
Article

Encountering the hostile environment: Recently arrived Afghan migrants in London

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Abstract

Following the dramatic evacuation from Kabul airport in August 2021, the UK government proclaimed its commitment to a ‘warm welcome’ for Afghans. In this paper we draw on original qualitative research to explore the emerging experiences of evacuees, and other recent arrivals, during their first year in London. Using the narratives of our Afghans participants, as well as insights from key stakeholders, we show how they navigated slow, opaque bureaucratic processes and lack of communication with official agencies. As a result of these lengthy processes, many thousands of evacuees remained in temporary hotel accommodation for protracted periods. Drawing on the concept of ‘everyday bordering’, we explore the extent to which Afghan resettlement policies are achieving their objectives. We consider how such policies are birthed within a punitive immigration system, which is designed to ‘wear down’ migrants in the UK, regardless of their reason for migration. Moreover, we argue

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that the ad hoc response of the Home Office and the Foreign Office has created 'false distinctions' between categories of Afghan refugees, reinforcing notions of 'deserving' versus 'underserving' migrants. This distinction allows the government to present itself as humanitarian, 'rescuing' people from Afghanistan, while simultaneously maintaining its commitment to the 'hostile immigration environment'.

Keywords

Afghan evacuation, deserving versus undeserving migrants, hostile environment, resettlement schemes

Introduction

This article focuses on a specific category of racialised migrants: recently arrived Afghans in London. In summer 2021, images of Afghans clinging to planes at Kabul airport shone a spotlight on the desperation of those trying to flee the new Taliban regime (The Guardian, 2021). The British government evacuated approximately 17,000 people from Afghanistan between April and September 2021 (Walsh and Sumption, 2021). The Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) promises to resettle 20,000 people over three years. While the government extols its commitment to supporting Afghans, over the last decade Britain has taken far fewer refugees from Afghanistan than European countries like Switzerland, France, Sweden or Germany (Calcea, 2021). Indeed, most of the estimated 2.6 million Afghan refugees registered with the UNHCR live in Pakistan and Iran (UNHCR, 2022). Moreover, the Nationality and Borders Act (2022) further reduces pathways to refugee status for Afghans arriving on British shores in small boats.

Against this backdrop, we undertook new qualitative research with Afghans in London in partnership with two Afghan associations. In this paper, drawing upon the oral testimony of those who were evacuated from Kabul airport and others who arrived via different routes, including students, as well as insights from key stakeholders, we examine on-going delays, disorganisation, miscommunication and opaque bureaucratic procedures framed by the overarching context of a hostile environment to migration.

The UK's hostile environment has been discussed extensively elsewhere (see editorial introduction). The hostile environment has been described as 'an ideological stance' rather than an evidence-based, ends-driven policy approach (Griffiths and Yeo, 2021: 530). Asylum and immigration are politicised in ways that reflect but also reinforce media attention in the context of a

‘nationalist and chauvinistic zeitgeist’ (Shepherd and Wilkinson, 2021: 224). As one of our key informants from a local authority stated, ‘immigration policy is performative’ (see also Jones et al., 2017; Reynolds et al., 2023). Moreover, El-Enany (2020: 8) argues that UK immigration systems are an ‘ongoing expression’ of the British Empire, and as such have been consistently punctuated by exclusionary policies towards racialised peoples. There appears to be growing political consensus, that ‘most asylum seekers are not genuine but ‘bogus’, because they flee for ‘opportunistic’ economic reasons’ (De Jong, 2022: 221). Hence, migration discourses tend to perpetuate categories of ‘deserving’ versus ‘undeserving’ migrants (Karyotis et al., 2021).

Legislation such as the Immigration Acts 2014 and 2016 and the Nationality and Borders Act (2022), have hardened borders and devolved patrol responsibility beyond the role of trained officials and into everyday life, which Yuval Davis et al. (2019) term ‘everyday bordering’. These policies make employers, landlords and marriage celebrants (vicars and priests), legally liable to check immigration status, with considerable penalties for noncompliance (ibid). This legislation has criminalised migration and heavily impacted on individuals and groups who are perceived as racialised ‘other’ (ibid).

In this paper, drawing on the conceptual framework of everyday bordering and our rich qualitative data, we argue that the hostile environment leaves the government ill-prepared to deal with sudden and anticipated crises, such as the collapse of the Afghan government in August 2021 and the subsequent evacuation of thousands of civilians. Moreover, our paper indicates how chaotic and incremental government policies have created ‘artificial distinctions’ within the same racialised group, i.e. Afghans, resulting in different pathways to immigration status and access to resources.

The article begins with a brief discussion of the Kabul evacuation process, as well as government policies to support Afghan resettlement in the UK. Then we introduce our research project and briefly explain its aims and methods. We next present our research findings by drawing upon the powerful narratives of participants, who experienced the evacuation first-hand and navigated the slow path of resettlement, and ‘everyday bordering’, while residing in temporary accommodation. Our analysis is informed by insights from key informants. The paper ends with our concluding argument.

Afghan relocation and resettlement policies

Britain has a long colonial relationship with Afghanistan since at least the mid-nineteenth century (Gregory, 2004), hence Afghan migration to the UK is not a recent phenomenon (Gladwell, 2021). Many decades of conflict, natural disasters, poverty, and food insecurity have caused mass displacement of Afghans both within and outside the country’s borders (UNHCR, n.d.).

Asylum applications to the UK by Afghans have generally been increasing since 1997 (Jones, 2010), yet prior to more recent resettlement schemes (see below), it was difficult for Afghans to achieve refugee status in the UK (Blitz et al., 2005). Data from the Home Office (2022a) show that between 2001 and 2012, the most common form of leave granted to Afghans was exceptional/discretionary leave to remain, a more temporary form of leave compared to refugee status. Afghans are also the sixth highest nationality to have been forcibly removed from the UK between 2004–2021 (Home Office, 2022b). In 2021, the situation changed following the most recent humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. In preparation for the withdrawal of UK armed forces from the country, around 15,000 Afghan and British people were evacuated in ‘Operation Pitting’. Although the British Government did not publish a detailed breakdown of the figures, Gower (2022) reported that approximately 5000 people of those evacuated were eligible for the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP), a scheme aimed at providing relocation and assistance to people who worked with/for the UK government and/or UK Armed Forces in Afghanistan. The relocation scheme was also open to vulnerable Afghan nationals, such as female politicians, women’s rights activists, and judges (Home Office, 2021a).

A further separate resettlement initiative, the Afghan Citizens’ Resettlement Scheme (ACRS), was established to relocate Afghan people most at risk of human rights abuse, such as women and girls, members of ethnic and religious minority groups, and LGBT+ individuals. This scheme promises to resettle up to 20,000 individuals. However, the implementation of ACRS has been criticised for prioritising people already in the UK and for the decision to drop the number of those eligible to apply from Afghanistan or neighbouring countries from 5000 to 2000 (Merrick, 2022). At the time of writing, only a few dozen people arrived under this scheme (Syal, 2023a). The Refugee Council already reported increasing numbers of asylum applications from Afghans since summer 2021 (Gower, 2022). Various stakeholders, including the Refugee Council (2021), were concerned that delays in opening the scheme to people currently outside the UK, coupled with the absence of other safe/accessible routes, would result in people resorting to unsafe routes to the UK (HoC, 2022).

As part of the resettlement schemes, the Home Office provided Afghans with emergency ‘bridging accommodation’; mostly in hotels and meant to be temporary until individuals’ needs were assessed and long-term solutions were organised (Powell, 2021). However, the process of rehousing evacuees has been torturously slow. During a parliamentary debate on the 6th January 2022, then Minister for Afghan Resettlement, Victoria Atkins, reported that approximately 4000 individuals had been or were in the process of being moved out of temporary accommodation (HoC, 2022), leaving approximately 12,000 people still in bridging hotels. In August

2022, one year on since the evacuation, Home Office figures released to journalists suggested that 9500 Afghans remained in hotels awaiting accommodation (Quinn, 2022). In March 2023, the government announced that all bridging hotels would close within three months and thousands of Afghans still living in hotels would need to find alternative accommodation.¹ Meanwhile, Afghan organisations in the UK struggle to cope with demand for their services and the scarcity of resources to support new arrivals (Mistlin, 2021).

The evacuation and resettlement schemes have come under increasing criticism. A damning report of the Foreign Affairs Committee called the evacuation a 'disaster' and a 'betrayal of [Afghan] allies' (HoC FAC, 2022: 3), which was caused by diplomatic disengagement as well as a lack of leadership and understanding of the situation in Afghanistan. The same report notes that the government underestimated the scale of the civilian evacuation, and hurriedly put together resettlement schemes whose inconsistent eligibility criteria and lack of clear guidelines failed the most vulnerable people who applied (HoC FAC, 2022). Senior retired officers and civil servants voiced their criticism of the ARAP policy and said they were worried that the scheme was not 'conducted with the required spirit of generosity and urgency' (HoC FAC, 2022: 14). Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that the government missed many earlier opportunities to help Afghans including locally employed civilians (LECs) who assisted the British military, such as interpreters and drivers. Despite mounting evidence to the contrary, with increasing numbers of attacks and bombing by the Taliban,² the government continually asserted that Afghanistan was safe and hence refused asylum to LECs who sought to flee prior to summer 2021 (De Jong, 2022). Moreover, this declaration that Afghanistan was safe enabled many European governments, including the British, to deport thousands of people despite the worsening situation there. The HoC FAC report concludes that the lack of preparation for the withdrawal cannot be 'explained by intelligence failures alone' (2022: 16); similarly, in her research with LECs, De Jong (2022) notes that state policies towards Afghanistan were largely motivated by the political agenda of keeping down immigration rates. Due to the commitment to a hostile immigration environment, little preparation was given to the possibility of a mass evacuation of LECs and others in need of protection. Commitment to the hostile environment is also apparent in the Nationality and Borders Act (2022) and the Migration and Economic Development Partnership, better known as the 'Rwanda asylum policy', which seeks to deport people coming to the UK through unofficial routes to camps in Rwanda. Concerns were raised by campaign groups when it was reported that several Afghans, who had fled the Taliban, were due to be removed on the first flight to Rwanda (see Thompson, 2022).

Our project aimed to provide valuable data on these issues by analysing Afghans' first-hand accounts of the evacuation process, their experiences with the Home Office, protracted periods in hotel accommodation and their views on the support provided by migrant associations and local authorities. Our findings indicate how the wider context of the 'hostile environment' impacts even on those whom the government professes to support.

The study

Our project began in January 2022³ and was designed in partnership with two Afghan organisations in London (Paiwand and Afghan Association Harrow). Louise Ryan had worked with Paiwand in previous projects, while the second organisation was a new partnership. The overall research aim was to understand the needs of diverse Afghan communities in London in the context of hostile immigration policy regimes. We sought to explore the experiences of recently arrived Afghans, especially evacuees. We aimed to assess how different agencies respond to the needs of Afghans and what more needs to be done.⁴

Working with the Afghan organisations, we recruited and trained four peer researchers.⁵ These two men and two women were Afghans, who had lived in the UK for relatively short periods of time, indeed, two were recent arrivals who were navigating the asylum process. The peer researchers helped to shape the project by supporting recruitment, especially facilitating access to fellow Afghans living in temporary hotel accommodation, but also in facilitating focus groups, contributing to the final report and engaging in dissemination activities.

The research was qualitative, and used in depth interviews and focus groups. We received ethical approval from London Metropolitan University. Participants were given an information sheet explaining how their data would be treated and instructions on how to withdraw should they wish to do so. Translation to Pashto or Farsi was provided where required. However, as most interviewees were university graduates and spoke English competently, they did not take up the offer of interpreters. To protect participants' identity, culturally appropriate pseudonyms have been used.

Overall, 30 Afghan people took part in the study. Although not making any claims to representativeness, consideration was given to diversity in terms of gender, age, family situation and time of arrival. Just over half (17) identified as female, and the rest (13) as male. Route and year of arrival in the UK varied greatly among participants, with just over half (16) of our participants having arrived between the years 2020–2021. Of the 16 recent arrivals, four had arrived as students, two entered via irregular routes and the rest were evacuees. These recently arrived participants were mainly young; in their 20s–30s.

Most interviewees were university educated, indeed several had higher degrees, or had been university students before evacuation. Those who had worked in Afghanistan prior to their departure held mostly high-level professional or government posts.

We conducted 20 interviews and two focus groups. Interviews were undertaken face to face whenever possible, although 8 were conducted online using MS Teams. Some participants who were interviewed individually also took part in focus groups. All interviews and focus groups were audio recorded, fully transcribed, and anonymised.

To track any changes in circumstances, we established email contact with the newly arrived participants and are keeping in touch electronically, specifically to understand whether and where they have been rehoused.

We conducted five interviews with key stakeholders, including two directors of migrant organisations and people involved in resettlement programmes at three London local authorities. These interviews were conducted online and provided crucial background information, especially the challenges facing recently arrived refugees and the services engaging with them.

The evacuation process

We interviewed ten people who had been part of the evacuation from Kabul Airport. A common theme among our participants was the speed with which their ‘normal lives’ in Afghanistan had suddenly fallen apart when the Taliban seized power in the summer of 2021. As Liqman, a young male evacuee, stated:

I myself didn't expect that this kind of situation ... we didn't think that after 20 years everything would be collapsed, organisations, governments, everything and we would be forced to leave Afghanistan.

The disruption of their lives occurred quickly and unexpectedly as the government collapsed and they were forced to flee at short notice. As Nasreen, a law student, explained: ‘suddenly the situation changed and we just come here and now we are here.’ A sign of her unanticipated relocation was the fact that she only brought one bag: ‘I just had one bag that was my laptop and that's all, I didn't bring anything with me ... My laptop and my phone ... I didn't bring my charger!’ The suddenness of their arrival contrasted markedly with the long, slow, protracted journey over land and sea undertaken by those who came via unofficial routes (Kaytaz, 2016; López and Ryan, 2023).

All the evacuees described the chaotic situation at Kabul airport. As Liqman emphasised: ‘It was I think many, many times worse than it was

seen on TVs'. Ebraheem, a government employee in his 30s, went to the airport with his wife and young children, but became so fearful for their safety in the crowds that he advised his wife to return home:

Look at this crowd, if we go further or go forward, this little daughter will die, maybe the crowd will come together and press her, and she will die.' I told her, 'Go back home with my father and after that I will see what will happen'.

In the end Ebraheem was evacuated without his wife and children who remain in Afghanistan.

Participants recounted waiting in the crowds outside the processing centre at the Baron Hotel for several days. The conditions were atrocious, and many interviewees described being without food and water:

the British Army were providing some bottles of water but that was very rare, it was not enough, just they were throwing them to the crowd and everybody who are stronger or taller they could catch it, all people couldn't catch it (Liqman).

Liqman, who waited for two days and two nights outside the Baron Hotel with his wife, mentioned the total lack of any facilities such as toilets: 'the most difficult thing was that there was no toilet for two days, especially it was really difficult for women. It was terrible.'

For those who waited in the queue with young children, the situation was especially difficult. Baseerah, her husband and 4 young children soon ran out of the little provisions they had brought with them: 'just sleeping on the ground with very warm weather and also lots of flies ... just lying on the grass for two nights without proper food.' Moreover, Baseerah and several other participants reported hearing gun fire and were fearful of being hit in the crossfire. Liqman reported that people near him in the queue were shot: 'I have seen two people that have been injured because of bullets'.

As well as the appalling conditions, people were anxious about getting processed in time before the situation deteriorated further. Despite having the correct documents, there seemed no guarantee of getting through to the airport. Several participants told us about their desperate efforts to get through the crowds and be processed.

It is apparent that the British authorities were suspicious of fake emails and reluctant to accept documents at face value. As Malala, a university student, reported 'they couldn't trust our email document, because they say that, "Everyone has it and it's fake"'. Trying to evacuate with her two sisters, Malala recounted her desperate efforts to get through to the British authorities. Having waded through a filthy canal for 4 hours, shouting for soldiers to accept her documents, Malala finally found two female British soldiers who were willing to listen to her: 'they helped me, they found me inside the

water, where I stood, and then I handed her my email, and then she noticed and checked my sisters' name, and then we were allowed to get in [the processing centre]'.

Participants were immensely relieved to be evacuated and expressed their gratitude to the British authorities: 'I'm really thankful of this British Government because they brought us from that bad situation' (Nasreen). Nonetheless, there was also a view that many vulnerable people had not been evacuated: 'many others who deserve to be evacuated, they were left behind.' (Malala).

Among our interviewees, there was consensus that the evacuation process was precarious and having the right connections was often a key factor in negotiating safe exit. A key informant from a London local authority noted: 'the emphasis on the connection with the British, used to organise the evacuation, doesn't map onto any of the international instruments that determine who should be getting protection'. A key informant from an Afghan association simply stated that 'it's all about networking and who knows who ... it's just not fair'.

Abubakar, a senior government employee in his 40s, explained how his evacuation was facilitated by a connection with a British official who helped him to get the necessary documents. Similarly, when Malala finally managed to get into the airport, she had to draw upon her connections to influential British people, including a well-known journalist: 'they interviewed me, and they also called [journalist] and the British Embassy ... and they approved that we were eligible to come.' By contrast, Malala recounted the situation of an Afghan policewoman, who was at risk from the Taliban, but who lacked influential connections and was refused evacuation.

Among our diverse sample of participants, we heard several accounts of those who were unable to be evacuated on time from Kabul airport. Zaman explained that his brother, a senior Afghan army officer, who had the correct documents, tried on several occasions to reach the airport with his wife and children, but could not get through the crowds before the evacuation was terminated. That brother is now in hiding in Afghanistan and Zaman is fearful for his safety. Mirwais, a government employee, did not manage to get to the airport and was forced to leave Afghanistan via Turkey to get to the UK. As discussed in the next section, those arriving via irregular routes face very different prospects in the UK.

As our data clearly show, the evacuation was hurriedly arranged and chaotic, with a lack of basic provisions including water and toilets. It is apparent that there was insufficient personnel on the ground to process the huge numbers who sought to leave. It is equally apparent that not all those who were most at risk were successfully evacuated. Our data confirm the findings of the HoC FAC (2022) report in suggesting that knowing 'the right people' and having good connections was a factor in ensuring safe transit out of Kabul airport.

Hotels and housing

Upon arrival in London, the evacuees were initially housed in Covid-secure, quarantine hotels before being moved into longer-term (yet still temporary) accommodation, so-called ‘bridging hotels’. Interestingly, these included high-end, sometimes 5-star, hotels in central London, which were empty because of the pandemic. At the time of interview, participants had lived in these hotels for more than 8 months. Follow up emails, in August 2022, revealed that most were still in those hotels, though with increasing tourism in London, there was pressure to vacate those hotels and several participants were moved to hotels outside London (see also Maghribi, 2022).

During our interviews, participants in bridging hotels expressed their gratitude to British authorities for providing accommodation in comfortable hotels in nice and secure areas of London. Abubakar praised the British government for providing Afghan refugees with lots of facilities, in nice hotels, at no cost: ‘we have everything. The food is very best, lunch, the dinner, and the breakfast.’

Several participants praised NGOs in promptly mobilising to assist and advise new arrivals. Baseerah, who had limited English language proficiency, and was interviewed via an interpreter, praised the work of Afghan organisations in hotels for providing interpreting skills when reading emails, making GP and school appointments, organising meetings with the Home Office, Job Centres and providing advice on applications to Universal Credit. Hamida, a medical student and mother of two boys, praised the work of charities such as Hopscotch for organising English language programmes and a children’s playgroup in her hotel: ‘This organisation is working brilliant’. During visits, we observed many NGOs, including Afghan organisations, running advice sessions in bridging hotels.

However, key informants from Afghan groups emphasised the heavy burden placed on them and how they had to mobilise quickly to fill the void in statutory services: ‘suddenly all agencies, all organisations, started to contact us to know how they can design these new services for the refugees.’ A key informant from another Afghan group explained the pressures for translation services: ‘I was the only translator there. Everybody was calling me up from the hotels to the local authorities and to the GPs and everybody’. Moreover, he described the emotional toll of listening to harrowing stories every day for weeks: ‘That was a very, very hard time ... listening to those dire stories and now it’s haunting my memory.’

We also interviewed people who arrived via other routes (including irregular routes – see López and Ryan, 2023). Sher Shah, a 24-year-old man, unable to be evacuated, paid traffickers to travel from Afghanistan via Turkey and Greece, on to the ‘Jungle’ in Calais and then by sea to Britain.

Arriving on British soil, he sought out a police station, claimed asylum and was promptly arrested. He described being treated badly by the police. In fact, he became very upset during the interview and explained that his treatment by British police was the most shocking and disappointing part of the entire journey. Because of the situation in Afghanistan, the UK government had paused deportations, so Sher Shah was eventually moved to a contingency hotel. While evacuees from Kabul airport were accommodated in mainly 'high end' hotels, Afghans who arrived around the same time through cross-Channel migration, like Sher Shah and Mirwais, were accommodated in cheaper 'contingency' hotels.

Therefore, the government accommodated recently arrived Afghans in different kinds of hotels depending on routes of arrival (López and Ryan, 2023). This is not simply about the type of accommodation; we also noted that while extensive support systems were available for evacuees in bridging hotels, little or no support was provided in contingency hotels. One informant from a local authority suggested that these processes have created 'two types of Afghans' when, in reality, there is no difference between them: 'it's a completely artificial, false distinction'. She added: 'while those living in bridging hotels will be allowed to work and claim benefits ... the others are stuck in limbo'. This 'artificial distinction', reinforcing notions of 'deserving' and 'undeserving', is not unique to Afghans. A similar situation existed among Syrian refugees: 'states label people' by de facto treating resettled people as the 'good' refugees, 'while those who arrive of their own volition, regardless of their needs, are viewed as more problematic' (Karyotis et al., 2021: 483).

In contrast to the speed of their evacuation, the slow pace of re-housing was a key concern for Afghans in bridging hotels. Participants who have lived in hotels for months on end, complained about the lack of transparency and information from the Home Office about when and where they might be re-housed. Liloma, a woman who worked for an NGO in Afghanistan, told us: 'When we asked them how long we should wait for a house and other information they always tell us, "We don't know. Just wait and we'll let you know" ... but still none of us know about the future'. Hamida said that the Home Office had stated there were not enough properties in London for all families. Participants, like Hamida whose two sons were settling into a local school, worried that they would be moved around the country from one hotel to another at short notice and that children's schooling would be disrupted (see other contributions to this special issue). In follow-up emails, we found that several interviewees, including Mirwais, Liloma and Liqman, had been moved to cheaper hotels outside London (see also Syal, 2023b). Liloma was still in a hotel in March 2023 (see Ryan et al., 2023).

A key informant from a local authority explained that the Home Office asked all London boroughs to get involved in the resettlement process of Afghan families. However, they stated, administrative inefficiencies and lack

of communication with the Home Office were delaying the process. For example, while that particular local authority had identified several properties in their borough, so far the Home Office had not found families to take up these vacancies. A key informant from another local authority, which also had properties available for Afghan families, expressed similar frustration that the re-housing process was ‘incredibly slow and disorganised’ partly because ‘the Home Office have had a lot of staff cuts in recent times ... So they were completely overwhelmed.’ Moreover, a stakeholder from a third local authority stated that, although the Home Office was unable to manage the re-housing process, they were reluctant, for political reasons, to hand over that process to local authorities. This stakeholder speculated that the government’s performative enactment of tough anti-immigration policies, operationalised through the Home Office, was negatively impacting on the bureaucratic mechanisms, staffing and cross-institutional cooperation needed to expedite Afghan resettlement. Consequently, vast sums of money were spent keeping Afghans in hotels when properties were available within some local authorities. That stakeholder concluded: ‘nothing in it makes sense if you were looking at it as a cost-benefit analysis’.

Ebraheem, who was trying to bring his wife and children from Afghanistan, expressed his confusion at the whole resettlement process. Although the Home Office had informed him that he was moving to accommodation by himself, he was moved to a shared flat with two other men in a small town outside London. The lack of privacy exacerbated his diagnosed anxiety: ‘I faced some difficulties that I cannot share with my family because they are not here’. Later, he emailed us to say that he moved from that accommodation to a rented house with Afghans friends in a town in the Midlands. He moved in search of a cheaper accommodation and where he hoped to find a job and send money to his family in Afghanistan.

In addition to concerns about housing, many participants, including Ebraheem, expressed concerns about delays in processing their immigration documentation to secure their rights and pave the way for family reunion with relatives waiting in Afghanistan.

Visas and the immigration process

As noted in the literature (Karyotis et al., 2021; Mayblin, 2019) all those entering the UK asylum process face lengthy delays, intrusive interrogations, and uncertain outcomes. While the evacuees are en-route to secure status, albeit very slowly, Afghans who arrived via other routes are in much more precarious situations. Nonetheless, even among the evacuees there were concerns about long delays and lack of information. Liqman reported not receiving guidance on issues related to financial support; he highlighted that it took

5 weeks ‘from the registration up to activation of Universal Credit’ and 2 months to receive the ARAP card. He complained that such lack of information does not allow refugees to make any plan: ‘We don’t know what will happen tomorrow ... so I cannot plan for anything’. Accessing information was a barrier also for those who had enjoyed relatively privileged lives in Afghanistan; a key informant from an Afghan organisation explained that some people were embarrassed to ask for advice, and as a result, ‘they missed a lot of opportunities and lots of benefits. And now they are in a stage that they have run out of everything’.

The resettlement process was particularly difficult to navigate for those who entered the UK on student visas, and whose status changed following the collapse of the Afghan government. Four of our participants arrived in 2020 on prestigious scholarships to study at British universities; they expected to complete their degrees and return to their jobs in Afghanistan. However, their plans were scuppered by the Taliban takeover. Unable to return home, these four had to apply to change their status from student visa holders to asylum seekers, a process which proved slow and complicated. Dilaram, who had been living in student halls, was faced with the prospect of homelessness as her university could only provide accommodation until her graduation or until the end of her visa. Dilaram explained: ‘I cannot get accommodation outside because it is costly, and I don’t have a valid visa. No one can give me a contract for a house’. The conceptual framework of ‘everyday bordering’ (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019) is especially pertinent to Dilaram’s experience. Her immigration status is not yet confirmed so landlords, as unofficial border guards, are unable to rent a property to her for fear of incurring a large fine.

Navigating the asylum process was a new, disconcerting experience especially for participants who had travelled to the UK on numerous occasions, before the collapse of the Afghan government, either on work or tourist visas. Gulkan first arrived in London in 2011 for work-related reasons; after returning to Afghanistan for a short period, he was posted back to London through his job in 2017. Similarly, to those who arrived on student visas, Gulkan had expected to return home, yet the changing political events in Afghanistan meant that he suddenly had to apply for asylum. Having occupied a high level, respected position in Britain, Gulkan found himself immersed in the slow, highly bureaucratic Home Office procedures, without any power to expedite the process. Following his initial Home Office interview in November 2021, Gulkan had repeatedly phoned but was told ‘wait, you have to wait’.

Mirwais had also spent time in the UK prior to 2021. Mirwais and his family had visited Europe regularly for business reasons and had travelled to the UK on tourist visas. ‘I used to come to the UK several times when I was [working] in Paris. My wife and my kids, they came several times here

for a visit.’ With the collapse of the Afghan government, like many others, Mirwais found himself in very different circumstances and caught up in the uncertainty of the Home Office systems:

my expectation was that I have visa when I arrive to the UK, I can apply for family reunion to bring my kids, they are depending to me. So since six months I’m here, I stop in a hotel in South London, honestly speaking, I am an asylum seeker now.

Mirwais’s wife and children also fled Afghanistan and were in Turkey waiting for him to assist their move to the UK. However, while his own immigration status was not yet confirmed, he was unable to help his family.

Prolonged delays in securing immigration status also impacted on participants’ access to employment. Moreover, both participants and employers were confused about their rights to work. As mentioned, Ebraheem was one of the few interviewees who had been rehoused from a hotel. However, he described his on-going difficulties in getting a job: ‘I wash two days non-stop dishes in a restaurant, they said, “You have insurance number, you have a bank account, but we cannot pay”. Why? Because you don’t have proper documents’’. Now living in private rented accommodation, Ebraheem struggled to survive on universal credit, as he also needed to send money to support his family in Afghanistan. Delays in regularising his immigration status caused him considerable stress:

I have done a biometric and still waiting for documents. So, I don’t receive any other call from the Home Office about the documents or requirements, I’m just waiting for them. But I have biometric, and they filled the form for me for permanent residency.

Nasreen, a student in her 20s, living in a central London hotel, had several interviews for cafe and hotel jobs but confusion about her right to work was a recurring problem:

The Home Office said ‘you’re allowed’. Also, we have got a letter that state that ‘you are allowed to work, to study’ ... But when we are going for a job, in the middle of the interview they want like ID number or something, reference number or something, but we do not have that. They are saying that without that we cannot give you a job, we cannot hire you.

Nasreen had a national insurance number but had not yet received her BRP (biometrics residents’ permit). Once again, the concept of everyday bordering is relevant here as unofficial border guards, i.e. employers, demand evidence of full immigration documentation. Clearly, there is confusion in the

system, as Home Office letters assert that Afghan evacuees have the right to work, while delays in issuing appropriate permits mean that employers are wary about offering jobs. Fearing fines, the overzealous behaviour of everyday border guards has been noted as another consequence of the hostile environment (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019). Hence, although resettled refugees in theory have access to the labour market, the reality is often far more complex (Karyotis et al., 2021).

Lack of clarity regarding right to work did not prevent Job Centres from pressurising participants to look for jobs. Liqman complained about being constantly invited to Job Centre appointments, sometimes several times per week; his wife, who was heavily pregnant, was also continually called by the Job Centre, although she was unable to work. This tension between what participants were 'expected' to do and what they were 'allowed' to do caused confusion and anxiety.

Despite the difficulties in getting clarification regarding their right to work, most participants were eager to gain employment and reactivate their careers in Britain. However, being highly qualified and having had professional jobs in Afghanistan, many were worried about de-skilling. Zaman, who was a doctor with many years' experience in Afghanistan and had arrived in Britain in 2020 to pursue an additional degree, found himself status-less when his student visa expired before his asylum claim was processed. Zaman was deeply concerned that his career was now over, and he would never work as a doctor again: 'You know medicine is seven years in Afghanistan ... I got specialisation which is three years, that's 10 years. I got a degree and PhD two years, so it was 12 years ... But here, I'm nothing ... I think I am lost here'.

The anxieties related to navigating obstacles and barriers of the immigration process were exacerbated by worries about the fate of loved ones still in Afghanistan. Liloma narrated how she had been threatened by Taliban supporters during her work with an NGO in rural Afghanistan: 'they told me, "we will kill you." When the Taliban came, I thought they would come to my house.' Having been evacuated in August 2021, Liloma fears repercussions against her relatives and is deeply concerned about their safety. Several other participants, especially those from ethnic minority groups, also described how their relatives were suffering severe threats. Those from the Hazara ethnic minority in particular, expressed specific concerns about persecution (see Fischer, 2017; Hakimi, 2022). For example, Begum, a Hazara woman, spoke about many Taliban attacks on Hazara women, and was anxious about her activist sisters in Afghanistan, now in hiding and in constant fear of arrest.

Our findings clearly illustrate how people's experiences and opportunities are shaped by the wider political context and events that operate beyond their control, but also how these circumstances can change suddenly, in unexpected

ways, with consequences for immigration routes. Even those who previously held secure immigration status, as well as those who are part of official evacuation process, can find themselves plunged into unfamiliar situations and still experience the uncertainty and insecurity of the hostile environment. Beyond the effect on participants themselves, it is apparent that immigration barriers have serious implications for family reunion, further failing vulnerable Afghans. Despite concerns about the safety of close relatives, including wives, siblings and parents, participants were struggling to secure their own immigration status and then to achieve family reunion in the UK.

Conclusion

The UK Government is wedded to its hostile environment stance which has been described as ideologically driven rather than informed by sound evidence (Griffiths and Yeo, 2021). Consequently, the UK asylum process has become ‘one of the harshest to navigate in Europe’ (Shepherd and Wilkinson, 2021: 211). The process is fraught with error and mismanagement and, therefore, tens of thousands of applicants slip through the cracks, without any legal recourse to sustain their livelihood (ibid; see Reynolds et al., 2023).

In this paper, we have explored another consequence of the hostile environment; the priority to deter migrants and to detect and deport those who manage to arrive in the UK, through a framework of everyday bordering (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019), means that the Home Office is unprepared when crises occur, such as in Syria, Afghanistan and most recently, Ukraine.

As we noted, Britain has a long and complex relationship with Afghanistan, from the nineteenth century colonial project to the twenty-first century ‘war on terror’ (Gregory, 2004). Furthermore, relations with the Afghan people need to be understood within the context of the hostile environment to migration. For example, despite evidence to the contrary, the government insisted that Afghanistan was safe (De Jong, 2022), hence opportunities were missed to implement safe exit routes. As a result, when the evacuation finally became necessary in August 2021, as our participants noted, it was ‘chaotic’, ‘unplanned’ and based on a hectic reaction to pressure from specific quarters, such as the British military, rather than being a coordinated emergency response.

Moreover, in this paper, applying the lens of everyday bordering, we have explored not only how people crossed the actual physical border of the UK, e.g. via the evacuation or through irregular routes, but also the complex negotiations of bordering within UK society. Participants describe resettlement and asylum applications as slow and disorganised. While lack of staff has been blamed, and certainly the Home Office is under-staffed (Mayblin, 2019), many of our respondents suggested that there was a lack of interest

and lack of prioritising of their applications. Furthermore, interviewees articulated challenging encounters with border guards, such as landlords and employers, as they attempt to secure their status and rebuild their lives.

We present evidence that, despite the government's public commitment to a 'warm welcome' for Afghans (see Home Office, 2021b), the wider context of the hostile environment continues to complicate and, in some ways, undermine the objectives of Afghan resettlement policies. More research is needed to assess how Afghans will experience resettlement in the longer term.⁶

Furthermore, we show, the rather ad hoc response of the Home Office and the Foreign Office has created 'false distinctions' between categories of Afghan refugees. While the evacuees are at least on a path to resettlement (albeit slowly), those who arrived through irregular routes are being treated entirely differently, although they are to all intents and purposes the same people from the same country fleeing the same situation. As argued here, immigration policy is largely performative and reflects wider political ideology. Thus, our data show, even within one racialised group – Afghans – categories of deserving versus underserving are defined via different routes of arrival in the UK. Sympathy for the evacuated refugees stands in stark contrast to discourses that vilify 'illegal migrants' arriving in small boats on British shores. This distinction allows the government to perform and present itself as humanitarian, 'rescuing' people from the Taliban, while at the same time, maintaining its commitment to the hostile immigration environment. Moreover, our analysis also shows how, in the context of the hostile environment, even somewhat privileged, highly skilled migrants, such as Afghans who already worked or studied in the UK, can be plunged into immigration insecurity with no certainties about when or how their situation will be resolved.

While the government presents events like the Afghan evacuation as unprecedented, unanticipated and isolated incidents, nonetheless, history tells a different story. There are clear similarities in migration flows out of Syria and Afghanistan only 7 years apart and now from Ukraine. Indeed, the flight of Asian people from Uganda in the 1960s-1970s, including the Patel family (parents of former Home Secretary Priti Patel), show how history has a habit of repeating itself. However, there are missed opportunities to learn from previous events. Each new wave of refugees is treated with a new set of resettlement programmes without evaluating the effectiveness of previous schemes. Presenting these events as isolated exceptions means that the core policy of hostile environment remains unchanged – despite growing concerns that it does not work and is not fit for purpose.

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Notes

1. See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-support-for-afghans-in-uk-hotels-to-find-settled-housing>
2. A BBC report in 2018 showed that the Taliban was carrying out multiple attacks and gaining ground. See: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-42863116>
3. Funding was received from London Metropolitan University – Transformation Award.
4. See: Ryan et al. (2022), <https://www.londonmet.ac.uk/research/centres-groups-and-units/global-diversities-and-inequalities-research-centre/projects-and-partners/afghan-migrants-in-london/>
5. Najiba Askari, Khandan Danish, Farid Fazli and Samiullah Khaillyzada
6. We have funding for follow-up research in 2023–2024. See: <https://www.londonmet.ac.uk/research/centres-groups-and-units/global-diversities-and-inequalities-research-centre/projects-and-partners/an-evaluation-of-the-syrian-and-afghan-resettlement-programmes-in-islington/>

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