

# Canada, Not U.S., To Resettle Some Afghan Religious Minorities

It's been a year of uncertainty for Afghan religious minorities who escaped their homeland and hoped to find refuge in the United States after the Taliban took over. But in the past week, some have received encouraging news, although it's not exactly what they expected.

Canada is accepting at least some religious minorities who have been languishing for a year in temporary housing in the United Arab Emirates, according to a U.S. government source familiar with the plans and nonprofit refugee advocates in regular contact with some of the stranded refugees.

While it's not the path to the freedom they'd envisioned, those refugees on track to leave the UAE facility are ecstatic for the safe sanctuary. Still, questions remain.

It's unclear how many of the approximately 1,500 Afghan religious minorities who sought a temporary safe harbor in the UAE will ultimately find refuge in Canada. Details on how the relocation and resettlement will work and when flights will leave are even hazier. Will there be family sponsors or churches and mosques in Canada ready to help them transition? Will refugees be granted work visas and a path to citizenship there?

And exactly why is Ottawa stepping in to help these persecuted people when the United States has a long tradition and commitment – including laws on the books – to provide safe harbor to those facing religious persecution in foreign countries?

The State Department is not saying whether it has decided to bar more religious minorities without work-related connections to the U.S. government

from resettling in the United States. But faith-based liberty advocates are reading between the lines, concerned about the messages the U.S. appears to be sending.

The agency has repeatedly reiterated that religious persecution alone does not qualify Afghans for P-2 status, a priority visa program reserved for those who worked with U.S.-based non-governmental organizations.

In a statement to RealClearPolitics, the State Department noted that the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program accepts referrals for refugees determined to be particularly vulnerable but said that those applying for that status must first be referred through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, a U.S. embassy, or a few private non-government organizations that work closely with the U.S. government.

The UAE, however, is not allowing UNHCR representatives into the country, shutting down a significant channel for refugee referrals, according to sources familiar with UAE policies.

## **How Did Afghans Escape to the UAE?**

Amid the United States' and NATO's chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan last year, the UAE agreed to house and feed some 12,000 Afghan evacuees in what became known as the Emirates Humanitarian City. UAE's monarchy consented to provide the emergency assistance with the understanding that it serve as a temporary facility lasting roughly 90 days while the United States processed the Afghans for resettlement.

At the time of the agreement, the Emiratis had no reason to fear that the U.S. would back out of the deal, leaving the refugees stranded.

The U.S. government had approved and even facilitated the private chartered

flights of the Afghans to the UAE, working with charities and veterans groups who vetted the Afghans, with the State Department approving every flight manifest. Mercury One, a humanitarian group started by conservative media personality Glenn Beck, raised tens of millions of dollars to pay for the private flights.

The group cooperated so closely with the U.S. government that Mercury One flew the Afghanistan national girls soccer team to safety, along with another planeload organized by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. The group also provided seats on its chartered planes to dozens of Afghan commanders who worked directly with U.S. Special Operations forces, as well as the safe passage of 25 war crimes witnesses the Defense Department wanted to protect, The Dispatch [reported](#) in late August.

But the flood of Afghan refugee applicants over the last year strained U.S. immigration and refugee agency resources, creating a backlog of cases for the tens of thousands of refugees – either those evacuated to so-called “lily pads” in foreign countries like the UAE or those still stuck in Afghanistan – and anyone who didn’t manage to make it onto U.S. military planes that left Kabul before the last U.S. troop departed.

Many of the more than 76,000 Afghans the U.S. military airlifted out during the frantic evacuation were not the most vulnerable populations and lacked proper vetting before arriving at military bases across the United States last year.

## **U.S. Pledges To Help Relocate All EHC Refugees**

The State Department insists it is working vigorously to help resettle those Afghans who helped evacuate but who remain stranded abroad. An agency spokesman told RCP that the U.S. has relocated more than 10,000 people from EHC to the United States and is working with other countries, including Canada, to help relocate some 2,000 others who remain in limbo.

The statements, while encouraging to refugee groups, aren't easing the heightened tensions among the refugees who remain in the UAE. The final flight authorized by the U.S. government from the EHC facility left on Aug. 17, and the U.S. ended consular services there with plans to wind down American engagement sometime this month, according to U.S. advocates who have continued to monitor the Afghans' cases.

For those refugees remaining at EHC, the U.S. pattern of disengagement is all too familiar, raising new fears that they will remain in indefinite limbo within the UAE, where they are denied citizenship, have few rights, and are regularly harassed and discriminated against for turning away from the predominately Sunni Muslim faith.

The worst fear for religious minorities at EHC is that the Emiratis will tire of supporting the camp and deport them back to Afghanistan, where they are considered apostates and will likely face a death sentence.

The State Department has pledged not to let that happen but so far has ignored repeated pleas by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, and numerous advocates to give those facing religious persecution special priority P-2 visa status or humanitarian parole.

"The United States has so far facilitated the onward relocation of more than 10,000 people from EHC to the United States, and we are continuing to facilitate the onward relocation of eligible Afghans to the U.S.," a State Department spokesperson said in a statement to RCP. "We are also working to identify resettlement options outside the United States for those individuals who are ultimately deemed ineligible for U.S. resettlement, and these conversations are already producing results."

## **Canada to the Rescue**

A U.S. government source told RCP that Canada has agreed to accept 1,000 Afghans from EHC, "in addition to their already robust and ongoing resettlement of Afghans." The source declined to say whether all 1,000 headed for Canada are part of the religious minorities who remain at EHC – mainly Christians and some Hazara Shiite Muslims. The State Department also has not disclosed to those slated for relocation a firm time frame for their departure to Canada.

However, according to sources working with EHC evacuees, the United Nations International Organization for Migration conducted some refugee interviews at EHC over the last week. Other organizations have already administered medical screenings.

A spokesperson for Canada's Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship agency declined to outline its plans to resettle the EHC refugees, citing safety and security concerns for the Afghans. Instead, the spokesperson touted Canada's plans to resettle at least 40,000 vulnerable Afghans by 2024, with more than 18,000 already relocated there.

"We have established new partnerships with countries in the region as well as building on existing ones, to address safety and security constraints limiting the mobility of Afghans," Michelle Carbert, an agency spokeswoman, said in a statement to RCP. "This will enable the government of Canada to complete immigration processing and bring Afghan clients to Canada."

The Canadian government is working with the United States and other allies "to support those who remain on the ground to find ways to maximize immigration and humanitarian pathways to Canada," Carbert continued.

## **Religious Freedom Wiped Out in Afghanistan**

One of the beneficiaries of Canada's decision to accept 1,000 refugees from

EHC is Ben, a young Christian man who escaped Afghanistan last year and worked with private U.S. sponsors who paid for his flight to the EHC facility. Ben (a pseudonym to protect his identity) has a long history of persecution growing up in Afghanistan, as Nina Shea, a religious freedom advocate at the Hudson Institute, [recently chronicled](#). Shea, a former USCIRF commissioner, has spent the last year advocating for Ben's resettlement in the U.S. or elsewhere.

As a teenager, Ben researched evangelical teachings on the Internet and converted to Christianity in 2014. His family reacted violently, subjecting him to such brutal beatings that he was once hospitalized. He fled his home and moved to Kabul, joining a house church operated by [Pastor Werner Groenewald](#) and his wife Hannelie.

The couple also ran an aid organization, Partnership in Academics and Development, and a seminary. Ben grew close to the family and their teenage son and daughter, finding refuge in their church until a brutal Taliban attack on the family's home left Werner and his two children murdered, along with another of Ben's friends.

"Ben was spared, but his church and adoptive family were wiped out," Shea wrote in a recent op-ed. "In the ensuing years, Ben struggled to overcome this trauma as he continued his studies in computer science."

As USCIRF [has documented](#), religious minorities are among those facing the greatest threat from the Taliban, along with women leaders, foreign-aid workers, and lawyers and judges who helped put jihadists behind bars before Kabul fell last year.

After taking over Kabul in August of 2021, Taliban leaders said they had a list of known Christian leaders in the underground house church movement and sent at least two warnings to them, saying they know who they are, according

to the Shai Fund, a nonprofit that advocates on behalf of refugees and displaced persons. One missive in October reminded Christians that Sharia law requires Taliban authorities to identify and arrest families who have converted from Islam.

Afghanistan's religious minorities, including Sikhs, Hindus, and members of the Bahai, Christian, Jewish, and Buddhist faiths, as well as non-Sunni Muslims (Shia, Sufi, and Ahmadiyya), live in constant fear of Taliban targeting. The United Kingdom's All Parliamentary Group for International Religious Freedom recently raised a concern that the Taliban is poised to engage in genocide against the religious minority communities remaining in Afghanistan.

According to a [Shai Fund report on religious minorities residing in EHC](#), private charities worked directly with the U.S. government to evacuate more than 2,500 religious minorities from Afghanistan to the UAE from August to October 2021. A smaller number, fewer than 370 people, were evacuated to Doha, the capital of Qatar – and were given humanitarian parole status and are now resettled in the United States.

Religious freedom advocates have pressed the U.S. to provide those religious minorities who remain at EHC the same blanket humanitarian parole status as those once held in Doha.

## **Non-Muslims Harassed at EHC**

Even though the refugees are grateful for the safe haven in Abu Dhabi, the months of living in limbo have taken their toll.

The Christian EHC community, in particular, has endured an increasingly hostile existence. While at EHC, living closely with Sunni and other Muslims, Christians report that they have been ostracized and even threatened if they do not attend prayers, according to an assessment report on EHC written by

Shai Fund Director Charmaine Hedding. Others have said they were denied basic supplies, were harassed by translators and had Korans left in their rooms. The Emiratis have tried to provide Christians separate chapel rooms and private bathrooms, and U.S. embassy staff in Abu Dhabi are “in constant touch with Emirati partners about these matters as issues arise,” according to a U.S. State Department spokesperson.

But the tensions at the EHC facility are rising, and many religious minorities fear an outbreak of violence against them if the uncertainty about their future continues.

The State Department would not discuss specific plans for religious minorities but said it is working with international partners to relocate all EHC refugees.

“No final decisions about all the Afghans at EHC have been made yet,” the State Department spokesperson told RCP in a statement. “Some travelers have a clear nexus to the United States while others do not. We are working with our Emirati and other international partners to ensure that those who ultimately do not resettle in the U.S. receive a durable resettlement opportunity elsewhere.”

## **Is the U.S. Abandoning Its Commitment to Religious Liberty?**

Religious freedom advocates are starting to openly question the Biden administration’s commitment to the country’s long history of prioritizing faith-based liberty. America’s very origins were as a haven for religious minorities fleeing discrimination in Europe.

Shortly after his confirmation, Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced that religious freedom would no longer be prioritized in his department’s list of human-rights concerns and faulted the Trump administration for what he characterized as an “unbalanced” emphasis on religious liberty over other



concerns.

"Human rights are also co-equal. There is no hierarchy that makes some rights more important than others," Blinken said last year during remarks at the State Department's release of its 45<sup>th</sup> annual report on the status of human rights worldwide. "At my confirmation hearing, I promised that the Biden-Harris administration would repudiate those unbalanced views. We do so decisively today," he said.

Last year, Blinken also disbanded the Commission on Inalienable Rights, an organization within the State Department created by his predecessor, Mike Pompeo, in 2019. The commission was composed of academics, philosophers, and activists who provided advice and policy recommendations on human rights to the U.S. government.

A State Department official told RCP that Blinken decided to end the commission after some members of Congress and "NGO stakeholders" expressed "deep public and private concern ... including their perception that the Commission's report suggested a hierarchy of rights with property rights and freedom of religion or belief held above others."

"The Secretary has been clear that there is no hierarchy that makes some rights more important than others," the official said.

Many religious freedom advocates argue that prioritizing faith-based liberty at specific times in foreign policy is a pragmatic and legal necessity – especially because history has long shown that tyrants and authoritarians target religious minorities for genocide.

They find Blinken's argument about a lack of priority for those suffering from religious persecution especially curious, given his Jewish ancestry and the family history he himself emphasizes. Blinken often recounts his stepfather's

rescue from a German concentration camp by American soldiers during the Holocaust, saying it shaped his own idea of what the U.S. symbolizes worldwide.

Shea and other religious freedom advocates argue that America has a direct responsibility to help religious minorities left in harm's way by the U.S. decision to withdraw completely from Afghanistan. She argues that welcoming these Afghans into the U.S. will serve as a beacon for our commitment to faith-based liberty at home and abroad.

"At this time, as the State Department pulls up stakes at the UAE camp, prioritizing visas for these religious refugees from the Taliban is demonstrably necessary," Shea asserted in a [recent op-ed](#). "To abandon them would betray America's oldest traditions and highest principles."

*Susan Crabtree is RealClearPolitics' White House/national political correspondent.*