

Afghans Who Bet on Fast Path to the U.S. Are Facing a Closed Door

Only a handful of applications for entry on urgent humanitarian grounds have been processed, and most have been denied.



By Miriam Jordan

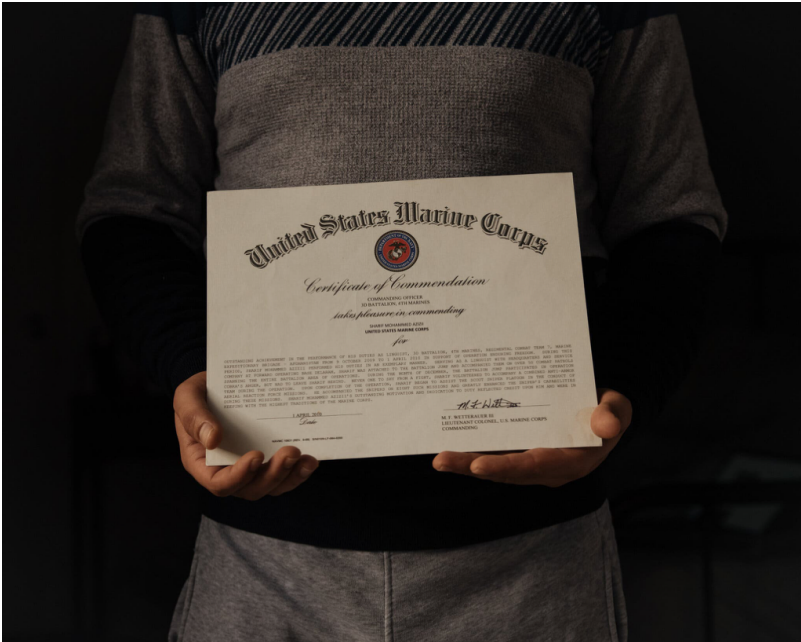
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LOS ANGELES — As a combat interpreter in Afghanistan, Sharif Azizi helped U.S. Special Forces hunt down Taliban targets, even after suffering leg and chest injuries from stepping on a land mine. When his life was threatened by the insurgents, the United States acknowledged his eight years of service and in 2017 brought him to safety in Los Angeles.

Last year, when Taliban fighters seized Kabul, they came looking for his mother and siblings. Unable to make it through the throngs amassed at the airport as the last American flights were leaving, the family fled to Pakistan. U.S. security officials who had helped arrange their exit papers assured the family that it could apply for a program designed to expedite entry into the United States for people facing emergencies. Months after submitting their applications, they received the response from the U.S. government: Denied.

“All the certificates of commendation I received, all the promises we got, it feels like a big lie,” said Mr. Azizi, who currently lives in San Jose, Calif. “They just leave my family and basically say, ‘That’s done. We don’t care.’”

Thousands of Afghan allies who narrowly missed being evacuated, and who have been living in hiding in Afghanistan or illegally in neighboring countries, have counted on a program known as humanitarian parole to reach the United States. But half a year since the frantic U.S. withdrawal, most remain stranded, either because they have been denied entry or are still awaiting the outcome of their cases.



Mr. Azizi received a certificate of commendation from the U.S. Marine Corps for his help with combat operations in Afghanistan. Lauren Segal for The New York Times

Of the 43,000 humanitarian parole applications the agency has received since July 2021, it has processed fewer than 2,000. About 1,500 had been denied and 170 approved as of Feb. 11.

The Department of Homeland Security uses parole authority to allow certain people or groups to legally enter the United States without a visa, which can take months or years to process. It has been utilized in the past to provide safe passage for large numbers of people out of conflict zones where the United States had military involvement, such as Vietnam and Iraq, as well for others in vulnerable situations, including Cubans and Central American minors.

After the hurried pullout from Afghanistan, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services agency received an avalanche of applications from Afghans who had not managed to board an evacuation flight. But only one out of eight whose cases have been adjudicated thus far has won approval, raising questions about how many people will be admitted and whether the program was ever a realistic option.

“The primary difference between these people and all the people who the U.S. airlifted is that these people were not able to shove their way through the crowds at the airport,” said Kyra Lilien, director of immigration legal services at Jewish Family & Community Services East Bay, a nonprofit in Concord, Calif., that is resettling Afghan refugees.

The agency has collected millions of dollars from applicants who pay a \$575 fee to file, but processing has been sluggish, leading to frustration and worry.

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“This was supposed to be a flexible mechanism for Afghans who supported the U.S. mission and have provided ample proof of danger to their lives,” said Steve Brozak, 60, a retired lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Marine Corps who hired an immigration law firm to prepare the applications for the Azizi family.

The agency said it had increased fivefold the number of adjudicators reviewing applications, given the surge in filings. Before the Afghan crisis, about 2,000 people a year applied for humanitarian parole, and 500 to 700 were approved, often for urgent medical treatment or to visit a dying relative.

“Humanitarian parole is not intended to replace established refugee processing channels such as the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, which is the typical pathway for individuals outside of the United States who have fled their country of origin and are seeking protection,” the agency said in a statement.

Under the refugee program, it takes several years for people to be admitted to the United States. It also takes many years for legal U.S. residents, like Mr. Azizi, to sponsor their families for admission.



Mr. Azizi, right, with other Afghan interpreters on a U.S. military mission in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. Sharif Azizi

For many of those waiting for emergency approvals, an association with the U.S. mission has made it impossible for them to remain at their homes in Afghanistan; they are either in hiding or are living illegally in other countries, in danger of being sent back.

“The refugee resettlement program is overwhelmed and lacks resources because of all the cuts the prior administration made,” said Steve Yale-Loehr, an immigration law professor at Cornell Law School who directs an Afghan law clinic that has filed dozens of parole applications, none approved so far.

In the statement by Citizenship and Immigration Services, it said the agency had been granting parole when warranted. “In some limited circumstances, protection needs are so urgent that obtaining protection via the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program is not a realistic option,” it said.

The bar for qualifying is very high as the government tries to determine which applicants are in genuine imminent danger and which could wait to apply for ordinary refugee status. Applicants must provide documentation from a credible third-party source that specifically names the targeted person and details the potential harm that person faces. Lawyers helping applicants file the claims said the standard was higher than what is generally applied to parole applicants and would be very difficult for most people fleeing a country in conflict to meet.

“This criteria makes it nearly impossible for the vast majority of cases to be granted,” said Ms. Lilien, who has received 13 denials on the applications she has submitted and is waiting for decisions on an additional 78, almost all of which were filed before mid-September.

A letter sent on Tuesday to the Homeland Security secretary, Alejandro Mayorkas, and signed by more than 200 representatives of legal-service providers, resettlement agencies and university law clinics called on the Biden administration to establish a streamlined, efficient system to bring vulnerable Afghans to the United States.

“While the military evacuation efforts ended with the withdrawal of U.S. troops in August 2021, at-risk Afghans’ dire need for protection has not,” the letter said.

“In keeping with its promises, the administration must act with urgency to utilize all tools at its disposal, including parole, to provide protection from persecution and violence in Afghanistan due to the accelerating human rights and humanitarian crisis,” the letter said, citing extrajudicial killings, disappearances and other human rights abuses.

It pointed out that after the fall of Saigon, the United States established a parole program to swiftly evacuate more than 140,000 Vietnamese refugees.

A majority of the 76,000 Afghans evacuated during the U.S. pullout were admitted on arrival with humanitarian parole, many of them people who might also have qualified for special immigrant visas issued to people who had worked directly for the U.S. forces, like Mr. Azizi, or for refugee status after performing jobs that advanced the goals of the U.S. mission.

Mr. Azizi said the Taliban had come searching for his family members after they abandoned their home. Soldiers had questioned the neighbors about their whereabouts and left a notice that ordered the family to report to Taliban headquarters upon its return, he said.



Afghans gathered in a field outside one of the entrances to Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, Afghanistan, as U.S. troops evacuated the country in August. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

Mr. Azizi's mother, Sima Barakzai, had been employed as a U.S. contractor as a cook, according to documents she submitted as part of her application. His sister, Sharareh, was trained and recognized by the U.S. Agency for International Development for her work to promote women's rights, and her parole application, also reviewed by The Times, included a photograph of her shaking hands with Ashraf Ghani, the former Afghan president.

In all, four family members had been issued an exit pass by U.S. military authorities in Afghanistan that entitled them to board U.S. evacuation flights, but they were unable to get through the gates at the airport in Kabul before the last flights departed.

As weeks turned into months without any decision on their applications, Mr. Brozak, the retired military officer who was aiding them, enlisted the help of Senator Bob Menendez of New Jersey, who personally reached out to the Homeland Security Department, which oversees Citizenship and Immigration Services, on the family's behalf. To no avail.

On Jan. 27, the family members were dismayed to receive denial letters. A form letter, which did not address the particulars of their cases, stated that parole was granted to people "at risk of severe targeted or individualized harm" in the country where they were located, or who risked imminent return to a country where they would be harmed.

In Pakistan, they are leading a precarious existence, unable to work to support themselves and trying to stay under the radar because of their illegal status. They have had to move four times.

During an outing to buy food recently, Mr. Azizi's 19-year-old brother was beaten up by people demanding bribes to refrain from reporting the family to authorities.

Mr. Azizi, who has been working as an Uber driver while taking computer science classes, said he had put his life in California on hold as he devoted himself to assisting his family.

"My heart is in so much pain. What will life be worth for me if I lose a member of my family?" said Mr. Azizi, weeping during an interview.

"I participated in big military operations. I risked my life for this country," he said. "But it just abandoned my family."

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