

Afghan refugees struggle to acclimate to their new home in Baltimore

Charles Cohen 12/4/23 5:30 a.m. EST



Nazifa, an Afghan refugee, spends time with her young grandchildren at her family's Baltimore apartment. While Nazifa says she appreciates the opportunities in the U.S., she has been surprised by the degree of crime and other city problems. (Mariam Alimi)

On the eighth floor of a northern Baltimore apartment building that has lost a good bit of its luster since its ornate 1920s revival heyday, things haven't been going well for the Razie family.

Samim, 23, had his car stolen at 8 in the morning in Mount Vernon. He was delivering a package as part of a job with Amazon Flex, which provided a badly needed income stream for this family of nine, when he stepped out of the doorway and saw an empty space where his car used to be.

He hadn't locked the car at the beginning of the workday. The theft cost him his job. Two months earlier, he and his brother had been held up at gunpoint, with his brother pistol-whipped in the parking lot outside their Reservoir Hill apartment.

But this time, he laughed in frustration. "This is not America," he said through interpreter and photographer Mariam Alimi. "This is not America — this is Baltimore."

“Yes,” he added, offering a soft smile with his first sentence in English to me. “This is Baltimore.”



Mohammad Noorzai Razie and his son, Samim, 23, eat a traditional dish called Mash palow at evening time at their North Baltimore apartment. (Mariam Alimi)

For the last eight months, Alimi has served as an interpreter and photographer as we have followed the ups and downs of three resettled Afghan families trying to adjust to life in Baltimore.

The check-ins have been a stark reflection of their new city and country, as they’ve faced a harsh landscape strewn with obstacles from the health care system and schools, not to mention a language barrier. Their language — Farsi — is rarely spoken here.

Not all Afghan refugees who have resettled here have had such a tough time.

There’s the [Only in America story of Rafi Yari](#), an Afghan boxer who came to the U.S. to escape the Taliban. Yari found a sense of brotherhood at a West Baltimore gym where he trained, has tasted success and believes it can lead to a career.

But for others, the United States seems like a series of slammed doors — or worse. They see dangerous traps rigged with crime, malaise and indifference.

“They have left one war zone and come to another,” said Zainab Chaudry, the Maryland director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, a nonprofit civil rights organization that advocates for Muslims’ rights. Chaudry found herself trying to help a family that had just lost their lease and was facing homelessness.

“It was an unprecedented sort of scenario, but the way that it all happened was just so shocking, and so sudden,” Chaudry said. “There wasn’t infrastructure, like within our own communities, to really support the influx of these families.”

She gave an example of a woman whisked away from her hotel to give birth, but then released from the hospital along with her husband and baby, with no one to help them find their way back to the hotel.

Chaudry also said there have been instances of bullying in schools, including one incident that made national news, where a group of students at one school allegedly [removed the hijab of a 16-year-old girl and attempted to choke her with it in the bathroom.](#)

Thanks to their children's ability to acclimate to U.S culture and their parents' good fortune in finding steady employment, some families have found stability. But that's not always the case.

"There are unfortunately a lot of families who've fallen through the cracks," she said. "There are many, many families who have not been able to hold down a job, have not been able to overcome the language barriers and the cultural barriers."



Sahil, an Afghan refugee living in Baltimore, suffered a broken leg when he was hit by a car attempting to cross a road on a scooter. (Mariam Alimi)

Bumpy landing

It's been more than two years since the United States completed a withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban regained power, leading to the airlifting of some 120,000 Afghans out of that country. Some 76,000 came to the United States, the largest such operation here since the end of the Vietnam War.

The panicked airlift makes Afghans particularly vulnerable, said Ruben Chandrasekar, a regional director for the International Rescue Committee, or IRC, a nonprofit that coordinated relocation efforts here.

"Different immigrants have different experiences," said Chandrasekar. "If you are lucky, you have family and friends [here] and the [Afghans don't] have that. Their landing is not as soft."

Chandrasekar said 500 people were brought to Baltimore, a city that he says has historically been receptive to refugees. The IRC has facilitated the relocation of 5,000 refugees from around the world to Baltimore over the last 20 years, he said.



Some Afghan families moved into this Reservoir Hill apartment building after fleeing their homeland in 2021. (Mariam Alimi)



Afghan families use the parking lot of a Reservoir Hill apartment building as a gathering place. (Mariam Alimi)

About a half-dozen families of Afghan refugees have found a home in the Esplanade, a nine-story apartment building that was constructed in 1912 and renovated in the 1990s. With its Druid Hill Park vista, it was no doubt built to impress. An ad in *The Baltimore Sun* from that time boasted, “The Esplanade’s location is without the possibility of duplication.” About 15 refugee families live in a cluster of apartments nearby.

In the vortex swinging from tragic rejections to sudden bouts of optimism is my colleague Alimi, whose quick “Let’s Go” pace reveals what in the sports world would be described as a motor that never quits. Often dressed in a leather jacket and with a gleam in her eye, she brings a tenacious attitude and a knack for talking to strangers. But it became apparent during our joint interviews that she was not merely interpreting the words of the Afghan refugees, but living the life of one — trying to find meaning and a life here, all the while wondering if she had made a big mistake.

On many occasions, she would pause to offer reassurance or advice to family members, or to swap stories, because unlike them, she speaks English well and has bureaucracy-navigational skills. She would jump in to help solve problems, from showing a fellow Afghan how to load money on an app to doing laundry or explaining how Section 8 housing could help them.

Respecting Afghan customs, Alimi would keep her camera pointed down, allowing so many beautiful scenes to flicker by uncaptured. Women don’t like, or are forbidden, to have their pictures taken.



A mother and a daughter who came from Afghanistan cross the road near their Reservoir Hill apartment in Baltimore. (Mariam Alimi)

But the scenes were undoubtedly filmic when Mohammad Noorzai Razie came home, taking his shoes off by the door and receiving kisses from his wife, daughters and sons. Gathering in a circle, family members show respect for his words, waiting patiently for sentences to be completed. They do this in their living room, but also along Eutaw Street, sometimes moving a bit precariously into the street, where careening cars race to get past an annoying traffic light.

The women wear a rich array of veils and scarves — greens, milky white, pink, sparkling lamés, reds, and blacks tempered with gauze. They enthusiastically welcome guests, their eyes gleaming at newcomers, and the women kiss Alimi's cheeks several times.

It's with this gentle disposition that they navigate Baltimore. Their eighth-floor apartment is thick with rugs but has bare walls. The delicious smell of naan baking fills the air. Here, the Razie family talk goes from the fast of Ramadan in early spring to despair over what they perceived as indifference by police to the armed robbery of the couple's sons.

"We never had in our imagination that these kinds of things are happening in the United States," said Mohammad Noorzai Razie, who made a good living working security at an American base in Kabul and now drives an Uber. At this point, Alimi is compelled to break from her role as interpreter and chats with Razie and his wife in Farsi.

"I say to them that in Afghanistan, there were explosions happening — everyday some kind of incident. Still the situation was much, much better than what is happening now here," Alimi said. "Because if you prepare and go to the police and say something, they can at least get a result, you can get something out of it. But here if you go to the police, they don't have an answer. They can't help him."

Long journey to Baltimore

Like the Razie family, Alimi escaped the fall of the Afghan government in 2021, in her case with 15 extended family members. They waited for days at an airport, many times camped by a locked door, feeling the aftershock of a nearby bomb and then the ends of sticks from patrolling Taliban. She considers herself and other family members to be extremely lucky not to be living under Taliban rule.

Women aren't "allowed to go out of their house," she said. "You have to have a male — your father, brother, nephew."

But while Afghans here may not face the dangers of wartime, they face crime, bureaucratic perils and a deadening sense of isolation that can be overwhelming, Alimi said.

"Afghanistan, with all those security problems, still it wasn't that much hard," she said. "There are mental issues for people who are coming to the United States."

Take the basic task of getting a driver's license. In Afghanistan, Alimi had to overcome the stigma of a women getting a license. After she got her license, she found it cheaper and more convenient to use car services and hacks in Kabul.

But in Baltimore, where taking the bus can mean excruciatingly long waits and car services charge high fees, a license is a necessity, she said.

After failing the driver's test here a second time, Alimi tried to tamp down her suspicion that the harsh rejection by the driver's test administrator represented just another jab from her new home.

"It's hard when you lose everything and you come to someplace and you think it will be better, but it becomes even worse," Alimi said.

In Afghanistan, Alimi was a photographer for international organizations, including the United Nations and the British Embassy. She also served as an interpreter for The New York Times as well as documentary filmmakers.

As a single woman and as a professional in Afghanistan, she was an outlier. Men threw rocks at her because they objected to her as a photographer, while her family couldn't understand why she had forsaken the tradition of getting married. Still, she eked out a spot where she could pursue her dream of becoming a photojournalist.

But in the United States, she found that her skill set — an interpreter with a camera — was not in demand. Now, she tries to secure rides back and forth from her job in Baltimore County to avoid a 50-minute bus trip. Her job as an activities assistant must support her, her mother (who has health issues), her brother, his wife and their two kids. It's not enough, she said.

A better life

On the fourth floor of a Reservoir Hill apartment building, Nazifa, her two daughters and her two grandchildren live in a mixed climate of optimism and foreboding.

Their apartment has thick rugs, pictures and tapestries. In a corner, the children's toys are neatly stacked. They, too, have their frantic flight story out of Afghanistan.

"We got [to take] only small bags, which were lost during the trip," said Nazifa, who asked that her last name not be used. "We came with empty hands."

Nazifa talked about the shock of seeing America in reality, compared to the image she had. She had heard stories of crime and strife, but she thought it was a misinformation campaign to dissuade foreigners. Still, the opportunities for education, employment or to start a business inspire her with possibilities



"Compared to what is going on in Afghanistan, we are happy," she said.

Many Afghan refugees in Baltimore have taken to city and state parks to hold large extended gatherings and feasts. (Mariam Alimi)

But it's a happiness that comes with risks, she said.

She cited "the small things that are happening around with the cars and the stealing, and also we don't have that much money that they should come and they should steal from us."

Indeed, the concept of America, land of the free, has taken on a dubious meaning. At one point, Mohammed Razie asked, why are the criminals allowed to stay free?

"Extreme Islam is in Afghanistan," he said. "That is what makes it worse. Here it is the extreme freedom, that is what makes it worse — like everyone has access to everything like the drinking, the marijuana, the drugs. I am thinking there is no rule in Baltimore City. There is no law."

From his Uber window, Razie has taken note of the city's widespread poverty. By comparison, the cities in Afghanistan are for the well-off, while those in the countryside struggle.

"Why is this?" he asked.

Taking the test

During our last visit in October, Alimi and I asked the family members we were checking in with if they would recommend Baltimore for new refugees.

Razie's wife, who requested anonymity, laughed. "We are trying to escape Baltimore," she said.



Mohammad Noorzai Razie gets ready for evening prayers at his family's North Baltimore apartment in 2023. (Mariam Alimi)

Six months ago, Alimi carried a reserve of optimism with her during interviews. At one point, when talking with the Nazifas, she noted that in the U.S. at least you don't have people knocking on your door questioning your profession. In the U.S., you can pursue your talent as far as you can.

But later, her mood turned grim. She talked of sleeplessness, of crying. And much of that had to do with the frustration of not passing her driving test.

On a Tuesday afternoon in October, Alimi drove around the Motor Vehicle Administration testing area. Her sister watched, encouraged that Alimi seemed to be stopping and signaling at all the right places. Plus, she nailed the dreaded parking test. But after taking a lap on the streets, she came back and parked the car crooked. Her face was wet with tears. The test officer told her she had racked up too many points to pass.

Alimi could have seen this rejection as further validation of how impossible it is for her to acclimate herself to this city. But she did not. Despite her frustration, she said she was thankful for the opportunity to try again. After all, she said, she's just getting started. Next to her was her sister, who emigrated to the United States a decade ago. Last spring, her sister bought a house in Reisterstown, where she loves her neighbors and the solid schools.

"I do have the opportunity of having a job or walking around and seeking better opportunities, seeking studies, so I'm thankful about it," she said. "But I'm worrying about my people who are in the other parts of the world, and they do not have any kind of opportunity."

Charles Cohen is a freelance writer, filmmaker and Baltimore native.

This story originally appeared in *The Baltimore Banner*. For more content like this, please visit [The Baltimore Banner's website](#).