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Thousands of Afghan families remain severed after messy U.S. exit

They were torn apart during the frantic race to escape Afghanistan's collapse. The Biden administration has no clear path to reunite them.

By [Abigail Hauslohner](#)

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SAN JOSE — The last time Fowzia saw her husband, she was suffering an asthma attack in the dusty mayhem outside Kabul's airport. He had shoved his way through the crowd to reach her, his face caked in grime and fear. Seconds later, an ambulance whisked her inside.

Fowzia and her daughter wound up on an evacuation flight the following day. U.S. service members coordinating the operation assured them, she said, that the rest of their family would soon follow. The Washington Post is identifying her and others only by their first names to protect their families from reprisal.

The Biden administration brought more than 76,000 Afghans to the United States last year as part of the U.S. withdrawal. Thousands more who wanted to flee, many of them American allies who aided the 20-year war effort, were left behind as the Taliban completed its violent takeover. Fowzia's husband, four of their children and four grandchildren are among those unable to escape.

The administration says reuniting Afghan families like Fowzia's is among its foremost priorities, as U.S. officials continue to negotiate evacuations — the administration calls them “relocations” — from Afghanistan despite the lack of any diplomatic or military presence there.

But neither the State Department, the Department of Homeland Security nor the Pentagon possesses data accounting for the number of Afghans brought to the United States through Operation Allies Welcome, as the resettlement effort is called, who remain separated from immediate family. Advocates estimate the figure could stretch into the tens of thousands.

The administration is “working on a solution” for allowing Afghans to “better notify” the State Department if they have immediate family members in need of relocation, a spokesperson for the agency said on the condition of anonymity, citing internal guidelines for speaking with the media. Officials declined to say how many Afghan families that were split during the U.S. withdrawal have since been reunited, though it's unclear whether the U.S. government is collecting such data.

Fowzia's family made plans to flee Afghanistan weeks before Kabul fell, she said. They had secured short-term visas to India, which they hoped would serve as a safe stopover destination on their way to permanent refuge.

They drove from their home in Mazar-e Sharif, in northern Afghanistan, to Hamid Karzai International Airport in the capital, just as the Taliban seized control of the city. “It looked like the day of judgment,” said Sodaba, Fowzia's 24-year-old daughter, who escaped along with her mother. “Everybody was just trying to flee.”

Violence, dehydration and mass panic made the path to escape perilous. Taliban guards beat and shot at people trying to make their way inside the airport. U.S. forces and Afghan paramilitaries fired over people's heads, and used tear gas and flash bangs to hold people back. Those most desperate waded through sewage canals outside the complex and attempted to scale its exterior walls. Children were trampled. A suicide bombing on Aug. 26 killed 170 Afghans and 13 U.S. service members.

A subsequent investigation of the bombing, conducted by the U.S. Army, noted that American military personnel tasked with securing the airport routinely encountered Afghans at the gates who had been separated from family members.

‘Sorry, the gate is closed’

Over two-plus weeks in August, the U.S. military made 387 evacuation flights, it says. Other nations' militaries and multiple commercial carriers brought thousands more to safety, a feat the Biden administration heralds as the largest noncombat evacuation in U.S. history.

“The thing was: It was chaos,” said Rona Popal, executive director of the Afghan Coalition, a nonprofit in Fremont, Calif., that assists Afghan immigrants and refugees.

For many, luck alone determined who escaped — and who did not. Some men who worked for the Afghan security forces were offered spots on flights out, or were asked to assist in the evacuation of people and sensitive equipment, before they had time to collect their families, advocates say. Others deemed it too risky to bring young children to the airport, electing instead to leave them in the care of their wives, hopeful they would be able to join them later. A number were beside their child or spouse one minute — and without them the next.

California, Texas and Virginia together have accepted roughly half the total evacuees, with California taking in more than 8,300, many of them drawn to large existing Afghan communities in Sacramento and in the Bay Area, the state government said.

Here in northern California, hundreds of Afghans are trying to start new lives. But in interviews, those who remain separated from loved ones described the enormity of that challenge in the absence of their spouses and children.

Parwin Husseini, 35 and a mother of four, is fortunate in one sense: A local pastor and his wife are allowing her to stay rent-free in the basement apartment of their home in Modesto. Without such generosity, she might still be in the motel where the resettlement agency placed her, or homeless.

But she has no idea how she will survive in the long-term — financially or emotionally. Husseini's husband and two young daughters were left behind. "I kept asking them, 'Please bring my husband, please bring my children,'" Husseini said, describing the sense of dread upon realizing that only she, one daughter and her 19-year-old sister-in-law made it inside the airport. "They said, 'Sorry, the gate is closed.'"

Now, during rare glimpses of her kids over FaceTime, they keep asking her: "Mom, when are we going to come? When are you going to come here?"

"I don't have an answer," she said.

Husseini, who was pregnant at the time of the evacuation and recently gave birth to a baby boy, said she asked the local resettlement agency how she could get the rest of her family out of Afghanistan. "They said you have to wait until you get a green card," she said — a status that immigration experts said could be years away, as Husseini has yet to apply for asylum in the United States, and does not know how.

Those separated from family during the evacuation also included some 1,400 Afghan children who eventually arrived to the United States without their parents. The Department of Health and Human Services, which is responsible for unaccompanied minors, said most have since been placed with "vetted family members and sponsors." More than 200 remain in government custody or in foster care, officials said.

Last year, a report by [ProPublica](#) documented suicide attempts, abuse and self-harm among unaccompanied Afghan evacuee children in the government's care. Parents who arrived without their young children also described feelings of despair. In one case, an entire family found themselves inside the Kabul airport without their baby, after they handed him to a U.S. service member. The infant has since been located in Kabul. The

rest of the family is now in Michigan.

‘What about my kids?’

Fowzia’s household consisted of 18 people, and they arrived at the airport together, she said. They were a middle-class family. And while no one worked for the U.S. government directly, they enjoyed the way of life that American influence facilitated throughout much of Afghanistan. One son was a lawyer; another a journalist. Her son-in-law was an activist who took part in demonstrations against the Taliban and Afghan government corruption. Her daughter Sodaba, who rode with Fowzia in the ambulance during her asthma attack, was studying law and working for Afghanistan’s Independent Election Commission.

Five members of the family ultimately escaped on two flights. The second carried Fowzia’s other daughter, Parwana, her husband, Sultan, and their toddler.

Their experience outside the airport was treacherous. For a week and a half, the family sought to enter but saw their progress thwarted at turns by the U.S. troops and the Taliban, and the sheer force of the crowd. Once inside the airport’s outer barrier, they slept on the ground, huddled beneath scraps of cardboard. There was no food or water. There were no toilets.

The family lost all of their luggage and several lost their shoes, including Fowzia. Sultan, her son-in-law, recounted struggling to protect his wife, Parwana, who was seven months pregnant, “because everyone was pushing, pushing.” At one point, she realized she was holding just the handle of her purse — the purse itself had been ripped free.

At a hospital inside the airport complex, U.S. service members gave Fowzia oxygen and urged her and her daughter to accept spots on an evacuation flight, they said. “What about my kids?” she pleaded.

“You need to take care of yourself, and you need to think about your own life right now,” Sodaba remembers an American answering. “They will come eventually. Don’t worry.”

Sultan and his wife and toddler made it into the airport the following day — also because of a medical emergency. The child had begun vomiting and was treated for severe dehydration. They, too, said they were assured “your family will eventually come” as U.S. personnel encouraged them to claim seats on an outbound flight. When they landed at a military base in Qatar, a TV was airing news of the suicide bombing.

“What would have been the point of trying to get to America if my dad was killed?” Parwana said, crying. Fortunately, the rest of the family was far enough from the blast to avoid injury.

‘Everyone has an excuse’

Since the withdrawal ended Aug. 31, the Biden administration says it has been able to move about 9,000

more Afghans out of the country. For the past two months, such relocations have occurred at a rate of about 350 people per week, according to a U.S. government official familiar with the ongoing efforts who, like others, spoke on the condition of anonymity citing internal policy.

Some advocates for the Afghans said they remain confident in the government's efforts. "Family reunifications are happening and they're tracking it," said Shawn VanDiver, founder of the #AfghanEvac Coalition, a network of military veterans, national security and intelligence experts, nonprofits and others that meets regularly with the administration.

"Anyone who was separated as a result of the [evacuation] is a priority," he added. "The challenges here are: How do you prioritize? How do you decide who is on flight one versus flight two?"

But many separated Afghans and their attorneys have complained about the lack of a clear process for extracting those left behind. They have grievances with President Biden, too, because he recently created a program to facilitate the swift relocation of refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine but has not taken comparable measures to aid those left behind in Afghanistan.

Afghans and their advocates say that, if they get any response at all to their pleas for help, it is typically the notification that a person has been placed on "a list."

"They say, 'I'm really sorry about your wife and daughter, but we can't do anything for them right now,'" said Ahmad, a former Afghan government official who arrived in California with his two sons, ages 9 and 2. His wife and 6-year-old daughter were left behind. "I have filled out every form. ... I have emailed maybe 200 organizations," including members of Congress, government agencies and the White House, he said. "Everyone has an excuse."

Among those interviewed for this report, most said they were unaware reunification was a potential near-term option; resettlement agencies have told them to focus on their own immigration paperwork first, and if they obtained green cards, they could someday apply for family visas.

Husseini, who has grappled with months of survivor's guilt, worries that might come too late. She and her sister-in-law have used their limited cash assistance from the U.S. government to send two wires of \$200 to her husband and two young daughters, but her husband — a former government employee — is out of work, and they, like other Afghans, are going hungry.

"He doesn't have a job, they don't have money, they don't have food," she said. The family is part of an ethnic minority that has been targeted by the Taliban.

"My children are alone there. My baby is a newborn. I need my husband here," Husseini said.

Starting over

For months, Fowzia and her family shared a small hotel suite at an Extended Stay America in San Jose. There

was a queen-size bed and a pullout couch, a bathroom and a kitchenette. Local volunteer groups had equipped them with a coffee maker and clothes, and for Parwana's new baby, a portable crib, diapers, baby formula and toys.

Of the 12 Afghan families housed at the hotel, half were in similar circumstances: separated from loved ones who were left behind and struggling to start over without them, said Zuhul Bahaduri, whose nonprofit, 5ivepillars, has been assisting them.

Some, including a father who arrived with his 5-year-old son, are quite distraught, she said. Although the boy has been enrolled in school, he is "having a lot of trouble adjusting," Bahaduri said, and both father and son are suffering from depression. "He sees the other kids with their mothers, and he comes home and he asks his dad: 'Why isn't my mom taking me to school?'"

In May, Fowzia's family moved out of the Extended Stay into a two-bedroom apartment. But it's too expensive, and now they're struggling to find another they can afford with their temporary federal assistance and the \$200 a week that Sodaba earns from her part-time job at Burlington Coat Factory. Sultan, who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, has been unable to find a job that doesn't require heavy lifting or long periods on his feet.

The financial struggle is compounded for single parents who arrived alone with small children, Afghans and advocates said. "Right now I don't have any job because there is no one to watch my baby," said Ahmad, who is living in Los Angeles. He has inquired at local day cares, but they charge hundreds of dollars a week. "My wife and daughter are in Afghanistan, and I have to support them, too. ... They need to get groceries. I will do any job I can find," he said.

In video calls over FaceTime, Ahmad's wife cries whenever she sees their toddler, he said, because while she wants to see him, she can't bear it.

Fowzia and her daughters last spoke to the rest of the family in Afghanistan a few weeks ago. Her two youngest sons have fled to Iran, fearing trouble with the Taliban, after the militant government detained the youngest, a 16-year-old, she said.

And in Modesto, Hussein's doctor has urged her to stay positive for the sake of her newborn. "But I can't," she said.

"As a mother, I should be very happy that the baby is healthy. But my happiness will come when my husband and my children are all together."

Farkhanda Omar and Nariman Nevin Khattak in California contributed to this report.