

**National Security** Foreign Policy Intelligence Justice Military

# Thousands of Afghans were evacuated to the U.S. Will America let them stay?

By [Abigail Hauslohner](#)

Today at 5:00 a.m. EDT



NEWARK, Calif. — On the day Kabul fell, Taliban fighters scouring the city for government loyalists arrived at the home of Mohammad Khisraw Noori and executed his brother-in-law. In an instant, his family's comfortable — if fragile — existence was shattered, in tandem with the political system they and thousands of others had helped to build over 20 years of U.S. occupation.

The killing set off a frantic bid to escape, leading Noori and eight of his family members to a pair of overcrowded one-bedroom apartments here, 25 miles south of Oakland. They were among the more than 76,000 Afghans evacuated to the United States last year as the war in their country came to an ignominious end for the U.S. side. Months later, many continue to struggle as the resettlement system responsible for supporting them labors under the extraordinary caseload.

Advocates, lawyers and even members of the Biden administration say the groups tasked with helping Afghans start over in the United States are overwhelmed by the volume of those in need. There are too few caseworkers. A nationwide shortage of affordable housing has compounded the challenge, forcing agencies to place many of the Afghans in extended-stay hotels.

Most Afghan evacuees fled with few, if any, belongings. Some were separated from immediate family members in the chaos. Many remain deeply traumatized.

Then there is the larger, looming crisis that military veterans groups and refugee advocates are urging Congress to consider. About 95 percent of those brought to the United States were admitted under what the government calls humanitarian parole. It is a temporary legal status allowing them to live and work in the country but only for two years.

The Department of Homeland Security has said that Afghans who arrived in the United States by mid-March also are eligible to apply for temporary protected status, another reprieve from deportation that immigration attorneys say is more redundant than helpful.

Those hoping to stay long term must apply for a permanent designation, such as asylum or the Special Immigrant Visas reserved for individuals who aided the U.S. mission in Afghanistan. It's a far more tenuous path through costly and complicated legal processes, with years-long backlogs and no guarantee of success.

Noori, who shares the small apartment with his wife, Waghma, and their children, ages 6 and 3, said he feels nothing but gratitude toward the U.S. government for airlifting his family out of danger and into this safe new existence. "Now," he explained, "I wake up in the morning and I feel human. It's like a new window of hope."

He is trying to stay optimistic that everything else — green cards, Social Security cards, a job — eventually will work out.

## The escape

Noori never intended to leave Afghanistan. At 35, he had done well for himself and his family. After working as an interpreter for the U.S. Embassy and then for U.S. Special Forces, he started his own logistics business.

In the year before the U.S. withdrawal, his company had supplied furniture to a member of Afghanistan's parliament; laid concrete for a sidewalk in Kabul; provided shoes, clothes and office plumbing to the city's traffic police; and fueled cars used by the Kabul mayor's office.

His late brother-in-law, Abdull, worked as a driver for Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, who fled Kabul just before the Taliban completed its takeover Aug. 15. (The family requested that Abdull and his widow, Shakila, be identified only by their first names, citing fears that relatives who remain in Afghanistan could be targeted by the Taliban.) Noori, Abdull and their families shared a house, living a prosperous middle-class lifestyle. After Abdull was killed, Noori gathered a few possessions and — with his wife, her sister, Shakila, and the two families' seven children — began the long journey to escape Afghanistan.

“I just grabbed as much as I could,” Noori said of the documents detailing his service to the U.S. government. Waghma and Shakila hid the papers beneath their clothes as the family fled. “Because the Taliban, if they found me with these documents, I’m sure they would just throw me from the fifth floor,” he said.

Shakila’s and Abdull’s older son, Esmat, had immigrated to the United States a year earlier, marrying into an Afghan American family in Fremont, Calif. After the assassination of Esmat’s father, Esmat’s wife, Manaz, and her parents tracked down veterans and former officials to help guide Noori and his group first into a succession of safe houses in northern Afghanistan, then, weeks later, onto an evacuation flight to Qatar. The family spent a month at a U.S. base there, a few weeks at a base in Virginia, and still several more weeks in the home of Hashima and Ahmad Hakimi, Manaz’s parents.

Noori and his family moved into the apartment in Newark on Jan 1. Shakila and her four children took up residence in another within the same gated community of taupe rectangular buildings across the street from a Pentecostal church. The Hakimis had found the units, co-signed the leases, and paid the first month’s rent.

Thus far, everyone but Noori has Social Security numbers and work permits. It has become the subject of nervous jokes in their family, as Noori — the only English speaker in the group — is also the de facto patriarch and presumed breadwinner.

“They’ll be sending you — just you — back to Afghanistan,” the others teased him one night.

But like many others in their position, Noori and his family face a deeply complex legal situation.

## ‘The challenges are extreme’

Although Congress has in past decades approved legislation to fast-track green cards for other large populations of political refugees, including for Cubans in the 1950s and Southeast Asians in the ’70s, lawmakers have yet to approve a similar measure for Afghans.

Advocates, including military veterans groups that worked behind the scenes to facilitate the evacuation of Afghans with whom U.S. troops served in combat, warn that without an “Afghan Adjustment Act” to provide them green cards, those rescued are at risk of a years-long bureaucratic struggle that few can afford. Equally worrisome, advocates say, those who fail in their asylum bids could lose their work authorization and become “undocumented immigrants” subject to deportation.

“To not act to address the ... uncertainty that they face is just adding insult to injury,” said Krish O’Mara Vignarajah, the president and chief executive of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service. “Our only plea is: to every political leader who stood up in August and said, ‘We must meet our pledge to these people,’ that there’s consistency, and that they also say we must provide refuge, which means permanent resettlement in the U.S. Because otherwise, we’re forcing them into statelessness.”

A number of Republican lawmakers have balked at the idea of fast-tracking permanent residency for the Afghans brought to the United States. Sen. Josh Hawley (R-Mo.) introduced a bill that would require the Department of Homeland Security to vet every evacuee all over again, including fresh biometric screenings and in-person interviews. The initial vetting process was flawed, Hawley and other Republican senators have said, and they worry that dangerous people were allowed into the country among the evacuees.

Hawley’s office did not respond to a request for comment. To date, the bill has no co-sponsors.

Many combat veterans have grown frustrated with the lack of action in Congress. “Six months ago exactly, these people were telling us they ‘would do anything to support veterans in this cause.’ Whatever we needed, they were ‘right there’ with us, they were ‘just as appalled,’ ” Matt Zeller, a senior adviser to Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) and a founder of the nonprofit group No One Left Behind, said in February. “I don’t understand how six months later, there’s this new paradigm where we suddenly have concerns about these people.”

Zeller and others also say the Biden administration has shown a lack of urgency, both in visa processing and in facilitating further evacuations for thousands — including former military interpreters — who were left behind. “There’s almost a sense from the administration that they just want this to go away,” he said.

The White House and the State Department declined to discuss the matter on the record, but officials, speaking on the condition of anonymity and citing internal policy, disputed such assessments. A State Department spokesperson said the administration “has directly facilitated the departure of approximately 7,000 individuals” since the end of August — a figure that includes U.S. citizens and green-card holders. Officials also said that since Biden took office 14 months ago, the administration has quadrupled the number of staffers responsible for processing Special Immigrant Visa applications, reduced processing time from more than two years to less than one, and issued nearly 9,000 of the visas to Afghans.

Last fall, Congress authorized for Afghan evacuees all benefits typically extended to refugees, including federal housing, food and medical assistance, plus Social Security numbers and work permits good for two years from the date of their arrival. But in practice, the administration of those benefits has hit obstacles.

“They have a large caseload to work through. And we know the resettlement agencies, they’re trying to serve these clients at the same time that they’re trying to hire,” said a senior Biden official, noting that the resettlement system was downsized during the previous administration to a capability of handling about 10,000 refugees a year. Seven times that figure arrived in the span of only a few months.

“We’ve been pushing from here for the Afghan Adjustment Act, which would allow those that came in under parole to change to special immigrant status, which is less paperwork than the asylum cases,” the senior Biden official said, but, “obviously, people that fled a war zone like Afghanistan [would] have a strong claim for asylum.”

Spojmie Nasiri, an Afghan American immigration lawyer, said she is alarmed by what she characterized as critical gaps in support. “I’m hearing stories from people in Airbnbs and hotels, and the case workers are not responding,” said Nasiri, who is based in Northern California, a region that officials say has absorbed thousands of evacuees.

Nasiri said she has encountered Afghan husbands unsure of how to work and care for their children after their wives were left behind in the chaos at the Kabul airport, and wives with no English language skills or work experience whose husbands were unable to escape. She has met with several people who have no clear concept of what humanitarian parole means, and she knows there are far too few immigration lawyers to help them.

“The challenges,” she said, “are extreme.”

It’s unclear how Noori’s extended family would have fared so far without the support of Hashima Hakimi and her relatives. In addition to their leases, Hakimi, a social services worker, registered the family with the local resettlement agency, Jewish Family & Community Services, and helped sign them up for food stamps and federal health care. The Hakimis helped the Nooris buy furniture, too; enrolled the children in school; and found free evening English classes for Noori’s wife and sister-in-law. When illnesses arose, she directed them to nearby clinics.


Her daughter Manaz helped file Special Immigrant Visa applications on the family’s behalf, but an automated response indicated that the documents submitted were incomplete. The family is confused by the process, they said, and hopes the resettlement agency will help them sort it out, but so far that help has not come.

Kyra Lilien, the legal services director at Jewish Family & Community Services-East Bay, said the nonprofit is “stretching to serve five times the number of clients we usually represent in one year.” She also worries that the new temporary protected status designation has added to confusion. For most Afghan beneficiaries, TPS will make little difference, expiring around the same time as the humanitarian parole that affords them the same benefits, Lilien said. Applying for TPS also is expensive without a waiver. According to U.S. Customs and Immigration Services, a family of five with two working adults can expect to pay more than \$1,200 in fees.

For Noori, the wait to receive his Social Security card, which he needs to find a job, has made him increasingly anxious.

“I feel really bad about Hashima paying my rent. They’re spending money on us,” he said. “But they have their own lives, too. I have to work. I want to stand on my own feet.”

By [Abigail Hauslohner](#)

Abigail Hauslohner is a roving national correspondent, writing on subjects ranging from racial justice to Islam, immigration, the coronavirus pandemic and political extremism. She covered the Middle East as a foreign correspondent from 2007 to 2014, and served as the Post's Cairo bureau chief.  [Twitter](#)