



Through research collaboration, Brown scholars aim to improve experiences of refugees

Researchers at Brown's Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Studies are working with the Refugee Dream Center in Providence to assess Afghan refugees' needs and improve military-civilian partnerships across the globe.



Alexandria Nylen (left), a civil-military program coordinator at Brown, is conducting a months-long series of interviews with several Afghans at the Refugee Dream Center in Providence. All photos: Nick Dentamaro/Brown University

PROVIDENCE, R.I. [Brown University] — On a chilly winter afternoon at the Refugee Dream Center (<http://www.refugeedreamcenter.org/>) in Upper South Providence, a group of Afghans chatted around a table that was bare, save for a bottle of hand sanitizer. Speaking Dari and donning protective masks amid COVID-19's Omicron surge, they swapped stories about their work, their families and the weather.

The exchanges might have seemed unremarkable to any casual bystander. Yet the circumstances were far from typical. Many of the new arrivals to Rhode Island had worked in Afghanistan with the United States military as pilots, cooks or translators — until August 2021, when the Taliban assumed control of the country, jeopardizing the safety of anyone with ties to the American government.

Like the 15 Afghan women who came to study at Brown (<https://www.brown.edu/news/2022-01-27/afghanstudents>) University in Fall 2021, they were forced to flee the country with little but the clothes on their backs, saying goodbye, perhaps forever, to their homes and extended families. Now, they are refugees in a state where the people, cultures and climate are largely unfamiliar.

How do the refugees feel about the major life shifts they've experienced? How are they coping with the trauma of their hasty exit from home? What resources do they need to thrive in Providence? And what can nonprofits and researchers learn from examining one of the world's largest humanitarian evacuations? These are among the questions at the center of a research collaboration between Brown scholars and the Refugee Dream Center, a Providence nonprofit that targets and fills gaps for refugees who no longer receive federal financial assistance.

With assistance from two Brown students, Alexandria Nylen — the civil-military program coordinator at Brown's Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Studies (<https://watson.brown.edu/chrhs/>) — is conducting a months-long series of interviews with several Afghans at the Refugee Dream Center.



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Arman Mohammadi, a first-year Brown undergraduate student who grew up in Afghanistan, is helping translate the refugees' Dari to English.

“We have two goals,” Nylen said. “One is to assess the refugees’ immediate needs. We want to know what kinds of goods and services and support this newly arrived population needs, and how we can help them feel more at home and integrated in Rhode Island. The other is to document their experiences working in Afghanistan with the U.S. military or government partners, as well as their experiences of the U.S.-led evacuation.”

The mutually beneficial project will offer a detailed window into refugees’ experiences for the Refugee Dream Center and similar entities across the globe, Nylen said, potentially providing crucial insights to organizations across the globe that are now welcoming refugees from Afghanistan, Ukraine and other countries experiencing conflict. Additionally, it will provide rare insights on what it’s like to partner with the U.S. government in conflict zones, which could help scholars and government officials work together to protect these workers’ safety and mental health in the future.

“To say that Afghan refugees have experienced a life-altering event is an understatement,” Nylen said. “By holding space for these individuals to share their stories — some of which are very difficult to hear — we hope to help improve refugees’ transitions into American life and improve civilian-military humanitarian operations across the world.”

Culturally sensitive interviews at the Refugee Dream Center

The idea for the research project came about in September 2021 when Omar Bah, the director of the Refugee Dream Center and a refugee himself (from the Gambia in West Africa), reached out to Adam Levine, who directs the Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Studies (CHRHS) at Brown’s [Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs](https://watson.brown.edu/) (<https://watson.brown.edu/>). Bah shared with Levine that he expected to welcome a large influx of Afghan refugees very soon, and he viewed their arrival as an opportunity to learn more about refugees’ wants and needs.

“Being one of the most vulnerable populations, it is important to understand the intricacies surrounding the realities of refugees,” Bah said. “The main thing we need to do is inquire, rather than assume, so that we can work with the refugees in a more culturally attuned way as they begin their integration journey in the U.S. We want the person who had the experience to be the teacher.”

I feel incredibly honored that people are willing to share these stories, some of which haven’t really been heard before.

ALEXANDRIA NYLEN — Civil-military program coordinator, Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Studies

Levine, a medical doctor who as a scholar is committed to bringing civilians and members of the military together (<https://www.brown.edu/news/2018-08-16/mil-civ>) to respond to humanitarian crises, said Bah's offer to collaborate presented CHRHS with a rare opportunity to understand more about Afghans' experiences working for the American military and government in Afghanistan and being evacuated to the United States.

"The evacuation of more than 100,000 Afghan citizens from Kabul last summer was the largest humanitarian evacuation in recent memory," Levine said. "It's vital that we learn about the successes and failures of this evacuation, from the perspective of the Afghan refugees themselves, in order to improve similar humanitarian evacuations in the future."

It wasn't the first time the two entities had collaborated. In 2018, they worked together to kickstart Breaking Barriers (<https://watson.brown.edu/chrhs/Education/seed-grants-breaking-barriers>), a project that helps refugees overcome the challenges associated with their experiences of crime to find success and well-being in the U.S. Over the last few years, CHRHS has also helped the Refugee Dream Center recruit several student interns.

Over the course of the fall, Nylen designed interview scripts for the refugees from the ground up, drawing on her extensive expertise interviewing individuals who live in Pakistan's tribal areas about the American government's post-9/11 use of unmanned aerial vehicles for military strikes in those areas. She employed Briscoe Turner, a student in the the Master of Public Affairs program at Brown's Watson Institute, to conduct background research on the history of the conflict in Afghanistan and to advise on mental health screening tools.

Nylen and Turner began interviewing the refugees in January 2022, and their interviews will continue through the Spring 2022 semester. Arman Mohammadi, a first-year Brown undergraduate student who grew up in Afghanistan, is helping the two researchers translate the refugees' Dari to English. The three of them communicate regularly with Refugee Dream Center staff members, including a designated Afghan case manager who is focused on easing the refugees' resettlement process.

Nylen and Turner begin each one-on-one interview with three clinical mental health screening tests that measure anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and depression — conditions that are particularly prevalent among refugee populations, Nylen said. Then, they ask questions about each person's life in Afghanistan — their family, their friends, their job — and how different it feels from their current life in Providence. In the first round of interviews, they asked refugees to share stories about how and when they decided to leave the country, how the evacuation process worked and who they left behind. Throughout the process, they keep interviewees' identities anonymous to protect their privacy and safety.

“It’s hard for me to imagine the enormity of leaving your life behind — not only your livelihood and your house, but also your friends and family,” Nylen said. “We are learning that in several circumstances, these individuals did not realize they were being evacuated until they reached the Kabul airport. They’re not only shouldering the burden of resettlement, which is huge on its own, but also the burden of finding ways to bring over the loved ones they were forced to leave.”

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OMAR BAH — Director, Refugee Dream Center

Learning from experience

Mohamaddi, whose first semester at Brown began just as the Taliban captured Kabul, said he may never have made it out of Afghanistan had University administrators not helped to arrange for his early arrival to campus. With their assistance, he arrived safely in Providence two weeks before the Taliban takeover, moving into a residence hall before most of his peers.

“I don’t know what would have happened if I hadn’t been able to leave early,” the computer science concentrator said as he spoke in Dari with the refugees at the Refugee Dream Center, exchanging cell phone numbers with one of them. “It means a lot to be able to study at Brown while also, in a way, staying connected to the community where I grew up.”

Turner, who hopes to find a career in criminal justice policy with a focus on racial equity, feels similarly grateful for the unique opportunity to speak to local refugees and to play one small part in easing their transitions.

“The experiences of refugees are often overlooked, and there are major gaps in the resources and services provided to refugee communities as they resettle in the U.S.,” Turner said. “I am passionate about making the policy process more accessible to, and mindful of, marginalized communities — so I was excited to get involved in a research partnership with the Refugee Dream Center, which is such an integral part of the Providence community.”

Nylen said that once the interview process is complete in late spring or early summer, she and Turner hope to share preliminary findings in an article or research brief that could not only help organizations like the Refugee Dream Center, but also policymakers at the state level who are often in charge of deciding when and how to take in refugees from other countries. She said their findings could help those leaders more accurately assess refugees’ needs and prepare accordingly.

Nylen added that she hopes their work holds lessons for future humanitarian operations and also makes a positive impact on the interviewees themselves. When done right, she said, in-depth interviews can help interviewees work through trauma and empower them to vocalize their needs.

“I feel incredibly honored that people are willing to share these stories, some of which haven’t really been heard before,” Nylen said. “I’m thankful I’ve been able to play a role, however indirect, in helping them feel like valued members of the Rhode Island community.”

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