

Caught in the crossfire

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ABSTRACT

The humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and the devastating images of individuals desperately clinging for their lives off planes have permeated the media in 2021. This article aims to draw on the personal experience of an Afghan-Australian undergraduate student who is engaging in forms of activism to help her family, and many others, in Afghanistan. Through conversations with family members in Afghanistan, the author aims to outline the lives of her family before the Taliban re-emergence, their obstacles into seeking humanitarian visas in Australia, and the role of engaging in activism as a beacon of hope.

Keywords

Afghanistan, humanitarian crisis, humanitarian visas, activism

Introduction

Living as a second-generation immigrant in a Western nation has always posed its challenges. While decades of academic research have explored this notion, for me, the crux of it can be summed up in a quotation by journalist Tiziana Ratcheva (2016), “I am a foreigner in my parents’ mother-land and I am a foreigner in the country to which they came almost thirty years ago.” However, rather than just asserting my personal experience, in this piece I also want to bring forward the experiences of my cousins and aunties who have been ‘caught in the crossfire’ in Afghanistan for the last forty-three years. In light of the current crisis in Afghanistan, I hope that I can give a voice to the feelings, emotions and perspectives of those who have lived lives that would be unimaginable to most – and the perspective that can only be shared by the first-generation Afghan diaspora. Over the last few weeks, I have spoken with my Khala Nahid and four of my cousins, Shazia, Kaynat, Arman and Hamid, while also reflecting on the obstacles I faced in finding them a ‘road out’ to Australia.¹ This is our story.

‘Appreciating the little things in life’: living in Afghanistan before the current crisis

Over the last twenty-two years of my existence, I have lived with the fact that my entire maternal family resided in Afghanistan. As someone who has never left Australia, let alone visited Afghanistan, my knowledge of my parents’ homeland was influenced heavily by Western media outlets and the anecdotes of my family members. While Western media have

presented Afghanistan as a dirt-ridden and unliveable country, until a few months ago my cousins and aunties lived – what you would call in third-world standards – a ‘decentish life’. They had a roof over their heads, my female cousins were innocuously able to attend school and university, visiting the bazaar was relatively safe, and on occasion, one could purchase and devour a burger. Recently, I asked my 30-year-old cousin Shazia what her opinions were on living in a country that was constantly in a state of flux. To my surprise, she expressed that, up until the Taliban took over, “Afghans lived their life as they could – they danced, they ate delicious food and tried to enjoy life’s little moments, like trekking the beautiful mountains or putting their feet in the water.” For my Khala Nahid, “living in Afghanistan was difficult, but manageable.” While it seems unbelievable for many of us in the West, for my family and many Afghans, Afghanistan was *home*, and they would continue to consider it *home* until otherwise.

‘They’re Back’: the re-emergence of the Taliban in 2021

In August 2021 it was evident that the Taliban were back, and more powerful than ever. While the announcement of the withdrawal of US forces had caused suspicion about the Taliban’s potential re-emergence, many were dismayed at how rapidly they re-occupied Afghanistan. It was a matter of days before television screens flashed with the words “Kabul Has Fallen.” While the Taliban have claimed that they have ‘reformed’ and will ‘uphold women’s rights’, many of my relatives in Afghanistan are not quite convinced. As my Khala Nahid says, “we know what the Taliban are like, we have lived through it before so who is to believe them now.” My mum and her sisters experienced the five years of turmoil that was the Taliban regime in the late 1990s. While my mum was able to escape it by marrying my father in 1997, the others were not quite so lucky. With the harsher immigration policies that followed the Howard and subsequent governments in Australia, my parents were dissuaded from even attempting to start a visa application process to assist my maternal family in leaving Afghanistan. And quite frankly, my Khala Nahid says that she “didn’t actually want to leave.” In light of the re-emergence of the Taliban regime in 2020, what many do not realise is that, for Afghans, fleeing their country from the Taliban is not a choice, it is a necessity. Afghans have historically called Afghanistan ‘their motherland’ and for my cousin Shazia, “leaving your entire life behind and the land that you were born in, the smell of the dew in the morning – nobody does this by choice. We do it because we have to.”

In the last twenty-one years, my family in Afghanistan, like many others, were passionate about ‘rebuilding their country’. Following the fallen Taliban regime in the late 1990s, many Afghans chose to stay in Afghanistan in order to contribute to their local communities. Global politics aside, it was evident to my relatives that they have always merely wanted two things: peace and opportunity. My cousin Kaynat stated that she always wanted “a life free from conflict” and “with the option to get an education, be employed and to enjoy life.” While this

may seem like a simple pursuit to many of us in the West, the aforementioned has been difficult for many Afghan nationals, and will be even more challenging to obtain with the re-emergence of the Taliban regime. As my Khala Nahid asserts, “I wanted something good to happen to my nation, but the regime has made me hopeless. We are not allowed to help, we cannot even try.” For my family, the Taliban regime’s re-control of Afghanistan epitomises the destruction of what Afghans had worked for in the last twenty-one years. And for my Khala Nahid, it signifies the end of what many of us take for granted: “I want the simple things; I want to go to work, I want to go to the shops, and I want my children, especially my daughter, to go to school.” The constant image of “bearded men, holding rifles packed in cars” and the perpetual “sound of gunfire” has inevitably made my family feel as though “enough is enough”.

‘The difficult road out’: obstacles when obtaining an Australian humanitarian visa

At the time of writing this piece, I have submitted two ‘humanitarian’ visa applications to the Department of Immigration in Australia. I put ‘humanitarian’ in quotation marks as the process is almost ‘in-humanitarian’ in its current design. On a scheme that has an estimated waiting time of “many months to years” (Department of Home Affairs 2021), it is inevitable that one may feel apprehensive in anticipation for a result. As someone who has lived a relatively comfortable life in Australia, hearing sentiments such as “when are we going?”, “I packed my blue suitcase!” and “do you think my bike will fit on the plane?” from my 7-year-old cousin in Afghanistan is simultaneously heart-warming and heart-shattering. Since applying for my family’s visa, my little cousin has been sleeping next to his little suitcase. When asking my Khala Nahid why she wanted to leave Afghanistan, aside from facing persecution by the Taliban for her work in humanitarian aid, with despair and hope in her voice she stated: “I just want my daughter to be able to go to school, I want to be able to sleep in peace, I don’t want to hear the sounds of bombs and I don’t want to see another dead body.” The sentiment shared by all family members in Afghanistan is that they are simply “tired of fighting.” It would be conventional to believe that these are satisfactory reasons for the Australian government to accept an individual on ‘humanitarian grounds’, however, it seems that this is not the case.

The Western world’s suspicion of refugees, particularly those seeking refuge from the Middle East and Central Asian countries, is reflected within Australia’s current refugee ‘humanitarian’ visa options. To be eligible for the visa options, an applicant (in this case, an Afghan refugee) must be registered with United Nations, hold certified identity documents, hold a passport, be able to prove residence, provide a history of employment and education and be able to provide character statements and health checks, among a whole other list of criteria (Department of Home Affairs 2021). For four out of five of the visa subclass options, applicants must lodge their documents “in paper only” and “outside of Australia” (Department of Home Affairs 2021). What the Department of Home Affairs in Australia has failed to consider in the

emergency and unprecedented situation that has unfolded in Afghanistan is that, with no consular embassies, no UN office and a non-existent administration, obtaining the aforementioned documents is almost completely impossible for many Afghans. I felt embarrassed and ashamed to ask my cousin if she “had an English translated version of her degree,” or if my Khala Nahid could re-call in detail all the scattered years it took her to complete secondary school. What the Department of Home Affairs in Australia has failed to understand is that these individuals have lived their entire lives in war, and that such criteria are like ‘asking a fish to climb a tree’. On a good day, I struggle to produce an original copy of my birth certificate and when a new employer asks me for ‘100 points’ of identification, I go on a quest to produce these documents. While the notion of ‘national security’ is a valid one, the hurdles that the Australian government has presented refugees in their visa process highlight many questions. Is Australia concerned about ‘national security’ or are there current policies just blatantly Islamophobic? Many academics, members of parliament, journalists and the greater Australian community have argued the latter (Bridge Initiative Team 2019; Bouma 2011; Briskman 2015; Morgan 2016).

‘Think global, act local’: activism as a beacon of hope

When the news of the Taliban’s re-emergence hit my family in Australia, I was approached by my mother who asked me “what should we do?”. At a moment of utter despair and hopelessness, I did what I thought was within my control by starting an online crowdfunding fundraiser on the Australian website mycause.com. I entitled the fundraiser campaign “Help my family in Afghanistan,” with the hope that I could gather a small amount of proceeds to support my large amount of family who are living in Kabul. While I had initially thought that nobody would care, I was left completely surprised with the overwhelming support. Within only a few days, my fundraiser garnered donations from well over 100 people, reaching a total of \$7550. Among these individuals were my colleagues at work, my university professors, my friends, my extended family in Australia and many who I am not even acquainted with.

Over the course of a few days, I was met with nothing but support. I was reached out to by the Australia Broadcasting Corporation (Handley 2021), the *Daily Telegraph* (Armstrong and Benns 2021) and *Monash University News* to comment on my family’s situation and to call on the government ‘to do more’. Members of parliament responded to my pleas to escalate the humanitarian visa applications I had lodged, and they even went as far as to offer me personal advice on the matter. In response to my concerns, my local member, John Alexander, broke ranks by urging the Federal government to increase the intake of Afghan refugees from 3000 to 20,000, stating that Australia has “a duty to provide sanctuary” and “if we can accept 12,000 from Syria, we can certainly accept more than that for our brothers and sisters now suffering in Afghanistan” (Yosufaszi 2021). My social media pages were flooded with

individuals sharing and re-posting to create awareness about the events in Afghanistan and ways to help. Above all, what was evident to me was that people did indeed care. And like me, they also acted.

Today, I continue to use activism and advocacy as a coping mechanism. And to be quite frank, I use it as a tool to overcome my feelings of despair, sadness and helplessness. I have created email templates, petitions, and compiled links to various organisations, disseminating this all to my network. I was even privileged enough to speak to former United Nations aid worker and war crimes investigator David Savage, to discuss ways in which we can support Afghans and put pressure on the government to ‘simply do more’. And I am definitely not alone in this pursuit. Many individuals within the broader Australian community have mobilised, and continue to mobilise, using social media as a tool to heighten awareness, pressure governments and raise money to assist the people of Afghanistan. For example, the *Camp4Afghanistan* (2021) campaign was created by Eren Ozenir and her peers to support Mahbooba’s Promise, a Sydney-based charity, to raise funds for Afghans who were displaced as a result of the current crisis. On the evening of the 28 August 2021, over 600 Australians registered to camp in their backyards, or to sleep on their floors, in solidarity with displaced Afghans. Furthermore, over 200,000 Australians signed the “Action for Afghanistan” (2021) petition which called on the Australian government to act more generously in granting visas and resettling Afghan refugees in Australia.

The activism, advocacy, support, solidarity, empathy and generosity are coming from every corner of society. For my family in Afghanistan, knowing that there are individuals “on the other side of the world” (as my Khala Nahid puts it) willing to support and advocate for them offers a sliver of optimism amidst all of the uncertainty and the desolation. For me, activism serves as a beacon of hope.

Conclusion

While the last forty-three years have not been without their challenges, for many Afghans, in Afghanistan and all over the world, 2021 has been a year of utter turbulence. Among it, many Afghans felt as though their voices had been suppressed amidst all the noise and global politics. For my family in Afghanistan, the question that looms in their minds is “what about us?”. Hence, amidst all the political tension and unrest, it is fundamentally important that individuals take responsibility as global citizens. We must give Afghans a voice and support them in their pursuit to living a life of peace and opportunity, whether this is inside of Afghanistan, or in their pursuit to seek refuge in another country. At the crux of it, we must remember the Afghan people are tired of being treated like political pawns. I believe that as individuals we can mobilise, by sending an Instagram post or an email to our local member of parliament, to

support Afghans so that the horrors of the late 1990s are not repeated. We must not allow Afghans to be ‘caught in the political crossfire’ any longer.

Notes

¹ *Khala* is Persian for ‘Auntie’. It is a term of respect and admiration that one uses before addressing elder women, or their maternal aunties. Nahid is my mum’s sister, and I call her ‘Khala Nahid’.

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Neilab Osman is a 22-year-old university student in Sociology and Media, Culture and Communications, a bilingual student support officer, project assistant (refugee outreach),

mental health advocate, refugee advocate and human rights enthusiast. In mid-2022, she will begin a Master's in Public and Social Policy at Macquarie University. Neilab has maintained an extremely high academic average during her studies and she has been placed on the Merit list 3 times, as well as achieving the highest mark in a number of subjects. Most importantly, Neilab is an Afghan-Australian and is the eldest daughter of refugees. The 2021 exacerbation of the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan insurmountably impacted Neilab as she has close family who currently reside in Kabul. Thus, Neilab has adopted the mantra 'Think Global, Act Local', and has been engaging in various forms of activism to help Afghans struggling in the crisis.