



**New lives,
uncertain futures:
experiences of Afghans
in displacement**



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Drawings of Afghanistan and its people by Silvia Kaepelli.

"Every Afghan lost their families: even though they escaped, they have their lives here, they are alive, they have peace... but mentally they have collapsed."

Abdul's words echo from a Zoom call on a late-spring afternoon. He is connecting from the small town in Northern Italy where he has been living for the last six months.

When the Taliban took over Afghanistan in August 2021, Abdul found himself in grave danger as he had been working for foreign NGOs for years. Unlike many others, Abdul found a rare opportunity to flee the country with his wife and child. He took it, unexpectedly joining the decades-long, millions-strong Afghan diaspora.

To suddenly leave everything behind was not easy, even for someone who had been working with internally displaced people in Afghanistan. As Abdul explains, "always there was an idea of 'refugee' in my mind, but never I thought of being in this situation."

The word that comes to Abdul's mind when he thinks back to his family's first days in displacement is 'shock'. "I was feeling like we lost everything. We had everything there, we lost [it]."

The feeling of shock resonates with many other Afghans who were forced to flee their country following August 2021. Even for people like Sayed, who always wanted to move and experience life in another country, things happened too fast: "We were not expecting such a change, a change within fifteen days: leaving your country, leaving everyone, coming to a new place."

He adds, "of course, it was a shock. A big shock for everyone."

Living in an uncertain present

“The very first few months were really challenging for us.” After escaping Afghanistan in August 2021, Maryam spent eight months in a town in the South of Italy. Together with her husband and siblings, she remembers the sense of uncertainty, worry, and confusion. “Nothing was clear for us, and we did not know what was going to be the next step.”

The first weeks in the refugee camp, in quarantine because of the on-going Covid pandemic, were the hardest. Speaking with fellow Afghans, everyone agreed that what they had just gone through felt “like a nightmare.” Maryam remembers feeling all sorts of emotions, from relief and excitement at being safe, to deep fear and nostalgia.

The unpredictability of life in displacement has impacted all Afghans who have been forced to leave their country in the last four decades. Starting a new life has been as challenging and shocking for the people who fled years ago as it is for people fleeing now.

Fatima is a young woman who left Afghanistan five years ago. Like for Abdul, Sayed, and Maryam, hers was not a choice. She fled to save herself, her mother, and sisters. Arriving in another country as a refugee was highly traumatic: “I found myself completely lost. At least there I knew the language, I knew the area, I knew the people, but here I must deal with all of this alone.”

Fatima and her family managed to get out of Afghanistan but struggled in the new country as well. Many opportunities were denied to them and life seemed to have stopped: “One of the things that really impact the mental health of the refugees is this uncertain future. You cannot do anything.”



Overcoming daily challenges

“Being for a long time without a job, this is a challenge for me at the moment, I feel this is a problem, it has to be solved.”

Once relocated to a safe place, the list of things refugees worry about does not end. As Sayed summarised, a large part of these concerns is of a practical matter, like finding a job and being financially independent.

Refugee rights are differently upheld from country to country. In some parts of the world, refugees do not even have the right to work. In others, they work longer hours for less pay. They are also prevented from applying to skilled jobs, as their qualifications are not recognized.

Fatima, too, struggled to find employment: “I know people, they did their Bachelor’s degree, but to get a good job they are lacking some language document, or some other technical certification that’s required, and one of the main problems is financial. People are not able to afford that.”

Adding onto these everyday stressors is the thought of family members back home. Abdul knows a lot of Afghan refugees who were not able to bring their spouses, children, or parents with them.

He understands their suffering, as these families are currently in Afghanistan struggling to find food, clothes, warmth, and shelter. “My first family, my wife and my child are here - but my mother, my brothers, sisters are back behind, so they need support. These are all the stories of Afghans who are refugees now.”





Reuniting with loved ones becomes a fixed thought. Sayed left behind all his siblings but is particularly worried about his little sisters. He fears their lives are already decided: confined to the native village they will soon be mothers.

He dreams of being able to help them out of the country: “they should enjoy being in touch with people, studying at the university, working in the office, or having their own business. Learn languages and see the world, experience different culture: this is what I dream for my sisters, if I can bring them, because still they are children. They have the right to see what life means.”

Building a new future together

“I’m hopeful, I see my world good, more light and bright in the future.”

Even amidst the challenges of displacement, most Afghans, like Sayed, are hopeful about their future. They want to become part of their new communities, to belong. Yet, host societies do not always treat forcibly displaced people as equals.

“Please give [refugees] the feeling that they are the same to you,” urges Fatima. Because, as Maryam adds: “we also had a life and we are also human beings. What if we are refugees? It doesn’t mean that we haven’t experienced a good life.”

Only when treated as brothers and sisters, will Afghans – as well as all others fleeing conflict, violence, human rights violations, persecution, and natural disasters – feel like they belong to their new homes.

Pope Francis reminds us that the future can only be built together. While we welcome Afghans in exile, we must not forget the people in Afghanistan are still suffering.

First and foremost, open, safe, and legal pathways to protection are needed for Afghans at risk. More than half of the people in Afghanistan are currently facing harrowing situations and are increasingly dependent on emergency assistance.

Secondly, the international community must continue to advocate for and work towards the return of peace and democracy in Afghanistan.

All Afghans deserve to be able to live in safety and dignity.

Let's not forget them.



*Names have been changed for privacy and security.



The future of their nation: a prayer for Afghanistan

Creator God,

In your wisdom and love you created the mountains and the valleys, the fields and the dust of Afghanistan. In the same love you created a strong and resilient people to inhabit the crossroads of the world, welcoming all who pass through.

Bestow on this people continued courage and strength. Help them always to know and trust in you, in times of peace and abundance, as in times of conflict and scarcity.

Give courage and wisdom to the women of Afghanistan, that they will grow strong and develop their gifts fully, to help create the future of their nation.

Give courage and wisdom to the men of Afghanistan, that they will seek peace and growth, to help create the future of their nation.

Give courage and wisdom to those who have been forced to live outside Afghanistan that they too can help create the future of their nation. And bless those who welcome them with generous and open hearts.

Above all, in your love, nurture and protect the children of Afghanistan that their hearts and minds may grow strong as they become, the future of their nation.

Amen.



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