. Yemeni refugees, subjected to gendered Islamophobic discourse were constructed as terrorists, sex criminals, and fake refugees, while Afghan refugees were constructed as national heroes. We propose the reasons for these disparities can be attributed to the following: First, long-standing Islamophobia propagated by right-wingers and fundamental Christian groups has contributed to a more hospitable social discourse towards Afghan refugees based on a mutual (exaggerated) fear of a Taliban-style takeover of South Korea. This allowed for a shift in policy where refugee protection was prioritized for Afghans, whereas in the Yemeni case, citizen insecurities took precedence. Second, from the political viewpoint of the South Korea-US alliance, Afghans were spared much of the problematic constructions of refugee masculinities, downplaying their Muslimness and framing them instead as people who had assisted South Korean national interests. Significantly, in attempting to avoid the social and legal controversies that arose with the Yemenis in 2018, the authorities took the unprecedented step of creating a completely new immigration category for Afghans. The handling of both cases emphasizes that Muslim refugee issues in South Korea are still a masculinized discourse, as backlash towards (Yemeni) refugees and support for (Afghan) refugees are both centered around the contributions, needs, and voices of men. Refugee women continue to be excluded from any meaningful discourse. It also indicates a continued discourse of distrust as Muslim, mostly male refugees continue to be assessed under alternate mechanisms rather than existing, functional refugee systems in South Korea.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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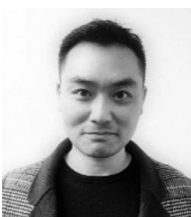
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