

# Utah Wants To Help Afghan Refugees Prosper. Will the Federal Government Get in the Way?

The federal government set the tone on the beginning of the resettlement process. It continues to keep legal status for certain evacuees out of reach.

[Fiona Harrigan](#) 7.14.2022 8:00 AM



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For Azim Kakaie, Utah felt like home from the very beginning.

The mountains in Salt Lake City look like the rugged terrain of his hometown in

central Afghanistan. Kakaie assisted U.S. forces during America's 20-year war there, becoming eligible for an American visa through his service. He diligently researched the best place for his family to settle before picking Utah, sold on the state's economic opportunities, low crime, community values, and those familiar mountains. "It was my first option, my first choice to come to Utah," he says.

Kakaie and his family had to leave Afghanistan much earlier than anticipated. The Taliban took control of the country in August 2021, and Kakaie knew he would be in direct danger because of his service to the United States. He couldn't leave the Kabul airport grounds to retrieve his family—he was working there as an air traffic controller—so he boarded a plane bound for Qatar and later traveled to Washington, D.C., visa in hand.

His family got out too, but only after multiple days of attempting to get to the airport gates. They were stranded in the thick crowds of civilians trying to flee, unable to squeeze forward, and they were beaten by the Taliban until their bodies were covered in bruises. After they were finally able to show their visas to an American soldier, they got into the airport. Terrorists [carried out](#) a bombing at the gates just 30 minutes later, [killing](#) as many as 170 Afghan civilians and 13 U.S. troops—including the man who had helped Kakaie's family reach safety.

Kakaie was the first Afghan evacuee to be resettled in Utah. Since then, the state has [accepted](#) over 900 Afghans. The majority of them live in Salt Lake City, with smaller numbers peppered throughout the state.

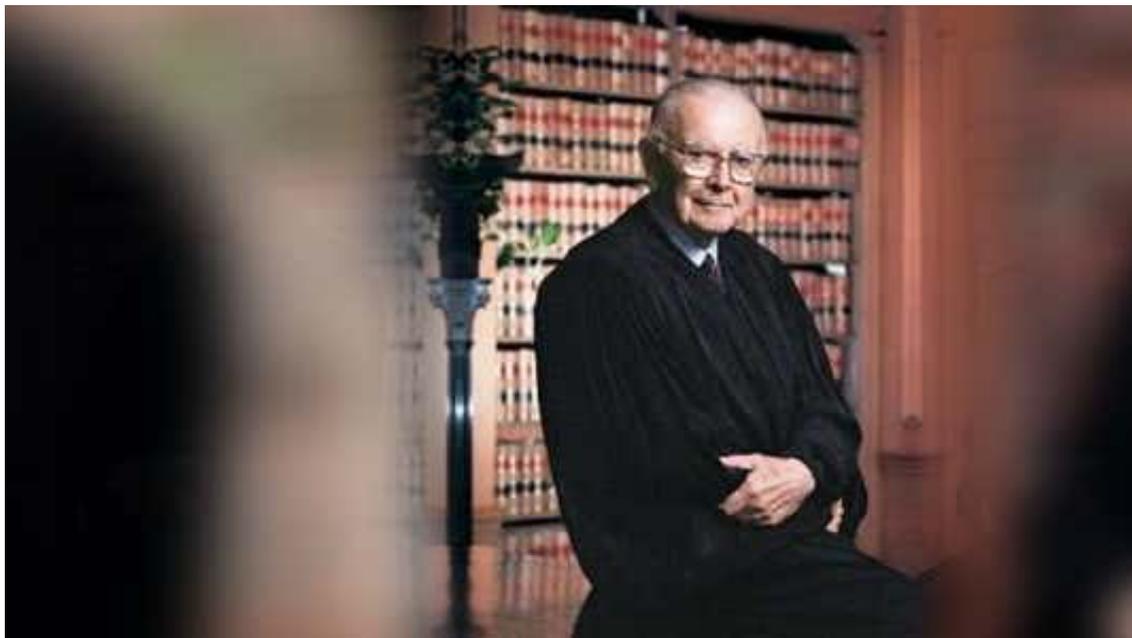
Overwhelmingly, they've been welcomed. From the governor's office to the state's many volunteers, Utahns have offered a helping hand. Local businesses provided meals for new arrivals and donated tables and chairs to help furnish their homes. One family even [donated](#) their house to new

Afghans. Kakaie says that everyone he met in the early days had something to give.

One might not expect such a reception from the [second-most](#) Republican state in the country. Nationally, the GOP has become more hostile to immigration over the last decade, with just 14 percent of Republicans [polled](#) last September by *The Economist* and YouGov saying that immigration makes the U.S. better off. A whopping 55 percent said it makes the country worse off. Just one-quarter of Republicans [felt](#) that the U.S. should offer asylum to civilians fleeing Afghanistan.

But since Kakaie and other Afghans landed in the Beehive State, bills seeking to improve refugee integration and accommodation have passed both chambers of Utah's Republican-dominated government with [unanimous](#) or [near-unanimous](#) support. Government officials, nonprofit leaders, volunteers, and refugees themselves tend to say the same thing: The state was more than willing to welcome Afghans.

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Readiness was a different story. Though Utah's refugee resettlement network functions well, Afghan evacuees arrived in the state in great numbers and without much warning. Volunteers and state officials had to scramble to match the pace of the federal government's civilian evacuations, which were conducted at the eleventh hour and ended up straining the state's systems.

And Afghan refugees in Utah—many of whom are there under a temporary immigration status—don't know if they'll be able to keep what they've built in their new home if the federal government doesn't lay out a tenable pathway to permanent residency or citizenship.

Utah's refugee situation shows how difficult it is to make space for even the most sympathetic immigrants in some of the most culturally and politically welcoming parts of the country: Even as Utah's GOP-led government has welcomed Afghan refugees, lawmakers in Washington have blocked or slowed the resettlement process by failing to provide for permanent resettlement options, leaving refugees in a state of legal limbo.

## **A State of Refugees**

Tension between Utah and the federal government is nothing new. Utah as a state sprang from such tension, having been founded by members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who were fleeing religious and political persecution.

Church founder Joseph Smith was [arrested](#) in New York multiple times in the 1820s and 1830s, many charges directly tied to his nascent religious group. Church members migrated to Ohio, where Smith was [tared and feathered](#) in 1832.

The Latter-day Saints once again fled westward. By the time they arrived in Missouri, the persecution had turned violent: The governor [issued](#) an "extermination order" in October 1838, directing state authorities to expel or kill LDS faithful. A state militia soon [carried out](#) a brutal massacre that saw 17 Latter-day Saints killed.

In 1839, Smith went to Washington, D.C., to "obtain recompense for losses sustained" by the Latter-day Saints in Missouri, according to a contemporaneous [news report](#). He met with President Martin Van Buren, but upon presenting a list of atrocities committed against his people, the president reportedly [told](#) Smith, "I can do nothing for you."

Hurt and newly militant, Smith returned home—by then, in Nauvoo, Illinois. After [ordering](#) the destruction of an anti-LDS newspaper's printing press, Smith was arrested. While detained and awaiting trial, a mob murdered him.

His followers fled yet again, this time on a brutal 1,300-mile journey [westward](#). Thousands of LDS pioneers died from the 1840s to the 1860s, [according to some estimates](#). But, the story goes, Smith's successor Brigham Young knew the pioneers had found their home when they reached the Great Salt Lake. "It is enough," he [said](#). "This is the right place."

Settlers in the Utah Territory believed the land's isolation would protect them from government hostility. But the pioneers soon clashed with the federal government as polygamy and theological rule in Utah began to chafe Washington. President James Buchanan [ordered](#) U.S forces to the Utah Territory in 1857 to quash perceived disobedience. Though the ensuing Utah War did not lead to significant casualties, it did [result](#) in lost autonomy for Utahns, Young losing the governorship, and eventually the Utah Territory falling under federal control.

That history of forced migration and subjugation by various governments continues to shape Utah's politics and civil society in astonishing ways. The LDS Church's pro-immigration message isn't newfound activism, nor is it a response to any one presidential administration's policies. Empathy for the displaced and persecuted is simply baked into the Church, and Utah governance more broadly.

In 2015, as Syrians fled their home country in droves and arrived in Europe, the Church [donated](#) \$5 million and committed an additional \$5 million to help the displaced. Then-Gov. Gary Herbert [said](#) his state was ready to accept Syrian refugees. He was the [only](#) Republican governor in the country to do so—30 Republican governors declared they wouldn't.

Members of the Church opposed former President Donald Trump's "Muslim ban," recalling the time when the U.S. secretary of state [tried](#) to [ban](#) LDS immigration from Europe. When the Trump administration was driving national refugee resettlement numbers to historic lows, Herbert wrote to the president requesting that more refugees be resettled in Utah. "Those experiences and hardships of our pioneer ancestors 170 years ago are still fresh in the minds of many Utahns," Herbert [said](#) in 2019. "We empathize deeply with individuals and groups who have been forced from their homes and we love giving them a new home and a new life."

"Even when there was national rhetoric that was not in support of refugees, Utah and our governors have always stood strong," says Asha Parekh, director of the Utah Refugee Services Office. "In Utah, we've seen really universal support."

When Governor Spencer Cox first heard that Utah could help resettle Afghans, he [called](#) an emergency meeting of the refugee advisory board last year. Members of the board identified core areas to be addressed in order to best serve Afghans: a housing shortage, closer engagement with the refugee community, and basic needs like funding for necessities.

Parekh's office and the state's resettlement agencies hired translators to serve as points of contact between communities and identified affordable, safe housing for newcomers. They established the Afghan Community Fund, a public-private partnership, to help centralize donations from Utahns.

"There's a lot of public dollars that are supporting many aspects of resettlement and integration, but there are these gaps," Parekh says, such as driver's education, some immigration fees, and furniture for new apartments. "That's what the private money is used for."

Inside the state, support for Afghans has been bipartisan. Parekh recalls a day in the state Capitol when her office and some refugees were in attendance. "It didn't matter, Democrat or Republican. Everyone was standing and cheering them."

That level of support is largely echoed by the population. Utahns turned out in great numbers to give Afghan refugees couches, beds, and their own time. Volunteerism is a distinct advantage Utah has over other states, holding the top spot nationally with [51 percent](#) of residents volunteering annually. "We have over 350 volunteers," says Patrick Poulin, executive director for the International Rescue Committee in Salt Lake City. "It just speaks to the caring

spirit of the people of Utah and it makes such a difference to have that many people helping and providing that human connection with refugees."

## "We Are So Grateful To Be Here"

Even as Kakaie's family was trying to escape Kabul last August, it was a Utahn who offered a helping hand.

Kakaie had already made it out of the country by then, but his wife and other relatives were trapped in the throng of people outside the airport gates waiting for seats on an evacuation flight. They attempted to reach the entrance multiple times over the course of a week and a half, at one point getting beaten by roving Taliban fighters who were camped out along roads to the airport and terrorizing civilians.

After waiting outside the airport gate all night, Kakaie's family braved the route again and pushed toward U.S. service members. Kakaie's wife Shazia held her visa up and caught the eye of Taylor Hoover, a marine from Utah. He shuffled her and the other family members to safety and helped them enter the airport.

Hoover was [killed](#) just 30 minutes later in a suicide bombing carried out by the Islamic State of Khorasan Province. Twelve other U.S. service members and as many as 170 Afghan civilians [died](#) in the attack.

Three mementos now hang on the wall in Kakaie's sitting room: an American flag, a collage featuring photos of each U.S. service member killed that day, and a large portrait of Hoover. "That's why the United States is the United States," he says. "They have these people."

It was difficult at first. Kakaie had to wait months before his resettlement agency could find him a suitable rental unit. He bought a car but had to save up money for repairs, waiting over an hour to catch a bus to work in the

meantime. Much of his family remained trapped in Afghanistan, or were being vetted on military bases in Germany and the U.S., while he was busy creating a new life for them all in Utah.

His wife, mother-in-law, brother, and brother-in-law arrived in Utah on November 1. They've since moved to a new apartment. They've made friends with locals, both immigrants and native-born Americans. All of them have steady jobs with the exception of Shazia, who is now caring for an infant son born this spring in Salt Lake City—a U.S. citizen. The family jokes that even he wanted to get away from the Taliban.

Kakaie feels a certain kinship with the Latter-day Saints, comparing their historic plights to the persecution his particular ethnic group has faced. The Hazaras, Kakaie explains, were forced to flee to the mountains in Afghanistan's interior, just as the early Latter-day Saints journeyed across America for years before finding a home in the western foothills of the Rocky Mountains. The rugged terrain kept both groups remote—and comparatively safe, out of easy reach of their national governments and prejudiced countrymen.

Kakaie still has family members waiting on visas to come to the United States. Food is scarce and finances are precarious in Afghanistan. He worries about the state of children's and women's rights under the new regime. Now that the Taliban has [barred](#) girls from attending school beyond the sixth grade, he's trying to help coordinate homeschooling cohorts to fill the gap.

But Kakaie is constantly taking stock of what he can now do and what he no longer has to fear. "You're free to go wherever you want to go. There is no limitation for you for education," Kakaie explains. "They're amazing people, all of them. Stores, hospitals—wherever we go, the people are super nice."

## **"A Lot of Complexity and Challenge at Every**

## Step of the Way"

It was never really a question that the U.S. could end up having to evacuate thousands of Afghans before fully withdrawing troops from Afghanistan if it hoped to make good on its promises. Twenty years of war there involved on-the-ground support from a bevy of interpreters, engineers, drivers, and other Afghan helpers.

By virtue of their service, the U.S. government guaranteed them a unique visa pathway—the special immigrant visa (SIV)—to come to America. SIV application backlogs still [numbered](#) in the tens of thousands by the time the U.S. withdrew from Afghanistan. Many Afghans had [waited](#) in line for years, fearing Taliban [retribution](#) in the meantime.

That's to say nothing of the countless other Afghans who didn't assist the U.S. and nonetheless hoped to flee, and had extremely limited immigration options to do so. There was clear demand for an escape route. But President Joe Biden claimed otherwise.

"I know there are concerns about why we did not begin evacuating Afghan civilians sooner," he [said](#) on August 16 last year. "Part of the answer is some of the Afghans did not want to leave earlier, still hopeful for their country. Part of it because the Afghan government and its supporters discouraged us from organizing a mass exodus to avoid triggering, as they said, a crisis of confidence."

Biden spoke against the backdrop of a desperate six-week mass evacuation that would eventually see [124,000](#) Afghan SIV applicants and other civilians airlifted to safety. In a single 24-hour period toward the end, 21,600 people were [evacuated](#), a sign of the flood made inevitable by federal delays. Over [76,000](#) Afghan evacuees came to the United States to be processed on

military bases and then dispersed throughout the states. Evacuating vulnerable people primarily in the twilight of America's conflict in Afghanistan may have saved face with the doomed Afghan government, but it introduced uncertainty for the Afghans who would be evacuated and the states that would soon receive them.

Utah previously had the luxuries of prep time and a steady, predictable flow of newcomers. But this required an emergency response. "We received 612 refugees in about a three-and-a-half-month period, which is equivalent to receiving maybe 2,000 in a year. Sometimes we were given 24-hour notice," Poulin explains. "It puts both the strain on the staff, the capacity to serve that many people...but it also really taxes the rest of the system."

Due to the large number of Afghans arriving so quickly, Poulin says that many interactions became "very transactional." Resettlement workers and case managers couldn't devote nearly as much time to developing relationships with refugees as they normally do. From health care to schools to housing, systems were strained.

"It created a lot of complexity and challenge at every step of the way," says Parekh. "The system hasn't been able to respond in the solid ways that we do with other populations. Everything has happened at a slower rate."

Utah's resettlement system has largely regained its footing after the initial shock caused by the federal government's last-minute evacuation efforts. But national lawmakers have failed to outline a way for nearly half of the Afghan evacuees to permanently stay in the United States. Though over 36,000 came to America as holders of or applicants for SIVs, which [grant](#) lawful permanent residency and a pathway to citizenship, another 36,000 came to the country under [humanitarian parole](#). That status allows them to live and work here only on a temporary basis.

"They're given two years of humanitarian parole, but there's kind of an immigration issue of what is the pathway for them to remain and to move toward citizenship," says Poulin. "That's a question that I think nationally we have to answer."

A potential answer came in the form of the Afghan Adjustment Act, a series of measures [debated](#) in Congress that would grant permanent protections to Afghan evacuees. Though no standalone bill containing them has been introduced, the Biden administration [asked](#) Congress to include them in a Ukraine-directed spending bill. But the provisions were ultimately stripped and opportunities for passage in another format look slim before the midterms. Congress has previously [passed](#) adjustment acts for refugees from Vietnam, Hungary, Cuba, and many other countries. Without such an adjustment, Afghans face the unfortunate dilemma of having no safe country to return to, but no place to legally call a lasting home.

"The Afghan Adjustment Act is something that I'm a big proponent of," says Danny Beus, executive director of the Cache Refugee and Immigrant Connection (CRIC), a nonprofit in Logan, Utah. "It would really take away that waiting game for the people that are here. It's really important that that get passed. But that's asking for Congress to...do something."

## "This Is the Right Place"

Now that the initial rush of refugee resettlement has slowed—rental units have been filled, newcomers are employed, and those early social lifelines have been established—relationships are truly starting to flourish. The emergency dynamic necessitated by the federal government's rate of evacuations has given way to a far more symbiotic one. As Utahns turn out to help Afghans, Afghans are striving to put that help to good use.

Katie Jensen runs the English Language Center of Cache Valley, which provides refugees and other immigrants with lessons on English, citizenship, and basic needs. It's based in Logan, a somewhat smaller and more conservative town than Salt Lake City, where most Afghan evacuees have landed. Though she's run into some isolated criticism for her work with immigrants, she says it's been "overwhelming, the outpouring of everything when they arrive."

Evening classes at the center are packed with eager newcomers attending classes. She's seen the lives of volunteers transformed—as well as her own—to witness people working so hard in their new home after going through terrible trauma. "Other people might know what a hard time they're having, but I feel it with them and it has changed my life."

Beus' organization has been changed, too. It had never helped with refugee resettlement before but stepped up when it became clear that resettlement agencies' capacities were strained. "We resettled 18 people really in like a month," he says. "We'd never done that before. We didn't necessarily know what we were doing. We just wanted to help people and figured it out." All of the new Afghans CRIC serves now have full-time jobs that pay at least \$20 per hour, and they're getting connected with language instruction and local schools. Given the outcomes, it's something Beus hopes to keep doing.

"I think Utah's always going to be a good place for refugees," says Jensen. But a major question still casts a shadow on all this success: Will the new Afghans be allowed to stay in Utah?

The federal government set the tone on the beginning of the resettlement process. It continues to keep legal status for certain evacuees out of reach. National lawmakers have demurred on a status adjustment for the Afghans whose paths to citizenship aren't clear-cut, and they may make them wait

longer still for a definitive answer.

It's been almost a year since Kakaie left Afghanistan. He now has a car, a job, a baby, and all sorts of dreams for what his family might accomplish in their new home.

I asked him how he felt the first day he woke up in Utah, knowing he was safe from government persecution and Taliban abuse. He inadvertently echoed what Brigham Young said when he knew the Latter-day Saints had found their lasting home, away from the angry mobs and intolerant politicians, looking out on the Great Salt Lake: "This is the right place."