

'What Will Happen to Me?' An Uncertain Future Awaits Afghans Who Fled

Tens of thousands clambered onto evacuation planes bound for Qatar. Many are now in limbo in overflowing processing centers, fearful of what comes next.

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AL UDEID AIR BASE, Qatar — Walking down the tarmac of the American military air base around 2 a.m. recently, the Afghan woman lunged for a handgun strapped to an American airman's leg. As service members rushed to restrain her, she shrieked and thrashed — determined to kill herself. Then, she crumpled into a ball and sobbed.

Her family had been killed during the Taliban's rapid takeover in Afghanistan and she had barely managed to get on an evacuation flight out of Kabul. Now, she was hundreds of miles from her homeland — all alone.

"Please, please, please," she gasped, the orange and yellow lights from buses crowded with evacuees flashing across her tear-soaked face.

Since the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan, the exodus of Afghans has swelled like a flash flood, inundating American military bases in places like Qatar, where tens of thousands of evacuees have over the past two weeks arrived to be screened by the U.S. authorities.

But as international evacuations wind down, attention has turned to the fates of those who were part of the sudden and unanticipated mass exodus. In just two weeks, more than 5,000 American troops in Kabul helped evacuate more than 114,000 people in a chaotic and often violent effort reflective of the stunning pace at which the Taliban took over.

After the insurgents entered the Afghan capital, Kabul, desperate scrums of people descended on the city's international airport, where they clambered onto evacuation flights. On landing in Qatar, which has played a key role in evacuation efforts, some Afghans fell to their knees in tears after disembarking, thinking they had arrived in the United States.

But that hope was extinguished after they were shuttled to a refugee processing center run by the American military in a large aircraft hangar — their first glimpse into the long, grueling journey toward eventually being resettled in the United States.

The surge of evacuees has already promised to create numerous legal, bureaucratic and logistical problems. Many Afghans who clambered onto flights may not be eligible for resettlement in the United States. Those who are risk overwhelming resettlement organizations in the United States that are tasked with providing for the immediate needs of newly arrived refugees — like housing, medical care and food — and that typically handle only a steady trickle of newcomers.

And at the processing centers, the relief of escaping Afghanistan under Taliban rule has collided with the hardships of leaving a homeland and starting life anew. Amid the exodus, people's collective sense of mourning for what Afghanistan once was has given way to fear for what their lives will become outside of it.



A photograph taken by an Afghan evacuee, who asked not to be named for fear of retaliation, showing service members at Al Udeid Air Base unloading supplies for the Afghans there.

“Thinking about my family, their situation, I am not mentally well,” said Zahra, 28, who left last week on an evacuation flight to Doha, the capital of Qatar. “And then in America, we don’t know what will happen there: Will we find a job, will we settle in a good place, will we make better lives for ourselves?” Like others interviewed for this article, she asked that only her first name be used to avoid reprisals.

Since she arrived in Doha, Zahra has been replaying the warning a Taliban guard gave her: Once she left, she would never be allowed back.

In Afghanistan she had readied herself to flee for nearly a week as she watched provincial capitals collapse in rapid succession. Then, two days after the insurgents poured into Kabul, she rushed to the airport with her mother, her siblings and their families.

After they pleaded with Taliban guards at the gate for more than an hour, the insurgents moved aside to allow Zahra’s family through. But as the crowd behind her surged forward, she heard the Taliban firing weapons into the air and felt her mother’s hand slip out of her own. When she turned around, she saw Taliban guards beating back the group behind her, with her mother and the rest of her family swallowed into that crowd.

Only Zahra, her brother-in-law and his children made it past the gate. Last week, they joined thousands of other Afghans who have poured into the processing center at Al Udeid Air Base.

Inside the aircraft hangar, bone-tired children sprawled across a patchwork of green Army cots, some stained from babies in need of diapers. With only part of the hangar air-conditioned, the air often felt thick from the 115-degree heat outside. Plastic bottles and human waste littered bathroom stalls. In giant tents with fluorescent lights overhead, mattresses covered the floor and hundreds of people tried to settle in. Outside the tents, a makeshift playground had been set up for the children.

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Overstretched American military personnel have worked around the clock to provide medical care, food and water to the unexpected flood of arrivals while immigration officers vet them. But the initial influx of Afghans outpaced the ability to screen them, raising concerns that a humanitarian disaster was unfolding in the processing centers.

John F. Kirby, the chief Pentagon spokesman, said Tuesday, “We’ll be the first to admit that there were conditions at Al Udeid that could have been better,” adding that poor circumstances were “facilitated by the sheer numbers, and the speed with which those numbers got there.”

To ease the strain on the transit hub in Doha, the U.S. military began sending evacuees to American bases in Germany, Italy, Spain and Bahrain, Mr. Kirby said. In Doha, over 100 additional toilets, plus cleaning and catering services, have been added to improve conditions.

After spending hours — or in some cases, days — at Al Udeid, many Afghan evacuees have been transferred to Camp As Sayliyah, a former Army base in a suburb outside Doha, which includes shipping containers transformed into transitional housing. The camp was intended for the monthslong process of screening Afghans who worked with the U.S. government and had applied for special immigration visas — a group that, a few months ago, was not expected to number more than a few thousand.



Children in a makeshift play area at the processing center at Al Udeid, which was overwhelmed in the early days of receiving evacuees from Afghanistan.

Instead, in the first few frenzied days under the Taliban, when rumors swirled of American planes transporting Afghans directly to the United States, thousands of people without passports, visas or identification cards flooded Kabul’s airport and were placed on Doha-bound planes.

“It was a panic environment; the Taliban had entered the airport, that’s why we came here,” said Gul, a police officer at Kabul’s airport who was among those flown to Doha.

The day after Kabul fell, he said, he arrived at his usual position at the airport, which felt like a ghost town: Security forces and airline crews had all abandoned their posts. By midday, chaos gripped the tarmac as people flooded the airport.

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here’s more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

Gul joined the frenzy, jumping onto four commercial planes — all grounded by the mayhem — before forcing his way onto an American evacuation flight. Even when Americans turned off the air-conditioning and told everyone the plane was broken, no one budged.

Now, settling into life at Camp As Sayliyah, he said the snap decision to leave weighed on him. His wife and three children under the age of 6 remain in Kabul.

“In the night, I cannot sleep,” he said. “I was a member of security forces, what if my family is targeted? Who is feeding them?”

He added, “I am here alone, and they are in Afghanistan, where the situation is terrible.”

No one knows how long Gul and others will have to wait for screening at the camp, unable to work or send money back to their families.

Crowds clamber to use the few phone chargers — often among the only items, other than the clothes they were wearing, that they brought with them. People scavenge for cigarette butts on the ground, salvaging small bits of tobacco. Every day around 5 a.m., a line swells outside the food hall, with people waiting hours to enter, sweat seeping through their clothes in the unrelenting heat. Last week, some in the camp complained of food shortages after being given meals ready to eat — or M.R.E.s — typically used by the military.

Those in line offer a window into the chaotic exit from Kabul: There are shopkeepers whose stores were next to the airport, members of the security forces who abandoned their posts there and employees of Kam Air, an Afghan airline, still in their uniforms after jumping on planes.

Mirwais, 31, arrived at the air base in Qatar after clambering onto an American evacuation flight last week. A former translator for U.S. forces and international organizations, he went into hiding when the Taliban entered Kabul and decided to leave after insurgents searching for him visited his mother’s home.



Mirwais, who worked as a translator, feels hopeless now that he has fled Afghanistan that he will be able to get his family out.
Photo by Mirwais

“If I were in Afghanistan, I would be dead right now,” he said. But with each passing day in the camp, he added, hope fades that he will not just survive but start a better life.

After days of desperate calls to relatives to try to get his wife and 10-month-old child evacuated, Mirwais said he had all but given up on reuniting with them outside Afghanistan. And his ability to travel on to the United States is anything but certain.

“I have no passport with me, no papers,” he said. “But if I can’t go on to the United States, what will happen to me? How will I support my family?”