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The Daily Hustle: Mission impossible – the quest for passports and visas in Afghanistan

Afghans who got onto evacuation lists may have the chance to go to Europe or North America, *if* they can get passports and visas for Pakistan. Their first dilemma is whether to go; it is not easy leaving one's homeland. But there is a second dilemma – whether to spend savings or go into debt to get the necessary travel documents. Many families have faced repeated disappointments and staggering costs trying to get those documents. In this instalment of the Daily Hustle, AAN hears from one Afghan about his painful decision to emigrate and then his, so far unsuccessful, efforts to get passports and visas for all the family.



*A large crowd gathered outside the passport office in Herat city to apply for travel documents.
Photo: Mohsen Karimi/AFP, 26 August 2023*

I'm 46 years old. My wife and I have four children – three sons, aged 16, 14 and 11, and a five-year-old daughter, who's the apple of my eye. I've been working for an international NGO for about 13 years, working my way up the ranks until I was a programme manager. My family and I had a good life. I had a good job and a steady income, which allowed me to provide for my family, put the kids in private school and lend a helping hand to our extended family and people back in our village when they needed it. The future looked bright.

But in spring 2021, as the Taliban were capturing district after district across Afghanistan, everything changed. In the weeks and days before the Taliban took over, the atmosphere in Kabul was tense. All over the city, people who were worried about the coming changes were making preparations to leave Afghanistan. Families were selling up everything they owned to pay for their move abroad. The shops that traded in used goods were bursting with household goods – furniture, appliances, kitchen utensils, clothes – their wares spilling onto sidewalks. Driving through the city, you could see people rummaging through what was on offer, looking to pick up bargains.

Traffickers were doing a booming business smuggling people to Pakistan, Iran and further afield to Turkey and on to Europe.

Finally, on 15 August 2021, the Republic fell and the Taliban took over the country. They would soon re-establish the second Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. I was concerned about the future. I'm old enough to remember what it was like during the first Islamic Emirate and I didn't want that life for my children. I considered leaving the country, but I didn't think my family and I were at any particular risk. I'd never worked for the government or the Afghan security forces. I still had a job and was earning a good income. I thought my NGO job would also offer me a measure of protection from any ill effects that the change in government might bring. The Taliban fighters who were now everywhere in the city were nice enough, even helpful and, at times, good-humoured. So, I thought we should wait and see what happens. After all, Afghanistan was home.

The decision to leave

Things, however, were not looking great. The economy went into freefall almost immediately after the takeover. For a time, my NGO had trouble paying salaries because of the banking crisis and the cost of basic goods was rising at a dizzying rate. Luckily, we had some savings that helped us through the difficult days and enough money to help our siblings and parents, who were in dire financial circumstances.

The announcement of a general amnesty by Supreme Leader Hibatullah Akhundzada that offered protection to members of the former government and security forces gave me hope. And, to be honest, the security situation was much better. The conflict had ended and people were travelling around the country. They were going back to their villages, some of them for the first time in years, or to places they had always wanted to visit. I thought maybe this time it would be different. Maybe the new Emirate would have space for all Afghans to live in peace and prosperity.

Meanwhile, the NGO I worked for had submitted the names of all staff members to a European country for evacuation. My managers weren't sure if they could continue operating in the new environment and were very concerned about the safety of the people working here. They asked if I wanted my family to be put forward for evacuation. I said that I did, thinking that I could make a final decision later when the time came. Things were still uncertain both on the ground and in my head and heart. I kept having conversations in my head weighing up the pros and cons of staying versus leaving.

The pull of home was strong, and the idea of leaving my parents and siblings behind was unbearable. There were days when I felt the need to leave and secure a future for my family with a sense of urgency. On other days, I thought I should stay home in Afghanistan. It's true things were getting more difficult and so many things were uncertain, but the boys could go to school and, as for my daughter, she's only five years old. She could still go to primary school in Afghanistan and maybe by the time she was ready to go to high school, the Emirate would have re-opened them for girls. And I still had a job.

Finally, the NGO I worked for told me that we had been accepted for evacuation by a European country. A few days later, I received an email from that country asking me to resubmit all our identity documents and start preparing to be evacuated. We had to settle our affairs, obtain passports and gather all the documents we would need in our new home in Europe.

It was time to make a decision. I talked things over with a friend and told him that I was thinking of staying in Afghanistan. He said I was being short-sighted. This, he said, was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to secure a good future for my family. If I passed it up, I might never have the chance to immigrate again and I owed it to my children, especially my daughter, to take it.

That evening, as I watched my daughter play with her doll in the living room, I thought about her future in the new Afghanistan. One of the first things the Emirate had done was to close girls' high schools, and while they had been promising that this was only temporary, there had been no movement on this front. Eventually, they would bar women from attending university.

Would the Emirate make good on its promise to reopen girls' high schools and allow women back into universities? Or would she be sentenced to a life of illiteracy and dependence? There was too much at stake. My friend was right. I owed it to my little girl to give her every chance at a better future.

The trials and tribulations of getting a passport in Afghanistan

Getting passports for myself and my family proved to be a difficult task. I tried unsuccessfully for more than six months to get them using the official process. The lines at the passport office were long and the process arduous. When we didn't hear back, I went to the passport office several times and queued up on the street overnight, but the answer was always the same: We are very busy, there are a large number of passport requests to process and you must wait your turn. Finally, after several months of waiting, I gave up on the idea of getting a passport through the normal channels and started looking for a *wasetal* (contact) at the passport office. My friend told me he knew someone who worked there and arranged for a meeting at a teahouse in central Kabul. The *wasetal* asked for 500 USD for each passport. It was a lot of money, 3,000 USD for six passports, but it seemed to be the only way for us to get them. I agreed to pay and he delivered the passports, as promised, two weeks later.

Time to get visas

Once we had our passports, I contacted the EU country which had agreed to take us for further instructions. They told me to apply for visas to Pakistan, which I did at the Pakistani embassy in Kabul. The visa applications were affordable (180 USD for the six of us or 30 USD per person), but our applications were denied. I then went to a travel agency which acts as a broker for visas to Pakistan and charges 300 USD per visa after it has successfully obtained them. But the visa broker was only able to get one visa. I had to find a way to get the other five visas. I contacted another person who said he could get the visas, again for 300 USD per person. We agreed that I would pay him 300 USD in advance and the remaining 1,200 USD when the visas were secured. This man never came through with the visas. I waited for a month for him to contact me, but he never did, nor would he answer my many phone calls. In the end, I lost the 300 USD I had given him.

Finally, I emailed the European country and explained my difficulties in getting a Pakistani visa. They wrote back quickly and told me that I should get an Iranian visa. It took three weeks to get our visas from the Iranian embassy, which cost 300 USD per person (1,800 USD for my family of six). After that, I was instructed to proceed to Iran's capital, Tehran, but as we were making the final preparations to leave, they emailed me to say that they were having some issues with processing evacuation applications at their embassy in Tehran. They told me to wait for further instructions. About two weeks later, they wrote again to tell me that the only option was for us to travel to Pakistan.

We were back where we started. I applied again for Pakistani visas for the five of us. I decided to try my luck with the embassy again rather than pay the hefty fees of a visa broker. I paid 30 USD per visa and waited. It took three months for the embassy to issue only two visas, which are valid for 90 days, but the other four applications were rejected. The race is on now. I have no choice but to pay a visa broker 1,050 USD per visa (4,020 USD in total) and hope against hope that these visas arrive before the other ones expire.

Today, the future seems as uncertain as it did that fateful night when I made the decision to leave Afghanistan. Over the months, I've spent nearly 10,000 USD from our savings to get passports and visas for us to leave. I try to manage my expectations; we've had so many setbacks, and things could still go wrong. But still, I'm hopeful that this time everything will work out. If the Pakistani visas come through, and if the European country is still willing to take us, then hopefully we will soon be on our way to Islamabad and then onwards to our new home in Europe – hopefully.

Edited by Roxanna Shapour

