

The Stand's Podcast: My South Side

Episode 2: "A Polarizing Promise The Potential of the Afghan Adjustment Act" Transcript

Joe Biden: "We have already evacuated more than 18,000 people since July and 13,000 since our military lift began on Aug the 14th. Thousands more have been evacuated on private charter flights facilitated by the U.S. government."

Intro music starting very low, a soft and sad instrumental music slowing gets louder

Abby Fritz: This is President Joe Biden addressing the nation in a white house press conference on Aug 20th of last year, just days after Afghanistan's fall.

Biden: These numbers includes US citizens and permanent residents as well as their families. It includes S.I.V. applicants and their families. Those Afghans who worked alongside us, served alongside the US, gone into combat with us, and provided valuable assistance to us such as translators and interpreters. The United States stands by its commitment we made to these people."

music continues

Fritz: But now that these allies are here, will the U.S. Government maintain this commitment?

I'm Abby Fritz of The Stand's podcast "My South Side", in this episode we explore how the humanitarian parolees of Syracuse are navigating the legal options they have to stay here in the US. We speak with professionals and advocates, but also look to the past for answers, on how the US government can keep its promise through the Afghan Adjustment Act.

Intro music fades out

Fritz: This is where things get complicated. I spoke with Lindsey Greisling, a staff attorney at the Advocates for Human Rights on what the legal status humanitarian parole really means for these Afghan allies. She has worked as an attorney for nine years, three of which she has spent at the Minnesota-based nonprofit.

Lindsey Greising: “People who have come in on humanitarian parole have been granted a period of two years to stay lawfully in the U.S., if nothing happens from Congress, before that two year period is up, people will either be required to apply for some other status that they're eligible for, or they'll be left without status and could be could face deportation.”

Host: Since the fall happened so quickly, many people didn't have time to apply for Special Immigrant Visas- also known as an S.I.V. or refugee status prior to arriving in U.S., which are both common approaches for people fleeing violence.

This seems like it should be an easy fix. Humanitarian parolees across the country can now apply for an S.I.V status, which gives permanent residence to people who helped the U.S. government abroad. But as Greising explains, there are a variety of technicalities that could disqualify them.

Greising: “But as many, many stories have issued, that program is riddled with inefficiencies and issues. So for example, a lot Afghans who worked in Afghanistan alongside the military, the U.S. military were actually contracted through the United Nations, or the World Bank. And so their contracts are technically not with the United States, and that might make them not eligible. Or they might not be able to get the required paperwork that they need, because they've lost contact with their supervisor or they destroyed it, because they were trying to escape without the Taliban knowing that they were an ally to the U.S. military so that that path could be quite difficult for a lot of people, even if they did in theory qualify. ”

Fritz: Humanitarian parolees will run into similar problems with asylum, where they must prove their fear of persecution or torture if they were to return to Afghanistan, through what Greising describes as a long and traumatizing process. One that also requires a variety of documents.

This is where Congress comes in with the Afghan Adjustment Act, which would give humanitarian parolees another path to permanent residence. One that takes into account the special circumstances of these people- such as a lack of documents.

Habib Sakhizada: “One night that was very, very hard. It was around one, 2 am when we came here to a checkpoint of the Taliban. We were in a taxi, they stopped us and said ‘What is inside of the bag?’ So I had to make a crazy story that these are all diapers for my little ones we were just invited to my sister's place and it's all full of diapers. And I got lucky he did not check it. Otherwise, I was in a big trouble. It was more like you're playing with your life. So either there's a win situation or lose situation.

Fritz: Habib Sakhizada, the brother of Saboor Sakhizada who you heard from last episode, lived in Afghanistan his whole life and was a contractor for the United States government. He's worked as an interpreter, cultural advisor, and on logistics since 2009, but had to go into hiding in 2017 after receiving threats from the Taliban.

Sakhizada took the risk of keeping some of his documents hidden in a backpack while fleeing Afghanistan. But many humanitarian parolees destroyed theirs before coming to the U.S. - in fear of encounters like the one Sakhizada described. This lack of documents is a major consideration of lawmakers while they write the Afghan Adjustment Act.

Greising: "The difference is not that they wouldn't have to provide evidence, the difference is the type of evidence that they would need to provide would be much more unlikely to have been destroyed or left behind if it related to asylum."

Fritz: The Afghan Adjustment Act is still in the drafting process, which means it could be weeks or even months before an official draft moves to congress.

Habib Sakhizada: "People who served alongside the U.S. military in Afghanistan deserve better. They all really showed their support their loyalty. The phrase that we used to use in Afghanistan, [word for 'shoulder to shoulder'] which is shoulder to shoulder, we stood there, we supported them. And, and I think it's their time, and it's the United States government's time to show that loyalty and show that friendship back."

Low instrumental music begins, a slow build-up of tension building music can be heard under Habib's quote and the beginning of Lois' quote

Zac Lois: "I mean, the American attention span moves fast. even a week or two afterwards..."

Host: He means after the fall.

Lois: "...you know, we had a, our media manager who was a very high profile, you know, she had connections in all the major media, she couldn't even get a story ran about Afghanistan. You know, networks didn't want to run them."

Fritz: Zac Lois, who you might remember from last episode, notes this shift in focus and the impacts it had on efforts to help Afghan allies. Specifically pointing to the dwindling funds for veteran organizations such as Honor the Promise and Task Force Pineapple.

Lois: “We had about enough money till until April then I think a lot of the organizations that are going to have to fold up shop. Especially with Ukraine now, you know, the focus and attention and support has shifted.”

Fritz: As Lois mentioned last episode, he still has five friends in Afghanistan.

Lois: “And it really looks like they're not getting out. So we've had a lot of hard conversations, especially with the money drying up, you know, a lot of these veterans organizations are falling by the wayside, or they run out of money, there's nothing that you can do to support them at that point.”

*Pause, background sounds of a coffee shop slowly *

Sharifeh Mohammadi: “Don't forget about Afghanistan”

Fritz: Sharifeh Mohammadi, who we spoke to last episode, works at Interfaith Works and is originally from Afghanistan. She is passionate about keeping the conversation alive surrounding Afghanistan and the fall.

Mohammadi: “I want to share my story. I want to talk about the falling of Afghanistan, how hard it is for people, especially after Ukraine, it's so hard. And people forget about Afghanistan. What happened in Afghanistan? News forget about it, the social media forget about it, people forget about it.”

Fritz: Mohammadi wanted to emphasize that Ukraine and Afghanistan both have a place in the conversations happening on the world stage.

Mohammadi: “Every place is talking about Ukraine. I'm not saying that you have not talked about Ukraine, everybody should talk about Ukraine. And how in Afghanistan we still have this situation we still have this problem of concern too.... I still I want to people feel the pain of Afghanistan too.”

Fritz: With conflicts in other parts of the world, Saboor Sakhizada understands that prioritizations have been made to shift focus, but hopes the humanitarian parolees, like his brother and sister, will not be forgotten.

Saboor Sakhizada: “I think one of the first things I learned and when I immigrated to America is about polarization of politics. In America, about these two dominant political parties that, you know, that seems that they couldn't get along on any matter. There's always this black and white matter, right?”

Fritz: But in the case of the Afghan Adjustment Act, Sakhizada believes that this is the gray area...

overlapping the words gray area

Saboor Sakhizada: "...gray area where they can bring these two parties together"

Fritz: Greising also mentioned this when speaking about the Evacuate Our Allies Coalition, noting that the supporters of this cause make up a diverse group. She pointed to military members, faith organizations, and advocates of immigration and human rights that have all been brought together by this cause.

Greising: "Like I said, this has been done before too, it's not like reinventing the wheel.

Fritz: Both Greising and Saboor Sakhizada point to history when concluding that this Act is possible.

Greising: "Congress has passed this legislation, similar legislation before in response to the Cuban Revolution, for example, or people who were seeking protection after the withdrawal in Vietnam. So this has been dealt with in previous situations where people groups, large groups of people would have been coming from countries and may not have the documents that they need."

Host: Saboor Sakhizada also brought up another example that happened right here in Upstate New York.

Saboor Sakhizada: "You go back into 1944, when the first 982 Holocaust refugees that were brought into not far from where we're sitting right now, about 45 minutes north of here, Oswego, the Fort Ontario base. So they kept these refugees and safe havens, they were given a temporary status, with the hopes that they were going to return all of these families back into, into their country and respective country. But what the challenge was that after the war ended, the challenge was that a lot of these families no longer have their belongings, their land, everything they owned, were destroyed. But but the other challenge was that some of these families had newborns, that were born on American soil. And so you have a family that is now, their son or daughter is an American citizen, are you going to send them back with their children with an American born citizen. It just becomes so complicated that allowed Congress and the executive branch at the time to make a decision saying, 'You know, what, 982 People can stay here permanently.' And it's not very far from where we sitting right now."

Fritz: Habib Sakhizada remembers the danger he faced while trying to flee Afghanistan.

Habib Sakhizada: “A couple times, I got beat, beat up so bad. They hurt me. They were hitting me with guns and stuff. And they had some sort of bats that they were telling me. So to protect my two letter wants to do her an HF three and one. So I had them in my hug and I had to take care of them so they beat me so bad and had to go home. Puts a bandage on my knee and my sister's Nick got hurt and my little ones face goddess crashed and but the barbed wires.”

Host: While the adjustment for humanitarian parolees will never be an easy one, given the extreme trauma many of them have experienced, the Afghan Adjustment Act could help lessen the stress and retraumatization many of these people will have to go through if they are forced to apply for an S.I.V. or asylum.

Short pause then upbeat, inquisitive music begins to play, starting low and slowly getting louder

Habib Sakhizada: We, we were there, when you were there. And now it's time when we are here. I want you guys to be with us, and work with us. So, so we can live a peaceful life.

Fritz: Without support from communities such as Syracuse many humanitarian parolees could not have foreseen a future here in the U.S.

Mohammadi: 23:06 “When people come here, they have nothing they are with empty pocket. So people and community and volunteer peoples. When they help us, we help our peoples, the people who are new. It's a big help. I just want to say I don't know how to say thanks, how to appreciate the people of Syracuse and the community.”

Fritz: My name is Abby Fritz and thank you for listening to The Stand’s “My South Side.” You can listen on Spotify and on The Stand’s website for upcoming episodes. A special thanks to Jeff Kramer whose story for The Stand titled “Humanitarian Parole” inspired this series and for assisting with sourcing on this project. This has been a collaborative production with WAER. Thanks also goes to Chris Bolt and Ashley Kang for assisting with scripting and editing.

Music fades out

Music by [Lesfm](#), [23843807](#) and [Coma-Media](#) from [Pixabay](#), in the order in which they are heard throughout the episode.