

Six Miles From Freedom in Afghanistan

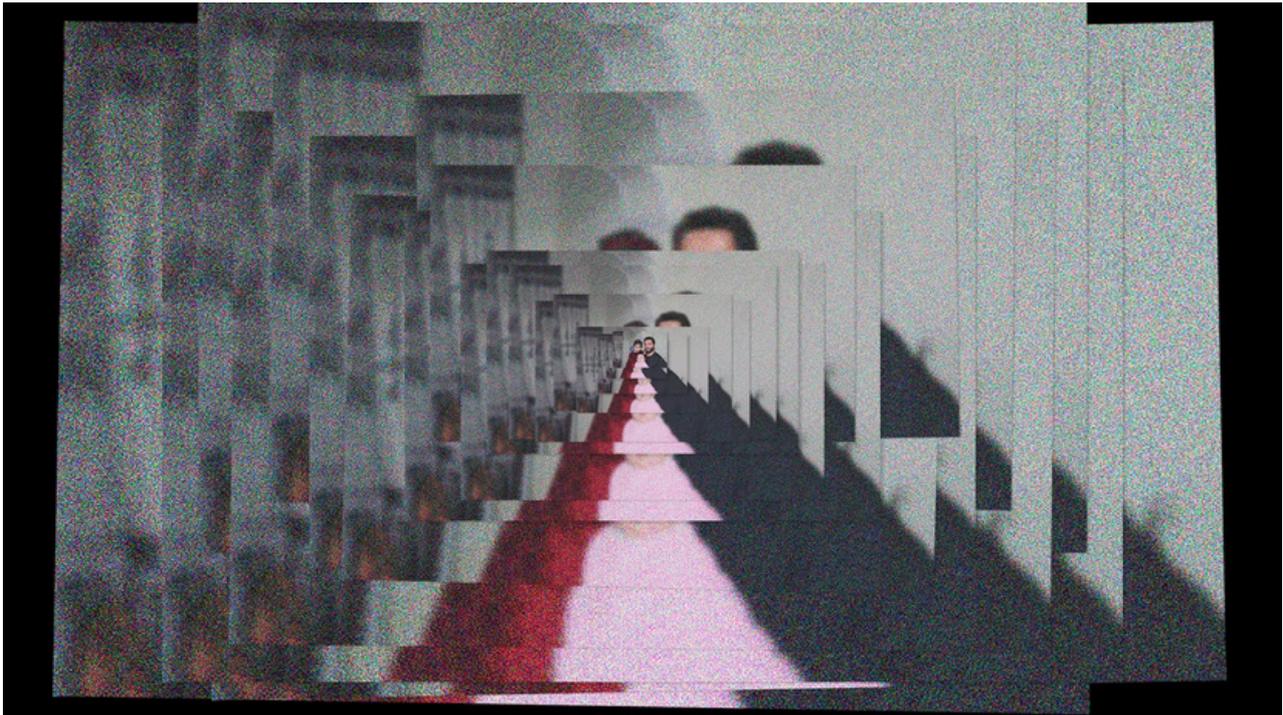
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August 21, 2021

Global

One family's bid to escape Afghanistan is emblematic of how the United States is failing to help those who risked their lives to work with Americans.

By Yasmeen Serhan



Shannon Lin / The Atlantic

6:00 AM ET

Six miles isn't a great distance, but for one Afghan man and his family, it could be the difference between life and death. Habib, whose full identity I won't disclose for his own safety, served as a contractor for the U.S. military in Afghanistan. It's a job that brought him pride, as well as plaudits from the commanders who worked with him. But it also brought him death threats from the Taliban.

Habib's three older brothers, who also worked with the U.S. military, were able to take advantage of the Special Immigrant Visa program, which allows Afghans who helped America to move to the United States. But Habib, his wife, and their two young daughters were not so lucky. His application was denied on the grounds that he lacked sufficient evidence proving that he had worked with the U.S., despite letters from military officials attesting to his service. Efforts by one of Habib's brothers, Saboor, who lives in Syracuse, New York, to advocate for him have so far proved futile.

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Habib is now in hiding just a few miles from the Kabul airport. The Taliban are patrolling the streets and searching houses in the area. It's only a matter of time before he is found. His only option is to try to get to the airport, where thousands of people have converged in recent days in a desperate bid to catch evacuation flights out of the country. But entrances to the airport are limited and blocked by dense crowds, gunfire, and Taliban checkpoints. A previous attempt resulted in Habib getting beaten; his youngest daughter was badly hurt.

I spoke with Saboor about where his fight to free Habib stands. His account has been edited for length and clarity.

It all started in 2001, right around when the U.S. entered Afghanistan. My oldest brother began working for the armed forces. The second oldest followed that path. I graduated from high school in 2007 and financial difficulties at home were such that I could not continue college. I also followed the same path. Eventually Habib, the youngest, followed me. It had become a family tradition and we had high aspirations. We were energized by what we were doing to help build a country. We were motivated to serve our people.

I served as an instructor to teach counterinsurgency classes, as an operations manager. My two other brothers served as interpreters. Habib served as a logistics officer, bringing essentials to the base so that the basic needs of the soldiers were met. He also did cultural advising by teaching soldiers the local language, the local culture, and how to go about their daily life when they're interacting with locals.

If you recall, back in 2008, 2009, Afghans who were allied to the coalition forces were being hunted, they were being killed, they were being kidnapped, they were being beheaded. So the level of fear grew and we began hiding our identity. We began disappearing from society. That sense of pride, that sense of service, began slowly vanishing. So eventually we became strangers in our own society. We had to stop meeting friends, we had to stop talking to community members, and began lying about who we work for and how we earn money. That eventually led us to saying, "I'm fed up with this. I've got to go." That's when we applied for programs like SIV.

In 2009, I applied. I waited for five years before they eventually said, "Okay, we're going to send you over." But for my oldest brother and Habib, when they initially applied, the embassy had given them a denial letter. And then eventually, out of the blue, they sent my oldest brother another email saying, "Your case is approved," even though we had a denial letter for him.

For Habib, we expected the same thing to happen, so we waited. We thought maybe there was an administrative error. We made an appeal. We contacted his sponsor. We made several follow-ups. We never heard anything. It was a constant back-and-forth of us trying to figure out what the heck is going on. We were fighting as brothers; we were talking to colleagues, trying to figure out how we can bring him to the States. Eventually,

when I naturalized as a U.S. citizen in 2019, I was like, *You know what, I don't care. I'll sponsor him myself.* That case is pending with the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services.

We've been in this fight for so long and, quite honestly, I'm exhausted. I'm paralyzed because we are just sitting there and looking up at the skies, trying to wait for some kind of magic to happen. I still believe that somebody somewhere will eventually say, "Shoot, we made a mistake. This guy meets every criteria. Let's send him an approval letter."

I visited Habib in Afghanistan in 2019, right before COVID hit. I had just been naturalized and I was like, *Well, maybe this is a good opportunity to show Habib that we haven't forgotten about him.* I made a pledge to Habib that I'll turn this world upside down if I have to to get him out of there.

There are some colleagues here who are soldiers who have been working with me to try to get Habib and his family to the airport so they could catch a flight anywhere on this planet aside from Afghanistan. Through them, we've been up all night trying to figure this out, trying to sort of implement the operation from here and kind of playing Habib like a chess piece, trying to move him around, trying to move him to different gates.

He got to the point where he almost lost his daughter. He got beaten; he couldn't get to the airport. I was like, "Why don't you just push, man? Why didn't you just man up and push through the crowd to get through the gate?" And he was like, "Look, man, if you want me to die, I'll go. But I can't. I'll die."

It's hard. There's obviously the sense of betrayal. My heart hurts right now because we believed in this mission and a country that we thought was going to do good to people. And here we are.

Every day we get up and we watch the news and you see the president or the State Department or the folks in the Pentagon or the top military officials, and they always say, "We do not leave our allies behind." It's a total lie. It's a betrayal. It's not the reality. I've called the White House, I've called the State Department, I've called my senators, I've called my representatives—anyone who showed a slight interest in saving lives. On one hand, you see them getting up and talking about how they're going to do whatever it takes to get the allies out, and on the other hand, reality tells you something different.

I can't even think of what might be next. At this stage, things are changing by seconds, by minutes. I think in the entire 20 years of the U.S.-led coalition war in Afghanistan, one of the greatest mistakes ever made is that they put a time frame into the departure. I remember back when I was serving and the Taliban would always say, "You have the watch, but we have the time." And we used to teach that to the soldiers, about how this level of urgency is not the right approach. We have to be patient; we're building a system. It could take years and years. It's not a project where you have a beginning and ending.

Read: 'This is not Saigon. This is worse than Saigon.'

I've lost faith and I've lost trust in a nation that I dedicated my entire life to. We've seen it happen, in 1975 with Saigon. This is no different. They're going to leave and, with all this power I have—of connecting with the military, with friends, with senators—I may not be able to save my brother.