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Our New Afghan Neighbors: The Challenges and Opportunities of Afghan Resettlement to Houston

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BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Last summer, the world witnessed the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, which led to one of the largest and most rapid humanitarian evacuation missions in U.S. history. As the Taliban reclaimed power, many Afghan people fled the country—some by foot to neighboring states and some via evacuation efforts led by the United States and its allies to be ultimately resettled abroad. The journey for Afghan evacuees has not been easy, as the majority of individuals were not flown directly to the United States but were instead sent to overseas air bases and third countries, making resettlement a long and arduous process.

Most of the Afghan evacuees airlifted from Kabul were taken to three main hubs located in Qatar, Germany, and Bahrain. Others were flown to temporary facilities in the U.A.E. and Kuwait and U.S. military installations in several EU countries.¹ While waiting at these various locations, Afghan evacuees went through security screenings by U.S. officials sent abroad to collect biometric and biographic information,² with varying wait times depending on the immigration status they were seeking to obtain. Once the evacuees received clearance, they were flown to eight military bases across the U.S., where they had to wait for months as their applications were processed before finally being resettled

in different states and communities with the assistance of nonprofit resettlement agencies. These agencies—which have scrambled to keep up with Afghan arrivals after their resources and personnel dwindled due to a lack of funding from the Trump administration—provide initial resettlement assistance, helping newly arrived refugees find housing, jobs, and access to public benefits like health care and food stamps.

THE SITUATION IN TEXAS AND HOUSTON

Texas has led resettlement efforts in the country, receiving almost 10,500 Afghan evacuees as of the end of February 2022. In many ways Texas is an ideal location to receive Afghan refugees³ due to the scale of its existing resettlement infrastructure and the presence of established Afghan communities, especially in Houston, which has received the largest number of Afghan evacuees (5,117) to date, followed by San Diego.⁴

Likely for these very reasons, *The New York Times* chose to resettle their former and current staff members from the Kabul bureau and their family members—124 individuals in total—to Houston. This group of Afghans was first evacuated to Doha with the assistance of the Qatari government and subsequently flown to Mexico City, where they underwent medical



10,500

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checks and COVID-19 tests and waited until arrangements had been completed for their resettlement in Houston.⁵ Once arrived, *The New York Times* partnered with Catholic Charities to provide the 26 families with accommodation. They also relied on donations, including food items and clothing, to assist them as they settled into their new homes.

Importantly, the arrival of Afghans—or any group of refugees—in a new community constitutes the beginning, rather than the end, of a resettlement journey. Once refugees have settled into their new environment, they still have to embark on an integration process that comes with its own subset of challenges, including finding employment, gaining access to and understanding how to engage with health care and education systems, learning a new language, and obtaining long-term residence status in the United States. And while refugees are incredibly resilient, many have faced traumatic and harrowing experiences while fleeing or en route to their new homes, meaning that they must confront these bureaucratic and legal challenges while also dealing with the strain of emotional and mental health difficulties.

CHALLENGES

Legal Pathways to Long-term Residency

Afghan refugees were resettled to the United States with different legal statuses. Some Afghan nationals who were employed by or on behalf of the U.S. government in Afghanistan or by the International Security Assistance Force for at least one year received a special immigrant visa (SIV), allowing them a pathway to legal permanent residency.⁶ However, the backlog in the U.S. immigration system and the speed of the evacuation resulted in the majority of Afghans—about 72,500—being admitted into the United States through humanitarian parole. Although parole allows for temporary lawful presence in the U.S. for two years, it does not provide a path to lawful permanent residence.⁷ This has been of great concern as Afghans will have to find different pathways to remain in the United

States. This may include applying for an SIV or asylum, which means they will have to contend with an onerous system that is already severely backlogged.

There is also the danger that Afghans may not succeed with the SIV process or asylum claims. Obtaining an SIV in the U.S. entails an extensive application process with steps such as obtaining a recommendation letter from a supervisor during their tenure in Afghanistan, with whom they may no longer have contact.⁸ In order for an asylum claim to be successful, the applicant must demonstrate that they individually fear persecution from the Taliban due to their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinions.⁹ Afghans may have a hard time demonstrating this since many of them destroyed or did not travel with documents linking them to the U.S. government due to fear of retaliation by the Taliban while evacuating.¹⁰

Last month, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security announced that Afghans residing in the United States without permanent legal status as of March 15, 2022, will be eligible to apply for temporary protected status. This will allow Afghans with expired visas or visas that are about to expire to remain in the country for 18 months, thereby protecting them from deportation, but failing to provide a long-term solution.¹¹ The best way forward is for Congress to pass the Afghan Adjustment Act, which would offer a straightforward path for Afghan parolees to apply for permanent residence one year after their arrival. This approach has been used several times in the past—for Vietnamese and other South Asian evacuees after the Vietnam War in 1977, Chinese refugees who fled communist China in 1965, and Cubans who fled after the Cuban Revolution in 1966.¹² Resettlement agencies, national security advisors, veterans groups, faith leaders, and local communities are all in support of passing the Afghan Adjustment Act, but Congress has been slow to act on this critical issue.¹³ Without a clear legal path forward, some Afghans may choose the risky option of returning to their home country, even as they face an uncertain future under the current Taliban regime.

Administrative Delays

Afghans in the United States have faced numerous bureaucratic hurdles, partly as a result of Trump-era cuts to personnel in offices such as the Social Security Administration and also due to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁴ In some cases, Afghan refugees have faced long delays in receiving access to public benefits like food stamps or having their identity documents processed. Some Afghans received their work permits but have had to wait several months to obtain a Social Security number. In other instances, they received their Social Security numbers but had to wait months for a work permit. In either scenario, delays regarding legal documents have added to the already stressful situation of attempting to establish work and become economically self-sufficient, which refugees are expected to do within three to six months of their arrival in the United States.

Integration

Social, cultural, and economic integration is necessary for refugees to be able to reconstruct their lives in a new location. One barrier to integration for many Afghans is gaining competency in the English language. Not all Afghans who resettled to the United States—or to Houston specifically—had prior English language training. While refugees should have access to English language classes through resettlement agencies, the focus on obtaining economic self-sufficiency within a short period of time means that resettled refugees are expected to prioritize employment over language learning. While some Afghan refugees who arrived right after the evacuation have been able to attend a handful of classes, others have been unable to enroll in courses at all.

Integration challenges are especially pronounced for Afghan women refugees. In line with cultural norms, the focus from resettlement agencies has been on assisting Afghan men with finding employment, but this has also meant that Afghan women are isolated in their homes—in many cases taking care of children—without opportunities to engage in language learning or to build relationships in their new

communities. In Afghanistan, children are raised in a more social and communitarian environment, and women have strong connections with family members, neighbors, and the broader community. After being uprooted and resettled to the United States, Afghan refugee women's social connections have been severed, and they are only likely to obtain information about their new environment from two sources: spouses and children who attend school. This isolation and precarity can compound over time and lead to mental health issues. It also puts refugee women at greater risk of domestic violence. Resettlement agencies, like Interfaith Ministries in Houston, have developed programs such as the Women's Empowerment Group that attempt to prevent the isolation of refugee women—including Afghan women and women of other nationalities.¹⁵

Unclear Future for those Still Outside the U.S.

The long waiting process for those who have not yet been able to travel to the United States has also frustrated many Afghans who have been stuck on overseas military bases or in third countries for the last seven months. For example, in February 2022, hundreds of Afghan refugees staged peaceful demonstrations at a camp in Abu Dhabi in opposition to a lack of information about the resettlement process from the U.S. government.¹⁶ As a result of this frustration and without any clear answers about a timeline for resettlement, 300 Afghans opted to return to Afghanistan in March 2022, despite fears of retaliation from the Taliban.¹⁷ The U.A.E. currently hosts approximately 12,000 Afghan refugees—among whom are journalists, judges, prosecutors, LGBTQ+ rights activists, and religious and ethnic minorities—but it is not clear that these individuals will ever be deemed eligible for resettlement to the United States due to alleged security concerns.¹⁸ Instead, after visiting the U.A.E. camps in March 2022, American officials called on other countries to take in the Afghan refugees currently stranded in the U.A.E.¹⁹ The U.S. government is eager to look for alternative options before the issue strains ties with Abu Dhabi.

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CONCLUSION

Afghan refugees face numerous challenges in their resettlement and integration processes, from the trauma of leaving their lives behind to language barriers, administrative constraints, unclear or absent pathways to lawful permanent residency, and isolation, especially for women. Despite these challenges, resettlement also brings new opportunities.

Afghans who worked for the U.S. government or affiliated non-governmental organizations were particularly vulnerable to retaliation under the re-established Taliban regime. Despite the trauma and hardship of resettlement, a new life in the United States offers a safe haven and the ability to construct a new life without the immediate threats of arrest or violence. Building a new life in the United States will also provide Afghan women with a very different future, even as they navigate the challenges of isolation and adapt to new social norms. Women's rights in Afghanistan are once again being severely curtailed under the current Taliban regime, demonstrated by the government's decision in March 2022 to indefinitely close girls' high schools. In contrast, Afghan women and girls resettled to the United States will be able to access education and work in any sector of their choosing.

Lastly, resettlement is not only beneficial for refugees but also for the communities that host them, as they contribute to the cultural diversity of American society and fill gaps in our labor market. Cosmopolitan cities like Houston have witnessed first-hand the benefits of welcoming refugees. From the cultural renewal of neighborhoods to the development of innovative restaurants, enterprises, and community organizations, refugees are a boon to our city and nation. It is therefore an honor to once again welcome our new Afghan neighbors.

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