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NATIONAL

# Afghans who helped the U.S. are in dangerous limbo after Trump's order on refugees

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By Diaa Hadid, Juliana Kim

**4-Minute Listen**

PLAYLIST

TRANSCRIPT



A U.S. Air Force captain goes over the day's mission route map with an Afghan National Army officer with assistance from an Afghan interpreter (left), before the U.S.-Afghan convoy sets off in Ghazni, Afghanistan, on March 16, 2009.

Robert Nickelsberg/Getty Images Europe

Surayya's flight to the United States was already booked when President Trump ordered a pause on the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. Not long after, her flight was canceled and her stomach dropped.

"I don't know what to do," she said. "If I go back to Afghanistan, I will be prosecuted or even be killed by the Taliban."

Surayya, who asked NPR not to use her full name for safety reasons, used to work on women's rights projects with the U.S. Embassy in Kabul. But when the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, Surayya and her children fled to neighboring Pakistan. There, she applied for resettlement in the U.S. and was approved.

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### Trump's immigration orders are a blueprint for sweeping policy changes

Now, Surayya's future and safety look uncertain, along with tens of thousands of other Afghans who risked their lives working for the U.S. government or military.

During Trump's first day in office, the president issued an executive order to pause refugee applications and travel plans, citing concerns over the country's capacity to absorb large numbers of refugees.

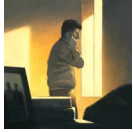
It remains unclear how long the suspension will last, but the order does allow the secretary of state and the secretary of homeland security to admit refugees on a "case-by-case basis." The U.S. State Department did not respond to NPR's request for comment.

### Longstanding pathways for Afghan allies hang in the balance

The U.S. is home to over 200,000 Afghans who arrived as refugees, according to Shawn VanDiver, a military veteran and the president of #AfghanEvac, a nonprofit that helps people from Afghanistan resettle in America.

Around the world, over 40,000 Afghans are still actively pursuing resettlement in the U.S., with more than 10,000 approved to relocate by the U.S. government.

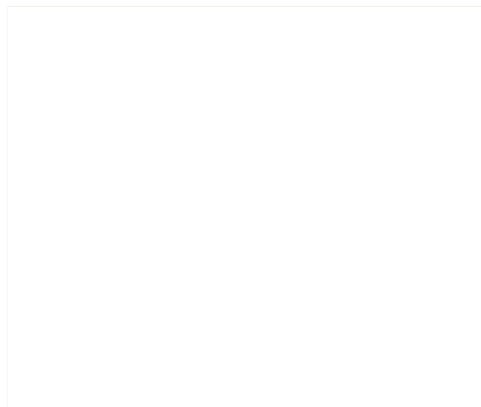
Many of those affected by the pause on the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) are Afghan lawyers and judges who put Taliban fighters behind bars, as well as members of the Afghan military who trained and fought alongside American troops. The families of about 200 active duty U.S. service members are also being impacted, VanDiver said.

**WORLD****Reporters' notebook: revisiting Afghan refugees starting anew in the U.S.**

"We made a promise to our Afghan allies, and fulfilling that promise is not just about policy – it's about honor and integrity," he added.

USRAP is one of the pathways for Afghans who risked their lives to support U.S. missions. The other is called the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV), specifically designed for Afghan interpreters, drivers and other contractors who worked directly with American forces.

The SIV program is in jeopardy too, following a separate executive order suspending foreign aid, including funding for refugee resettlement agencies. The order similarly stalls relocation flights, as well as hinders organizations from processing SIV cases and providing critical travel loans, according to VanDiver.

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"This isn't just a humanitarian issue – it's an economic one. The ripple effects will be felt across the U.S. as resettlement agencies close their doors and jobs are lost," he said.

**"He is unfortunately putting our lives in grave danger"**

Surayya said she was supposed to be evacuated to the U.S. after the Taliban seized Kabul. But like thousands of others, she was not able to get on a plane during America's chaotic retreat from Afghanistan in 2021.

The exit happened during former President Biden's time in office, but it was set in motion by the first Trump administration, which signed a deal with the Taliban in 2020 to withdraw after two decades in the country.



#### INVESTIGATIONS

### Three years after the U.S. withdrawal, former Afghan forces are hunted by the Taliban

While Surayya currently resides in Pakistan, it is not a permanent solution. Over the years, Pakistan has deported hundreds of thousands of Afghans. Without a chance to move to the U.S., Surayya does not know where else to go.

"Police of Pakistan are searching for Afghans," she said. "I am not safe here. And if I go back to Afghanistan, my life is not safe, my kids' life is not safe."

Many Afghans who worked for the U.S. but were unable to escape Afghanistan now live in hiding from the Taliban, like Roshangar, who asked NPR not to include his full name because he's been on the run.

Roshangar said he used to work alongside American pilots, helping review and approve airstrikes against Taliban fighters. He was on the last step of his application before the refugee program was suspended. Roshangar said he feels that the Trump administration turned its back to America's Afghan allies.

"He is unfortunately putting our lives in grave danger," he said.

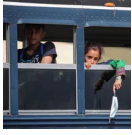
### Veterans rally behind Afghan allies, urging the Trump administration to reverse course

For Army veteran Mark Kirkendall, the issue is deeply personal. "I called these Afghan engineers I worked with my adopted sons," he said. "That's how close we are."

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Kirkendall was deployed to Afghanistan over a decade ago. Since then, he kept in regular contact with the engineers he worked with, helping many of them resettle to the U.S.



## INVESTIGATIONS

### What It's Like Inside The U.S. Processing Center Welcoming Thousands Of Afghans

Kirkendall, who voted for Trump, is hoping the president will make an exemption for Afghan allies. With three engineers still in Afghanistan — and having lost two to the Taliban — Kirkendall said he sees it as a matter of life or death.

"U.S policy has always been to take care of our allies, and we're not doing a good job of that; we're failing the Afghan people," he said.

To Army veteran Alex Waller, who was deployed to Afghanistan in 2017, he believes the U.S. has a moral responsibility to protect those who risked their lives to serve alongside American troops.

"By and large, they are productive members of society that want to be here, that want to make good life for themselves, and who are — in my opinion — they're outstanding people," he said.

For the past two years, Waller and other veterans have been working with Task Force Argo, a volunteer group dedicated to helping Afghan allies evacuate, to bring to the U.S. a former member of the Afghan military who is currently in Turkey.

Waller said the soldier was known for participating in dozens of raids against the Taliban and helping evacuate a wounded American. Since Waller learned that USRAP was paused, he couldn't help but wish he had acted more quickly.

"We should not assume that the countries that they are hiding in will continue to, like, let them hang around out of the kindness of their hearts or something," he said.

Last week, hundreds of veterans signed an open letter to the Trump administration organized by #AfghanEvac, urging that Afghans who put themselves in harm's way working for the U.S. should be exempt from the executive order blocking refugee pathways. They argued that failing to do so would jeopardize America's credibility with potential allies in future conflicts:

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