

CALIFORNIA TODAY

An Afghan Journey From Kabul to the Bay Area

A former interpreter for the U.S. military moved from Kabul to Martinez last week. He longs for the family that he left behind.



By Thomas Fuller

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Ahmed Azizi, a former interpreter for U.S. Special Forces in Afghanistan, and his wife, Tamanna Rasteen, moved from Afghanistan to the United States last week, settling in Martinez. Mike Kai Chen for The New York Times

MARTINEZ — Ahmed Azizi, a former interpreter for U.S. Special Forces in Afghanistan, is living between two worlds.

Last week he was in Kabul embracing his parents and an entourage of two dozen brothers, cousins and nephews who tearfully waved and wondered when they might see him again.

This week, Azizi finds himself in a house a few blocks from a freeway that whiskers him off to downtown San Francisco and the Golden Gate Bridge, the places he dreamed of when he was living in a military outpost battling insurgents in southern Afghanistan.

Azizi is one of tens of thousands of Afghans who have resettled in the United States in the two decades since the American invasion of Afghanistan. They say they feel lucky to have left the turmoil of Afghanistan, but fear for their relatives who remain there.

Azizi's American story so far: He is a Muslim man sponsored by a Jewish organization and living across the street from an evangelical church in a California subdivision.

"Life is beautiful," Azizi told me.

On Wednesday, when we arranged to meet at his house, Azizi said he would text me his address. But he didn't know the name of his street, so he sent me the latitude and longitude as if he were still somewhere in a remote Afghan outpost.

Azizi and his wife, Tamanna Rasteen, both 28, have spent the past few days wandering through the Bay Area wide-eyed.

Azizi said he was impressed with the discipline shown by California drivers. "In Kabul there are some traffic lights at intersections, but no one follows them," he said. He noticed how people keep to themselves in California; no one asked him who he was, where he was from. "Everybody is busy with their own business," he said.

Rasteen said she was impressed by the buildings. They looked sturdy to her. In San Francisco, she was intrigued that some people wore jeans that sagged “halfway down their legs,” she said.

But this was small talk.



Azizi and Rasteen still have many family members in Kabul. Mike Kai Chen for The New York Times

Behind the smiles, it was not difficult to detect the deep ambivalence they harbored about leaving their families behind. Azizi became glassy eyed when he recounted his father’s parting words last week: “Take care of yourself, take care of your wife. God bless you.”

Azizi said he did not realize — no one realized, he said — that as he was leaving the country, it was on the precipice of regime change. When his plane took off, Afghanistan had a government. When he arrived in California on Thursday, it was in shambles. Three days later, as he was settling into his new home in Martinez, the Taliban — the enemy he had helped fight for three years — had declared victory.

I asked Azizi whether he had trouble separating his old life from his new life and how much he thought about his three years serving with U.S. troops.

He recounted a shooting that seems like a poignant statement on the difficulties of the American war in Afghanistan. In July 2019, Azizi traveled to an Afghan Army base in Uruzgan province, southwest of Kabul. He was interpreting for American troops when a barrage of bullets fatally wounded two American soldiers. An Afghan Army soldier inside the base had targeted the Americans, according to an account by the Stars and Stripes newspaper, which identified the two slain U.S. soldiers as Brandon Jay Kreischer, 20, and Michael Isaiah Nance, 24.

“I was new to the job,” Azizi said. “It was a very difficult time.”

From the time he became a military interpreter in 2018, Azizi said he felt like he was a marked man. The job came with constant reminders of its dangers. One fellow interpreter was killed in battle. Another was tracked down and slain in front of his family while on leave. Two others were killed near their homes, one decapitated with a knife.

“Every single minute and second I was scared,” Azizi told me.

His flight last week to the United States landed in Washington, D.C., and it was only when he arrived at his hotel, a Holiday Inn in Virginia, that he said he finally felt safe.

Now in California he is embarking on the next chapter.

“We are starting from zero here,” he said.

Jewish Family & Community Services East Bay, the organization helping him, is paying his rent for now.

Updates on Afghanistan Sign up for a daily email with the latest news on the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

In a few weeks he will get his green card, allowing him to find employment.

His goal, he says, is to enlist in the U.S. military.

"This country gave me this opportunity," he said. "This country gave me a new life."

For more:

- In California, where many Afghans resettled after the American invasion, those who worked with the United States fear for relatives left behind. [Read more.](#)
- On Wednesday, the Taliban faced the first challenges to their renewed rule and used force to break up protests. Prominent figures vowed to continue resistance.
- Keep up with the latest from Afghanistan with the Times live briefing.

Thomas Fuller is the San Francisco bureau chief for The New York Times.



Republican candidates in the recall election, from left, Kevin Faulconer, Kevin Kiley and John Cox, participated in a debate held by the Sacramento Press Club in Sacramento on Tuesday. Rich Pedroncelli/Associated Press

CALIFORNIA

- **Vaccine verification:** California officials announced Wednesday that people attending indoor gatherings of 1,000 people or more will have to show proof of vaccination or a negative coronavirus test result starting on Sept. 20, KTLA reports.
- **Recall:** A new essay from the Times Opinion section explores an important issue: "Why Deep Blue California Could Elect a Bright Red Governor."
- **Baby bear:** Firefighters are keeping an eye on an emaciated bear cub that may have lost its mother in the Dixie fire. The baby bear has been spotted "peering through brush and leaping through plants covered in fire retardant chemicals," The Associated Press reports.
- **Blue Shield stepping down:** The Los Angeles Times reports that the Blue Shield of California, which Gov. Gavin Newsom says was critical in distributing vaccines early in the pandemic, is taking a step back from its role.

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

- **Imperial County:** Tucked into the southeast corner of the state, Imperial County has surprised many with its vaccination rates, third highest in the state, CalMatters reports.
- **Sweet treats:** The Girl Scouts of Greater Los Angeles and Orange County are releasing a new cookie. Adventurefuls are a brownie-inspired treat with caramel cream and sea salt, reports The Orange County Register.
- **Real estate costs:** Southern California home prices set a record in July, with the six-county region's median sales price reaching \$681,750, The Los Angeles Times reports.

CENTRAL CALIFORNIA

- **Missing family:** A Mariposa family that went missing on Monday was found dead in mountains near Yosemite National Park on Tuesday, reports The Sacramento Bee.
- **Farmers:** As the extreme drought persists, small farm owners are left wondering whether state emergency funds will be directed their way or if they will be left to fend for themselves, Civil Eats reports.
- **Police violence:** The American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California released a report this week saying that the Bakersfield Police Department has one of the highest rates of police killings in the nation and has failed to address longstanding practices of excessive force and racial discrimination, The Bakersfield Californian reports.

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

- **Wildfire updates:** While the Dixie and McFarland fires are at least somewhat contained, the Caldor fire in El Dorado County, which started on Saturday, wasn't contained at all as of Tuesday night.
- **San Francisco ghost guns:** San Francisco's district attorney, Chesa Boudin, is suing three companies for selling parts and accessories to assemble "ghosts guns," untraceable firearms that can be made from do-it-yourself kits.
- **Airport closure:** A study released two weeks ago found elevated lead levels in children from neighborhoods near the Reid-Hillview Airport in East San Jose. On Tuesday, Santa Clara County supervisors unanimously approved a measure to close the airport, NBC Bay Area reports.



Heami Lee for The New York Times

What we're eating

Adapted by the Times restaurant critic Tejal Rao, this chiles rellenos recipe originally comes from Andrea Serrato, who sells an exquisite version of the dish out of her home in East Los Angeles.



The Alabama Hills in Lone Pine, Calif. Brian Melley/Associated Press

Where we're traveling

Today's California travel tip comes from David Olodort. He writes:

This hidden gem is caught between two titans of nature: Mt. Whitney and Death Valley! The Alabama Hills (unfortunately christened after a Confederate ship) is an incredible landscape of tumbling rock formations (à la Joshua Tree minus the yuccas). I recommend exploring the rolling trails, feeling the coarse rock on your hands, at sunset when the light over the Sierras is breathtaking. It's also home to countless Western movies, which you can learn about in town (Lone Pine is a lovely community!).

Tell us about your favorite places to visit in California. Please include your name and where you live, so we can share your tip in the newsletter. Email your suggestions to CAtoday@nytimes.com.

And before you go, some good news

After a long hiatus because of the pandemic, Los Angeles's favorite car-free event, CicLAvia, has returned to the streets.

Pedestrians and cyclists took over a stretch of Avalon Boulevard in Wilmington on Sunday, but this time, there was a new attraction along the side of the road. Along the route, participants could not only pick up water and grab a bite at food trucks, but also receive a free Covid-19 vaccination.

"We're playing our part as we try to ensure that our city can move to a better place," CicLAvia's chief strategist told KCRW.

Thanks for reading. I'll be back tomorrow. — Soumya

P.S. Here's today's Mini Crossword, and a clue: Furry feet (4 letters).

Steven Moity, Briana Scalia and Miles McKinley contributed to California Today. You can reach the team at CAtoday@nytimes.com.

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