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The Daily Hustle: My life as a refugee – and choosing to return home

After the Islamic Republic collapsed in August 2021, tens of thousands of people rushed to Kabul airport, attempting to leave Afghanistan. Some faced specific threats from the new rulers. Others were fearful of an uncertain future, increased violence and unemployment and hoped for a better future for themselves and their children if they went abroad. Among those leaving were Afghans who worked for international NGOs and the former government who went as refugees to other countries, mostly in Europe and North America. Now, more than two years on, some are choosing to return home. AAN's Sayed Asadullah Sadat has talked to one former NGO worker who has recently returned to Afghanistan with his family about their experience as refugees in Denmark and why, in the end, they decided to come back to Kabul.



A woman carries a child as she disembarks an SAS evacuation aircraft at Copenhagen Airport. Photo: Mads Claus Rasmussen/Ritzau Scanpix/AFP, 22 August 2021.

Leaving everything you know behind and going into the unknown to start a new life in a country you've never been to isn't easy. Migration has both negative and positive aspects, and everyone has their own story. This is my story.

The atmosphere in Kabul changed to one of fear and uncertainty immediately after the news broke that the president, Ashraf Ghani, had fled the country. As Taliban fighters started entering the city, panicked crowds started gathering outside the gates of Kabul airport, hoping to leave the country while it was still open. I was one of them. I used to work for an international NGO in Kabul and my organisation quickly arranged for staff members who wanted to leave to be taken to Europe. And so it was that, two days after the collapse, my wife and I went to Kabul airport with our five children. It was the first leg of a two-year journey that took us from Kabul to Pakistan, on to Denmark and finally back to Afghanistan.

It's difficult to describe what it was like at the airport. We could see the growing crowd trying to force its way in. We said goodbye to my brother, who had driven us there, and braved the crowd to get to the gate. Everyone was trying to get in, but the US forces only allowed people with documents to enter. We were among the fortunate. The NGO I worked for had arranged for us to be on the list and we were allowed to go in.

The 24 hours we spent at the airport waiting to be evacuated were the most terrifying hours of my life – a nightmare I will never forget. I had never experienced this sort of chaos and pandemonium. Hundreds, maybe even thousands, were waiting and the atmosphere of fear, anxiety and anticipation was palpable. There was no one to help people and everyone had to take care of himself and his family. It was so crowded you couldn't even find a place to sit. There were no working bathrooms and no food. We could hear gunshots outside the airport as NATO forces tried to disperse the crowd. There was a stampede on the runway as a crowd tried to force its way onto a plane; shots were fired and, in the confusion, several people were killed. My children were scared and crying. The girls wanted to go home. I was trying to comfort my kids when I saw the most extraordinary thing – two men falling from the sky. They had tried to get out by hiding in an aeroplane's wheels, and when it took off, they fell to their deaths.

Finally, we were taken on a military plane to Pakistan. We were given food when we arrived. It was the first thing we had eaten since we left our house in Kabul nearly two days earlier. Luckily, my wife had had the sense to pack some biscuits for our children in her bag. We spent eight hours at the airport in Pakistan, where our documents were checked before we boarded the plane for our final destination, Denmark.

A new life in Denmark

The Copenhagen airport was a hub of activity. There was a reception centre for Afghan refugees where they checked our bags, took our biometrics and registered us. There were people who welcomed us and gave us food to eat. Then, we were taken to the first of two camps we would stay at before we could live in our own house.

The facilities in the first camp were pretty basic. They took our passports and other documents and sent us to our temporary accommodation. Each family was given a room and there was a bathroom and kitchen, which several families had to share. The food they served at the camp was unfamiliar to us. We weren't even sure if it was halal, but we had to eat what was on offer.

My wife and daughters were exhausted from the journey. My youngest daughter started having stomach problems because of the food. We took her to the understaffed clinic at the camp. The only doctor was overburdened with the various ailments the people at the camp suffered from and, anyway, there was no medicine to treat my daughter.

We stayed in that camp for five days and then we were taken to another one. The second camp was much better. It had more facilities, and each family had separate living quarters. Our family of seven got two rooms, including a bathroom, but we had to share the kitchen with other families. Still, we could cook our own food and buy what we needed from a nearby market.

We lived in this camp for five months. It was fine for the adults, but the children chafed at the confines of the camp and were homesick for Afghanistan. They missed their old lives and wanted to play with their cousins and friends. There were classes for the older children and a kindergarten for the little ones, which kept them busy. Everyone, including the children, went to English and Danish classes because, if we were to make a successful go at our new lives, it was important to learn the language as quickly as possible.

Finally, we were issued two-year temporary visas and sent to the area where the government had decided we should live. We could now rent a place to live and find work. The Danish government had taken care of all our expenses while we were in the camp, but now we were given an allowance of 7,000 krone [1,000 USD] for me and my wife. There was no allowance for the children. I was able to find a house that was within our budget, but it was very old. It had a damp problem; there was mould on the walls and the plumbing didn't work very well. Our allowance wasn't enough to meet our expenses. We kept dipping into the nest egg we had brought from Afghanistan to make ends meet until that was gone and then I had to borrow money from friends. The pressure was on to find a job.

Finding work and making ends meet

Finding a job is difficult when you are a new arrival and barely speak the language. Many employers ask for previous experience in Denmark. To overcome this hurdle, the municipality has a programme that places refugees in unpaid apprenticeships for six months. But even after that, employers are reluctant to hire immigrants, especially Muslims whom they view with some suspicion. In the end, no matter how educated you are and what kind of job you had back home, a refugee can only hope to find unskilled work, for example, as a cleaner or guard. When you learn the language, you can find work in care homes and, if you're very lucky, as a waiter or a shop assistant.

I was finally able to find work stocking shelves in a supermarket. The pay was low and the taxes high (40 per cent). I was paid 15,000 krone (USD 2,200), but my take-home after taxes was only 9,000 krone (USD 1,300). My government allowance was discontinued after I found work, but my wife kept receiving her allowance of 3,500 krone (USD 500). In other words, we had USD 1,800 for a family of seven. The cost of living was backbreaking. In addition to food and rent, we had to pay for water, electricity, the internet and transport. There was also the cost of sending my younger kids to kindergarten. Schooling is free for all children in Denmark, but refugees have to pay a fee if they want to send their kids to kindergarten. Some friends told us that it didn't used to be this way, but after so many Afghans started arriving with big families, the government changed the rules. There were also other expenses such as clothes for the children and other things – a candy bar here, an ice cream there, a birthday cake. It felt like even breathing came at a cost. We couldn't make ends meet however much we tightened our belts.

Deciding to go back to Afghanistan

Starting a new life in Denmark was difficult for me and my family. We were unfamiliar with the environment, culture and customs. We already knew there would be a settling-in period, but we were unprepared for the realities of life as refugees in our new home. For one thing, unlike Afghanistan, where big family networks and even friends step in to help each other, there was no one to help us navigate the new environment. People are busy with their own lives and solving their own problems.

The two years we spent living in Denmark took their toll on my family. I started having anxiety attacks. My wife grew more depressed and withdrawn by the day. My two youngest children kept picking up colds in kindergarten and their health kept deteriorating. We finally decided to take them out of kindergarten and keep them at home. One of my sons stopped eating. He said he was being bullied at school and that none of the other pupils would play or even talk to him. I took him to the nearest clinic, which was in the city and a two-hour bus ride away from our house. But the doctor wouldn't give him any medicine. She said it was stress-related and advised us to keep him at home for a few days and let him rest. Then my oldest son, who was also having a hard time at school, started having anxiety attacks and I could see my wife sinking deeper into depression with each passing day.

I felt defeated. Things could not go on this way. One evening, sitting at the kitchen table and trying to figure out how we could manage things, my wife and I talked about returning to Afghanistan. It was my wife's idea. She said that life in Denmark was unsuitable for us and that she worried about our children and their state of mind. She was also worried about how we could raise our children in this unfamiliar environment and make sure they retained their Afghan identity and our social and cultural values. I could also see that she was deeply unhappy and missed having our family and friends around. We talked about it for several days, always at night after the children had gone to bed, going through our options, but we could see no other way. Finally, we had a family meeting. I could see my children light up at the mention of going back to Afghanistan.

And so, it was decided. I approached the Danish government and told them we wanted to go home.

Why did you come back?

Since we got back to Kabul, people, many of them incredulous, keep asking the same question: Why did you come back? I tell them that life abroad is not for everyone. There are economic problems and the language and cultural barriers make it difficult to find suitable employment and access government services like healthcare. I explain how expensive life is in Europe and how emasculating it is not to be able to provide for your family, no matter how hard you work. Mostly, I tell them that the isolation and the intense feeling of being an outsider squatting in someone else's home are unbearable. Life in Europe is good, but not all Europeans are very welcoming to immigrants, especially if you're a Muslim. I had never experienced racial discrimination and it was difficult for me to come to terms with it. It was not easy to watch my kids crying when they came home from school because no one would play with them and tell my older son to ignore the boys who were bullying him in school. Why should he ignore them? Why should he have this bitter experience at all?

I knew starting over for the second time in two years wouldn't be easy, but at least we'd be home in our own country.

Back to zero after two years

The decision to return wasn't one I took lightly. I was between the devil and the deep blue sea. On the one hand, we had economic and health problems and I could see my family slipping away. On the other, we faced an uncertain future in Afghanistan. I had sold my house and all of our belongings when we left. I had no job to go back to and most of my family and friends had left the country. There was also the stigma of returning to Afghanistan, with people viewing you as a failure – someone who didn't have what it takes to make a go of things and create a better life for his family.

For now, we're busy with starting our life from scratch. We're staying with friends until we find a house to rent. I spend my days looking for work and catching up with the changes in Kabul. I've taken my son to hospital, where he was finally treated for the persistent infection he'd been suffering from. My wife was also treated by a doctor in Kabul and her depression is much better. As a family, I have to admit that we're much happier even though things are still uncertain.

Kabul has changed a lot since the last time we lived here. For one thing, security is much better, but the economy is much worse than I remember. People are struggling to find jobs and put food on the table. The ban on older girls going to school is a big concern for me. I have three daughters; I think about my eldest daughter and her future. She would have started grade 7 this year.

I know that starting from zero is not going to be easy. We face an uncertain economic future and I still have to find a job to support my family and I figure out how I can get my daughters educated after they finish elementary school, but the mental pressures are gone. My wife and children are doing well and are joyful again. I'm living in my own country and it is a thousand times better than living abroad.

Edited by Roxanna Shapour