

Imagine, for a moment, that your neighbour's house burns down.

What would you do for them?

Offer them your spare room, a place to sleep for a night or two?

And when would the welcome wear thin? After a week? A month? A *year*?

How about thirty-four years?

Thirty-four years ago, 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, precipitating one of the largest and most protracted refugee crises the world has ever seen.

Even today Afghanistan, a country wracked by war and instability, a country in which Australia has a vested military interest, continues to produce more refugees than almost anywhere else.

Now if you listen to the shock jocks of talkback radio, or even some of our politicians, you might be forgiven for thinking that every last one of those Afghan refugees is headed for Australia's northern borders, but the reality is most refugees end up living with the neighbours.

For Afghans that means, for the most part, Pakistan or Iran.

1979 was a big year for Iran. This was the same year the Shah, the king, was deposed and the Islamic Republic established. The new Iranian government welcomed the Afghan refugees in a spirit of Islamic brotherhood.

However, as Iran's identity has shifted from one tied up in notions of a borderless Islam to a much more familiar nationalist one, life, for refugees, has become increasingly difficult. From an open door policy the Iranian government has introduced and continues to refine a suite of harsh and often blatantly discriminatory measures designed to 'encourage' voluntary repatriation.

Policy is important it has real impacts and it shapes attitudes. But it's equally true that attitudes can shape policy. For this reason, I'm heading to one particular city, in the south of Iran, the city of Shiraz to explore how the relationship between Iranian hosts and Afghan guests plays out on the ground.

From me there'll be no treacherous border crossing. I'll be flying to Iran, passport in hand. And I know, from experience, that I, and my family, will be hosted with extraordinary generosity and goodwill. Indeed, Iranians in Shiraz pride themselves on their hospitality. But the everyday instances of harassment experienced by Afghans in the city indicate that for some the welcome is wearing thin. I'm going to be talking to and spending time with Iranians and Afghans in order to understand how rising hostility towards refugees intersects with an Iranian cultural imperative of hospitality.

When the neighbours come knocking, there or here, what sort of a welcome do they get?