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Interview Series: "Global Deportation and Detention Regimes"
Organized by Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin

Interview with Shahram Khosravi

How can we make sense of today's deportations? What happens to people after they are deported? And how might we understand the politics of borders, as well as their implications for resistance and knowledge production in the present moment? To explore these questions, in the first interview of the "Global Deportation and Detention Regimes" series, we spoke with Shahram Khosravi in Istanbul in January 2026 about escalated migration enforcement, the political economy of deportations and detentions, and what it means to engage knowledge production on migration in dark times.

Shahram Khosravi is a former taxi driver and currently an accidental Professor of Anthropology at Stockholm University. He is the author of several academic books and articles, though he prefers writing stories. Khosravi has been an active contributor to the international press. He recently published two art books, *Waiting: A Project in Conversation* (transcript Verlag, 2021) and *The Gaze of the X-Ray: An Archive of Violence* (transcript Verlag, 2024), and has also produced two visual essays.

Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin: Hello Shahram, thank you so much for speaking with us. Let us start with a broad question: deportation and detention have been part of border governance for a long time. From your perspective, what feels different today? Are there any new trends or patterns that stand out to you?

Shahram Khosravi: I did study detention and deportation more than a decade ago. Then I became interested in knowing what happens to people after deportation. But I have not done research on detention or deportation in recent years. With a colleague in Tehran, I am writing an article about detention and deportation in Iran. There is little research on the topic in Iran and access to information is very restricted. But I think it's very important to know more about detention and deportation outside the Global North and to see how detention and deportation have also been exported to other places. So, for example, the Iranian state legitimizes deportation—and saying: “Look, they do exactly the same in Europe. So why are you always blaming us? Look what they are doing against migrants in the US.” So, I think, a part of the answer to your question is how much this model has been exported.

Another new thing is that people are increasingly deported to countries they are not citizens of. They are deported to third countries. Several hundred Venezuelans were deported to El Salvador. Trump paid El Salvador to receive the deportees, and then they put detainees in prison and, as you know, treated them very badly. And then after a few months, they are deported to Venezuela because the US and Venezuela had no connection, so they did it through El Salvador. So, this is new! We didn’t have it before! Or many Middle Easterners have been deported to Panama. The US paid Panama to put all these Iranians, Afghans, Iraqis in a hotel, locked in a hotel, and gradually Panama sent them to their own country. What is new is that deportation is more arbitrary, more money involved. It’s less regulated and transparent. During the Fall of 2025, hundreds of Iranians were put in airplanes and deported from the US, some of them were in the middle of the asylum process.

Detention is also growing in terms of number. In many European countries, detention centers are between 25 or 30 years old. And during the past 30 years, we see how we have more facilities and more spaces to put people inside. And they are not efficient; they are very expensive. For example, in Sweden, the cost to keep one person per day is about €550. This is about paying the rent, paying the employers, you know, all these costs. It’s very expensive to keep people detained without knowing if they can be deported or not. For example, if there are tens of thousand people in a detention center at any time through all the European Union, how much money is spent there? Can you imagine? And according to domestic reports, they are not working; it’s expensive. If I give you numbers from Sweden, for example, about 30% of all detainees are not being able to be deported. They are released after several months or years. So what is the point?

Before COVID, the largest number of detainees in Sweden were Somalians. But if you look at deportation figures from the same year, which people were deported from Sweden, you don't see Somalians among the first 20 groups. They kept a large number of Somalians in a detention center, while they knew that they could not be deported. So why did they do it?

Now, this is also a new thing, the current Swedish government has paid a lot of money to the Somali government to accept deportees, since the Somalian authorities refused to receive deportees without proper papers, documents. But now they collaborate with the Swedish government. Ten years ago it would be a scandal, and there would be a huge debate about it. But now, on the contrary, the Swedish government is very proud of that, saying: "Yes, we paid, and look, we are very successful in deporting people." So, this is also another change: something which was shameful before is not anymore shameful. Like Trump said, I don't know if you saw, when he met Zohran Mamdani for the first time in White House, "Don't worry," he said to Mamdani, "call me fascist if you want. I don't care." He doesn't care about being called fascist. This is the change we see.

I think another example of these changes is that we were always criticizing the asylum convention, the Refugee Convention, saying: "This is not working, we have to change it." Now we are defending it because it's under attack. We have moved from a critical approach to defending the Refugee Convention. We said before: "We need to change it, this is not working." And now: "No, don't touch it. We have to keep it as it is." So, yes, I think, we have gone from a regulated deportation, a regulated migration control, to something which is totally unregulated, unpredictable. It's very brutal. And it's a war, it's a war on migration! This is not migration control. This is a war on migration, which started from the US and now is coming to Europe. And also we see it, of course, in other places, too.

And also, if we think about deportation and war, how are they related to each other: in the summer of 2025 Israel and the US bombed Iran, the Iranian state reacted to that by deporting 1.5 million Afghans during a couple of months. It was a huge operation of mass deportation. And it was very much related to the war because they argued that

Iran cannot have so many undocumented migrants. Many of them were documented migrants. They collected also documented migrants and deported them. I think we should look at deportation and detention also in relation to, very much to ongoing wars and securitization, which is very different from securitization after the Cold War. What ICE is doing in the US is in the name of securitization of the American society. They say we have to do this, like killing an American woman, she was not even a migrant, but in name of security of the society. Last week, just two days before I came here (Istanbul), I went to a detention center to meet a woman. It was not research. She's a Russian woman put in detention. And she showed me all the documents in Swedish, and she doesn't speak Swedish. She cannot read Swedish. There is no translation, nothing. And the document said that because she had a PhD in physics, her research might be a risk for Swedish society. But she was not doing research. And this was from Swedish security police. Not a migration agency or ordinary police. This, of course, is very much about her being Russian. It's very much about the war in Ukraine. So again, all the changes you asked about are very much about a larger picture of imperial wars.

Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin: What you said about ending up defending the Geneva Convention while trying to critique it really resonates with us. We often joke that, in the end, it's also left to us to defend the existing system. But at the same time, we still see some of the alternative paths, great examples of resistance. What do you think?

Shahram Khosravi: Of course. But you know, the problem is that again, if we think in terms of disasters, the interval between disasters is so short. Before, for example, 30 years ago, it was a huge movement about "no one is illegal; stop deportation". They are not there anymore in the same way in Europe as we had before, say, 15 years ago. Not because people care less, but because people are occupied by other disasters like the genocide in Palestine. All forces are mobilized against the genocide. They don't have time for anti-deportation. I think that's the problem. But I believe that we have more resistance today than before. We have more critical voices today than before, but they are very much focusing on other disasters than deportation, such as the genocide. So, I see much less resistance against deportation and illegalization of migrants than before.

In the US, of course, it's different because of ICE. You can see how local neighborhoods are mobilizing, which did not exist before, but now we see how local communities are organizing and mobilizing resistance. Because what they have understood in the US, but we in Europe have not understood, is that this is not about migration. This is a war against society itself. What happened, for example, in Chicago, I don't know if you have seen, it was like a Hollywood movie when ICE attacked the neighborhood where El Salvadorian migrants live. It was like an action movie. This is not migration control. This is not the regulation of migration. This is a war. And they are doing also the same, but not in the same way, in Europe. Soon we don't have any right to asylum already in Europe. In the UK it's gone. In Sweden it's almost gone. So in the best case, the asylum seeker receives one year permission; after one year they have to apply again, apply again and apply again. And after four or five years, if there is no war in Syria or Afghanistan, they will say "go back".

Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin: So, they don't get any permanent status?

Shahram Khosravi: Not anymore. This is also new. No permanent residence permits. You are already deportable from day one. Like the UK did to itself by Brexit, Sweden is doing self-harm. This is very damaging to the economy of Sweden because now people who are deported are professional. After 10 years, 15 years working, they are deported. People who are deported are well-integrated. Employers are protesting, companies are protesting. They say: "We need these people." What is the logic of removing people who are already established in society? It is not even about economy. It is about something else. The only thing I can say is that it is about race.

Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin: In one of your articles,[1] you wrote about people who are deported—first stripped of their citizenship, then made deportable, sometimes even deported after 20 or 25 years. Often, they don't even speak the language of the country they're sent to, like from Sweden to Iran or Afghanistan. That really struck us. Deportability seemed like it had limits, but this shows how flexible—and brutal—those limits can be. It also challenges the whole migration myth: that one day you'd be naturalized, gain citizenship, and settle. But what we see all of a sudden is that they get your citizenship back and deport you!

Shahram Khosravi: Yeah. This happened before but was a rare incident. The case you mention was from Norway. Now Trump is talking about that and I'm sure it will be also in Europe that they will be possible to take back citizenship from people and deport them. In India, Muslim citizens are concerned about similar threats.

Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin: The same happened in Turkey. There was a Syrian activist who had been very active in politics from the very beginning. He gained Turkish citizenship and after a decade of moving to Turkey, last year, he was stripped of it and sent back to Syria.

Shahram Khosravi: And the reason was because of his activism?

Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin: Yes, for taking part in "provocative actions".

Shahram Khosravi: Yes, if you support Palestinians' liberation, you can be labeled as terrorists in Europe. But what you said about people who are deported to countries, this is also something new. For example, what we see now, this mass forced displacement in the Middle East started in the past four decades, four or five decades. Deportation is very complex. For example, Afghan nationals, now they are third generation in the Afghan diaspora outside Afghanistan. But when they are deported from Iran or Pakistan to Afghanistan, the country they never been to. So, this is also something new. People are deported to a country they have never been to.

So, maybe we need other concepts to understand what is happening. It's not deportation. It's maybe something what Ruth Gilmore called "organized abandonment".[2] So this is organized abandonment or transnational organized abandonment because people are abandoned not only in the country they are deported from, but also in the country they are deported to. Afghanistan is a very good example. Iraq is another one. Sudan, Somalia… So we see that deportation is not what governments or states in Europe want to put it, "going back home". Deportation is rather going from one abandonment to another abandonment. The only difference is the geographical location.

Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin: This idea of abandonment actually brings us to something you've worked on as well: what happens to people *after* they're deported, sometimes after many years. You described the situation[3] as one where they can't really become part of society because they're seen as a failure—part of a certain moral project of migration. So, how did migration turn into this kind of moral project, and how does its "failure" then translate into discrimination in the so-called countries of origin? And also, there's the whole economy of deportation. Given how ineffective and inefficient this whole system of detention and deportation is, it really makes one wonder—why do these countries, in late capitalism, keep doing it?

Shahram Khosravi: I think it's important to make a distinction between different cases. There's a huge difference between being deported to Afghanistan and being deported to Turkey. So, the question is not where people are deported to, but to what condition? The condition in Afghanistan is the condition of a society, destroyed by four or five decades of civil war and by foreign occupation. The poverty rate is up to 60% now, mass displacement—millions of people are internally displaced in Afghanistan. So, deportation, you see 1.5 million people are deported from Iran to Afghanistan, you can imagine what happens to Afghanistan? What happened to the Afghan economy? Who takes care of these people? I mean, the lack of infrastructure, the lack of civil society, the lack of many resources to take care of these deportees. And also, every single deportation is not about one individual because every individual is related to many other individuals. Every single deportation means the end of remittances. So, when 1.5 million people are deported, how many millions are affected economically when remittances are not arriving anymore?

Then you should also think about gender aspect. There is a huge difference between being deported as a woman and as a man. In Nigeria, for example, when women are deported, they are regarded as sex workers: “They deported you because you were a sex worker over there.” This is stigmatization and leads to discriminatory treatment of the deportees. Another gender related issue is that in some countries the police keep the female or minor deportees until male relatives come and take them. You can imagine what happens if the women had escaped from domestic violence. So, Europeans are sending them back to what they had escaped from. One case was an Afghan family deported from Norway some years ago, and the report by the police following them was that when they entered Kabul airport and at the moment they left the airplane, the man started beating the wife in front of everyone, including the Norwegian police. They didn’t do anything. They just came back leaving the woman with the abusive husband. What Norway did was just sent back that woman to the violence she escaped from.

We can talk about deportation in terms of trafficking and think about what is similar between trafficking and deportation. If you look at the definition of trafficking according to the UN you see elements of violence, coercion, and making profit. So, these three are main aspects and you see them in deportation too. There is a lot of money in deportation. There are many other actors than states involved in deportation who make a lot of money thanks to deportation. In Pakistan and Iran, deportees have to pay themselves for deportation. They have to pay for travel to be deported. So, an Afghan family, eight children, two grandparents—we are talking about 12 people. They need to rent a minibus. And these people do not have that money. So, there are people who pay that money, saying: “I take care of that money, but when you come to Afghanistan, you have to work for me for free.” This is trafficking. This is exactly the definition of trafficking! Thanks to official policies by Pakistani or Norwegian states.

I think if we, maybe going back to the resistance question, what we can do is ask this kind of question of how and when deportation started resembling trafficking. And then if we in societies in Turkey or in Sweden start saying: “Wow, my government is involved in trafficking in the name of deportation.” Trafficking very easily can mobilize people to save innocent women, who are believed to be abused as sex workers: “We have to save them.” So why cannot we do that for deportees?

Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin: In the context of Turkey, we’re not sure how much this kind of discourse might work. Migrant women are being killed unjustly, and yet neither the legal system nor society becomes any less racist—there’s not even a discourse of “protection” or “saving”.

Shahram Khosravi: No, I mean in Europe you have still this white feminism that’s saying: “We have to save non-white women.” And of course, in the end, they are not saving them anyway. Once a police officer told me that he was very shocked. He said: “When we go inside a place to save the victims of trafficking, women start attacking us.” He wondered: “We were there to save them, but they didn’t want to be saved.” I told him that they did not save them, because after the court, the women would be deported. Or even if they are not deported, they are asked to act as witnesses in court against the traffickers. And traffickers come from the same community as the women. So, the women acting as witnesses in the court put their own families back home in danger. The women and the traffickers usually come from the same country and same city or village. This is not saving.

We see this even in the US, in the north of the US, there are some detention centers that generate money from detainees. The wage for working a shift of eight hours is one dollar per day. Ruth Gilmore wrote about not only migration detention, but also incarceration as an industry. In Iran, the head of the detention center rents out detainees to local employers. So, a farmer comes in the morning, says: “I need 15 workers.” 15 detainees are given to him to work for free. But the employer pays the head of the detention center. The detainees generate money for the camp because the state's money is not enough. There is a lot of money there. Also, we should add human smuggling to the picture. In the case of deportation from neighboring countries, every single deportation can mean a new client for human smugglers. When 1.5 million people were deported to Afghanistan, it became a fiesta for all human smugglers because people wanted to come back to their families in Iran or to their jobs. They had property, they had something to sell. So, they paid human smugglers to come back. Human smuggling flourishes thanks to deportation.

Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin: What you're saying makes us think we really need new concepts. In one of his articles, Prem (Kumar Rajaram)[4] talks about the underbelly of capitalism—not the surface level of contracts, but the gray world of smugglers, traffickers, and so on. We used to think the state didn't feed that world, but what you're describing shows the deportation and border regimes are actually sustaining it. It says a lot about how the economic system itself has changed—we're operating in a different kind of capitalism, not just a different migration regime.

Shahram Khosravi: For example, smuggling in general is a good example. So why in this capitalist system, is one form of smuggling criminalized by law, but not others? Dubai and Singapore are now heavens for very advanced capitalism. They were created thanks to smuggling. They smuggled gold before becoming what they are now. Or the Iranian state, because of American sanctions, smuggling to Turkey, or Dubai, or you know… So we have official smuggling. We have an official port for smuggling because you cannot survive otherwise. Or what do you call Trump kidnapping the Venezuelan president? This is human smuggling, or what is that? This is also smuggling. So why are you punishing people who are helping migrants from Iran to Turkey or from Turkey to Greece?

Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin: It reminds us that debates around whether these people should be called facilitators, smugglers, or what they do should be seen as part of solidarity or human trafficking.

Shahram Khosravi: Yeah, we have smugglers who have been doing human smuggling not for money. We have, for example, in Tibet, we have monks smuggling people from China to Tibet to India to save them, not because of money, but because of Buddhism, because of faith. Kurdish activists—they did human smuggling because of their ethnicity, ethnic patriotism or ideology. We have human smugglers in North Africa who make a distinction between *haram* smuggling and *halal* smuggling. Haram smuggling is the smuggling of drugs and weapons because they harm people. But human smuggling is not harming anyone. It is *halal*. It's not harming; it's helping. How human smuggling is constructed discursively by states or in public debates is reductive, very simplified, and used as a tool in the criminalization of migration. I think our problem is a language problem. All these concepts are very problematic and perhaps we need new language to conceptualize what is happening today, because those concepts we are used to and we have been working with, they are state-centric ones and not helping us at all to understand the problem.

Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin: As your works have shown,[5] your experience with the border and the border regime(s) is fairly different from common academic engagement. How do you see the politics of borders vis-a-vis the politics of knowledge production of borders?

Shahram Khosravi: I think it started before I entered academia. I belong to a people in Iran called Bakhtiari, and anthropologists call us tribes, but they are not a tribe. Tribe is a very colonial concept. We can say they are the indigenous people of the Zagros Mountains. One aspect of life of indigenous people like the Bakhtiari was that we were always been outside the law or the law was used against us. So, I grew up with that knowledge, how to navigate the law, because the law is not there to protect us, the law is against us. I think, I just continued that way even in academia because I realized that the knowledge we produce and the knowledge, I am part of its production, is the very same knowledge which is used against people like me, first as indigenous people in Iran and then as a migrant in Europe. My reaction to borders is very much similar to the reaction to knowledge production because I see how they are part of the same oppression.

Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin: Our positionalities affect how we understand a lot, and what kind of knowledge we produce as well. Does your positionality provide another way of seeing the cracks of the system?

Shahram Khosravi: You know, the problem is we reproduce the same, maybe this is why I stopped doing empirical research, because I was not sure how to produce knowledge that cannot be used against migrants, and I am not sure how my knowledge production and bordering practices overlap. Again, language is very central here. Migration studies are full of metaphors, and in knowledge production we need metaphors. We need metaphors to make something which is not familiar, more familiar. We need metaphors to make something familiar and create a method to study that and to explain it. But the problem is that we forgot that they are metaphors. For example, integration is a metaphor: there is no such thing as integration in reality. What does integration mean? It's a metaphor to talk about a problem that we have some people who are outside society. We have people who need to be included in public housing, to find a job, etc. But when policymakers and academics talk about integration, they talk in a way as if people literally are outside the society and then we have to help them to enter into the society. It's a very misleading way to think. Or for example, in Europe, a category is "people with migrant background". It's also a metaphor. Or undocumented migrants. Paperless migrants. These are metaphors. The problem is when we create a fictional category based on the metaphor. We say there are 100,000 undocumented migrants here or there. And then we think we need a method to study them. And then we create a method and then through that method we create knowledge, a statistic or ethnographies or description. All based on metaphors. And we forgot that they were metaphors. Even the term "migrant" itself is a metaphor. There is no such thing as a migrant. Migrant is a metaphor.

The official definition of a migrant is a person who is outside her country of citizenship for one year or longer. But how can that definition make a person to be called migrant in 40 years or even in generations? We call a person student when this person studies at university. When finishing university, we don't call that person a student for the rest of her life. But we do it with migrants. A migrant is a migrant only in the context of migration bureaucracy. When you apply for asylum or waiting for papers, etc. It's bizarre to call someone a student for the rest of her because she was at university for three years. But we call people migrants when they are not any longer migrants. It is the metaphor that we forgot is a metaphor and we take it as social fact, as social reality. And it's very dangerous because we create something which is not existing and put a lot of… Can you imagine billions and billions of euros are put into integration programs, to solve a problem that is not existing, or a problem that is wrongly framed?

This is not knowledge production, this is "misknowledge production". In the past four decades we have produced a lot of knowledge about migration, more in the US and Europe, less in the Global South. In four decades, we have produced so much information, so much data. What are we doing with that? All this so-called knowledge, is it helping anyone? Perhaps it helps me to get a job but it's not helping the migrants. It's not solving problems migrants struggle with.

Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin: This actually connects to the talk we watched, the *Sociological Review* annual lecture, where you talked about doing migration studies in "dark times". First, on the methodological side, how to do it? And more reflectively, in the context you described, if the knowledge we produce doesn't really matter much for the migrants, then who is it for? Do we even need migration studies?

Shahram Khosravi: That talk was given at the University of Glasgow. One part of the question is, as you asked, for whom we produce knowledge, who needs migration studies? Many people need it. I mean, states need it, policymakers, activists, we, students, journalists need it. But not migrants. Migrants do not need migration studies. Very much like indigenous people, because what we produce, they already know. I give you one example. I don't know if I mentioned that in the talk or not, and this is one of many examples. There was huge research, quantitative research about name changing and access to labor markets. And it showed that if you change your Muslim sounding surname, you have more chance to find a job and then you have between 10 and 15% more income compared to those who did not change their name. Any kid with a Muslim name in Europe knows that. Any child from age 10 knows this, that her name is a problem in a racist society. So why put so much money, so many professors involved in four years coming to that knowledge, that even children already know? Go ask them, they will tell you! So, we produce knowledge that people already know, or they don't have any use of that. What can migrants do with this knowledge? I think it's important to think what kind of knowledge we should produce that can be useful also for migrants themselves. Who is the audience? Producing knowledge for policymakers to make a better policy? Or producing knowledge for migrants so they can survive borders?

I have been working with policymakers in Sweden for many years, for at least 20 years. And I, in the end, understood that there was no point; it is a waste of time because they have different questions. They are not interested in the answers coming from us. So, if I don't produce knowledge for policymakers, then I can produce knowledge for migrants. So they can defend themselves better against bordering practices, they can understand their situation better or put their individual experiences of borders in a larger context. To connect their isolated and individual experience to collective and historical experience.

Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin: Sometimes it seems that, rather than focusing solely on the experiences coming from migrants, we might need to focus on the structures themselves to understand how the system works. This could even help in dismantling the very settings that produce these experiences in the first place.

Shahram Khosravi: Yes, yes, definitely.

Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin: We enjoyed the conversation very much. Thank you so much.

Shahram Khosravi: Of course. Thank you.

Endnotes

[1] Khosravi, S. 2018. "Introduction." In *After Deportation: Ethnographic Perspectives*, edited by S. Khosravi, 1-14. Springer.

[2] Adler-Bolton, B., and R. W. Gilmore. 2022. "Organized Abandonment w/ Ruth Wilson Gilmore." *Death Panel*, October 6. https://www.deathpanel.net/transcripts/organized-abandonment-with-ruth-wilson-gilmore.

[3] Khosravi, S. 2016. "Deportation as a Way of Life for Young Afghan Men." In *Detaining the Immigrant Other: Global and Transnational Issues*, edited by R. Furman, D. Epps, and G. Lamphear, 169-181. Oxford University Press.

[4] Rajaram, P. K. 2015. *Ruling the Margins: Colonial Power and Administrative Rule in the Past and Present*. Routledge.

[5] Khosravi, S. 2007. "The 'Illegal' Traveller: An Auto-ethnography of Borders." *Social Anthropology / Anthropologie sociale* 15, no. 3: 321-334. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0964-0282.2007.00019.x.