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Kyle Mackie

Cuny Graduate School of Journalism

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“It’s a Kind of Killing:” Afghan Refugees in Shadow of the EU Fear They’re Forgotten

By Kyle S. Mackie

SJENICA, Serbia – The children of Afghan, Syrian and Iraqi refugees used to play together here in a gravel driveway leading to a rectangular building designed for function rather than looks. Once a textile factory, it now serves as a center for asylum seekers. Karimi Wahab, a civil engineer and refugee from northeastern Afghanistan, used to chat with Syrians and Kurds who had picked up some of his native language, Dari, along their journey out of the Middle East and into Europe. He slept beside them in a room packed with bunk beds, occasionally arguing over bedtimes and smoking inside.

But now most of the children at play and the men in the singles room where Wahab sleeps are from Afghanistan. For Wahab and the rest of his 12-member family in Sjenica, watching refugees from other war-torn countries get moved along into the European Union has become routine.

“All the refugees from Syria and from Iraq, they went in front of our eyes,” said Wahab, who believes he is 26 or 27. “They came after us and they went before us.”

Afghans make up almost two thirds of Serbia’s 4,129 stranded migrants and refugees, according to the latest International Organization for Migration and UN Refugee Agency statistics. While that number of stranded individuals might seem modest given the once-massive scale of the European migration crisis, it’s the second-highest figure of any country in this southeastern corner of Europe. Greece accommodates the most at 54,225.

Serbia was an integral transit country along the popular Western Balkans land route into the European Union in 2015. More than 1 million people streamed into Europe that year, and the EU-candidate country is still reeling from the sudden influx.

The Afghan refugees left behind are living reminders of the flood of humanity across Balkan borders that was slowed to a trickle by tightened border security and the EU’s March 2016 migration deal with Turkey, which drastically reduced the number of new arrivals to Greece and other countries in the region. Now, in the effective standstill, there’s nothing for families like the Karimis to do but wait, trapped between the violent country they know, where it’s too dangerous to return, and an unknown destination and future they’ve all but lost hope in.

“If we knew that when we were in Afghanistan that maybe Syrians or Iraqis would only get into European countries, never we came,” said Wahab. “Never. We wouldn’t have come.”

Wahab didn’t want to leave Afghanistan. Back home, he had a university degree, a car and a salary of \$900 per month in a country where the annual GDP per capita is about \$562. But his job with the Ministry of Education in Takhar Province, where he managed the rebuilding of girls’ schools that had been destroyed by the Taliban, made him a magnet for threats from militants.

He still remembers the first time the Taliban called his cell phone. “Yo, Wahab,” he recalled the man saying. “When you go [to the school] again it will get burned again.” At one work site, he said that the school’s manager bluntly told him, “The Taliban want to capture you.” Then his hometown, Kunduz City, was captured by the Taliban on Sept. 28, 2015.

Kunduz is a strategically important city near the border with Tajikistan that Afghan and American forces have had to recapture twice after brief takeovers by Taliban fighters in 2015 and 2016. Wahab was in the neighboring province for work during the first attack, which took place in the middle of the Eid al-Adha holiday, but his parents, two brothers and six sisters survived it. He remembers one of them calling him and hearing gunfire in the background of the phone call as the Taliban overran the city. The fighters killed dozens of civilians, released hundreds of prisoners and looted and destroyed buildings.

Wahab’s family managed to leave Kunduz while it was still under Taliban control by piling together into a single car and driving to meet Wahab at the relative’s house where he was staying. Once together, the Karimis decided they had no choice but to leave Afghanistan.

“At that time, many many people killed,” said Wahab, recalling the horror of the attack. “Children, women, girls...” Even after the Afghan government regained control of Kunduz, the Karimis suspected that the Taliban would come back. So, they returned to their home only briefly, gathered a few personal belongings, including family photos, said a gut-wrenching goodbye to relatives and then embarked on a route that is most common for Afghans making the odyssey to Europe.

Sjenica, a quiet mountain town of 14,000 in southwest Serbia, is the unlikely temporary endpoint of their journey. They made it here by navigating an easy to find but expensive smuggling network, spending essentially all of the family’s savings to do so. Wahab said that an upfront fee of \$1,800 per person paid for their transport from Nimruz Province, where Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran meet, to Istanbul, Turkey. They traveled partly in vehicles and partly by walking, always crossing borders over rough terrain on foot. He remembered smugglers paying off the Taliban at a checkpoint on the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and renting horses for his mother and pregnant sister for the mountainous crossing between Iran and Turkey. Sometimes they would pass days hidden in a room or stable while being passed from one smuggler to the next.

From Istanbul, an introduction to another smuggling network and an additional \$1,000 per person, Wahab said, paid for their passage to Greece. No smugglers accompanied what Wahab estimated to be about 50 migrants crammed onto a rubber boat in which they made the crossing. The boat ran out of fuel eight hours into the journey, in the middle of the Aegean Sea, and was eventually rescued by a Greek police ship. Greek authorities transported the Karimis to the island of Samos, near Turkey. After a few days, they were then ferried to Athens before being taken north to the border with Macedonia, and then finally back to a camp in Athens’s suburbs once that border closed. Eventually, more smugglers paid for with loans from family in Afghanistan trafficked the Karimis across Greece’s border with Albania and through Kosovo to Serbia.

By Wahab’s last count, his family has now been at the Sjenica center for about one year and 26

days. And the daily routine of sleeping, eating, praying, checking Facebook, and always, waiting, is growing increasingly unbearable.

“For how long should we keep ourselves busy with a video?” Wahab asked, exasperated during a phone call in October. Sometimes he tries to learn German from YouTube videos. Sometimes he goes with family members to a local mosque, where Serbians will “say hi and that’s it.” Other times, he just goes back to bed after breakfast, retreating into the lower bunk where he’s draped a sheet for a little privacy. He normally doesn’t sleep for more than five or six hours a night because his room is a gathering place for men at the center who like to smoke, drink and play cards late into the night. Wahab said he doesn’t drink or smoke himself but that he can’t complain because the other men will get angry.

Most of the rest of his family sleeps together in a single room about the size of two jail cells down the hall. It’s crowded, but Wahab said it’s better than the dismal conditions in which they previously lived for nine months at Greece’s Elliniko refugee camp. Before it was shut down, that facility was described by the human rights group Amnesty International as “totally unfit to host people.”

“It’s not our home,” Wahab said about the Sjenica center. He described the family’s daily inconveniences as “small problems,” like how they’re not allowed to cook for themselves, even when religious observance means that they can’t eat the food served in the cafeteria. For example, as practicing Muslims, the Karimis don’t eat pork. Sausage is regularly served at the center, and the Serbian style of the dish can contain a mixture of beef, lamb and pork – so they don’t eat it. But as time goes by, small problems are swelling into big ones, dangerous ones; the doctor who works at the center recently recommended that Wahab see a psychologist.

“I don’t go because I know if I go he will tell me to be strong,” Wahab said. He’s also been told by other refugees who have gone to see the psychologist what medications he can expect to be prescribed: vitamin D and sleeping pills. He doesn’t think they’ll help. “The drugs cannot solve our problem.”

Hungarian immigration authorities allow 10 individuals to cross legally from Serbia every business day, five each at two border crossings. Virtually all of the 186 mostly Afghan refugees currently accommodated in Sjenica are waiting for their names to be called, including the Karimis. The list has acquired an almost mythical status for Afghans because no one from their country has been called in over a year.

In the same time period, about 100 Syrians and Iraqis have cycled through the center and been transported on to Hungary, according to its coordinator, Dino Hamidovic. Dino, 25, works for his father Fiko Hamidovic, who manages the camp for the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration.

“How long they will wait, we don’t know,” said the younger Hamidovic of the Afghans in their joint care.

There’s no publically available data about the admissions list to Hungary, and both Serbian and

Hungarian immigration authorities failed to answer repeated requests for comment for this story. However, Peter van der Auweraert, IOM sub-regional coordinator for the Western Balkans, said he doesn't see any evidence that there's active discrimination against Afghans.

"Inside Serbia, migrants are treated the same whether you're Afghan, Algerian, from Mali, or wherever it is that you come from," said van der Auweraert. "It is true that there's a lot of rumors amongst different nationalities that others are seen as getting a better treatment but I think it's more a reflection of frustration about the fact that people cannot get on with their life."

Frustration is reaching new heights among Afghans living on the outskirts of European society. On Nov. 19, [The Independent](#) reported that an 11-year-old Afghan killed himself at a refugee camp in Austria. That's after a [report](#) published by Amnesty International in October which alleged that the EU is violating its *non-refoulement* principle by returning Afghans to a country where they will be at risk of human rights violations, including indiscriminate violence from armed conflict. The report documented a drop of about 10 percent in the average asylum recognition rate for Afghans across the EU from 2015 to 2016 at the same time as the number of forced and assisted voluntary returns to Afghanistan nearly tripled.

Compared to Syrians and Iraqis, Afghans have been granted asylum less frequently, on average, every year since 2014 across EU and European Free Trade Association countries, according to the Migration Policy Institute. Nearly all Syrian applications were approved in 2016, for example, compared to just over half of Afghan applications. The Iraqi average recognition rate was about 63 percent.

The latest Eurostat asylum quarterly report for this year showed that EU member states made the largest number of decisions on Afghan applications, followed by Syrians and then Iraqis. The Afghan rejection rate was the highest of the three. The number of positive Syrian decisions far outnumbered both that of Afghan and Iraqis, but even though a larger number of Afghans were granted asylum than Iraqis (24,900 compared to 16,000), the perception of the lower rate of acceptance trickles down all the way from Brussels to Sjenica, where long wait times are taking a serious psychological toll.

"We feel that we are forgot as refugees, as humans," said Wahab, speaking in Sjenica back in July. His left arm hung at an awkward and painful-looking angle – the result of a shoulder injury sustained about 10 days earlier. He'd been working one of the few jobs in town for refugees, a 12-hour-long shift for a local farmer that paid €10 (\$11.61). Wahab said he got a shot to help with the pain that kept him up at night for about a month, but that he was never brought to the hospital for an X-ray. He went back to farming anyway whenever he got the chance throughout the rest of the summer, but now that the harvest is long over and snow is falling in Sjenica there's no opportunity to work.

He found out about an early-morning job recently that would have had him stoking a fire for a local company from 5 to 8 a.m., but the center's rules prohibit refugees from leaving the premises before 7 a.m. In the absence of any purposeful daily activities, besides occasionally helping the Hamidovics translate when new Afghans arrive at the center, Wahab's mind is constantly mulling an unknown future – one that he's not even sure he can picture in the EU

anymore. He said he can't forgive the EU for stalling more than two years of his life, and that it might have been better to just die in Afghanistan.

"If they [the EU] want to close their borders on me, their doors on me and they don't want to accept me," he said, "it's a kind of killing."

That sentiment was echoed repeatedly in a half dozen interviews with other Afghans at both the ex-factory that houses families in Sjenica, where the Karimis live, and the former hotel down the road that accommodates mostly single males.

"In these two years we became crazy," said Fatema Mohammadi, with her 12-year-old son Omid translating. "If you go in Afghanistan just one time they will kill us, but here, one hundred times they will kill us."

Wahab has told his family back in Afghanistan to forget about coming to Europe. He's only in touch with them sporadically these days, and it's the same with his friends who have made it to France and Germany. He got tired of everyone asking him the same questions about what he was doing and when his family was going to get to Europe. He never had anything new to tell them.

But one of his school friends from Kunduz, whom Wahab last saw in Greece, still thinks it's worth the wait. After nearly a year in Uetersen, Germany, near Hamburg, 23-year-old Hassam Yaqobi is currently awaiting the final decision on his application for asylum. He's hopeful that he'll be approved.

"In Germany, right now I have security, I have peace," Hassam said, speaking over the phone in October. "There is no Taliban, there is no *Daesh* [ISIS]. I can continue my life."

In the meantime, stuck somewhere between home and asylum, the Karimis are left to wonder when they'll be free to continue theirs.