

REPAIR PROJECT

FRANCE

MOHAMMAD'S STORY

After fleeing Afghanistan as a child, Mohammad's* world was shattered when years later he was deported back to the country. With his life under threat, he escaped once again, finding refuge in France. After five years apart, Mohammad's family is now partially reunited, but still waiting to be together with their eldest son.

"My parents and I fled Afghanistan over 30 years ago, when I was just six years old. We travelled to Iran seeking refuge from the insecurity and violence at home. In Iran, I completed my studies and married, and my wife and I had two sons, but we never obtained residence permits.

For years I worked without papers, until I was arrested in 2013. The Iranian authorities offered to release me if I joined their armed forces. When I refused, they deported me to Afghanistan.

**Name has been changed*

In Afghanistan, conflict with a relative with ties to the Taliban resulted in threats against my life and the targeting of my home and workplace. My employer helped me stay hidden until I could return to Iran.

After reuniting with my family in Iran in 2015, we tried to flee to Turkey, but three of us were caught at the border. The smugglers had separated us into groups and my older son, only six years old, had already crossed over. We didn't know if we'd ever see him again.

Stuck in Iran facing deportation and arrest, grieving the separation from our eldest child, and with our youngest child not strong enough to face a potentially very dangerous journey, I fled Iran alone in 2018.

In June 2018, I applied for asylum in France. A year later, in June 2019 I received a positive decision. Later that year, I contacted the French Red Cross for help finding my eldest son.

I remained in constant contact with my wife and our youngest child – still in Iran without papers – but it was almost two years before we received any news of our eldest son. He was safe and living in Sweden, and had recognised my photo in the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Trace the Face system.



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To find out more about the achievements and findings of the REPAIR project – read our online report, and access our online toolkit using the QR Codes.



Online Toolkit



Online Report

That same year, the French Red Cross began assisting with our family reunification application. In March 2022, our application was finally ready, and my wife and son made an appointment at the French embassy in Tehran to submit their documents.

More than eight months passed before we received an answer. I sent my wife money from my salary every month to cover rent and living costs in Iran while we waited for the decision. Finally, in December 2022, they received an appointment at the embassy to collect their visas.

But even with the visas, we didn't know if they would be able to leave Iran. My wife and youngest son never had residence permits, the fines they would need to pay to get an exit visa could be tens of thousands of euros.

As the French consulate doesn't have any dialogue with Iranian authorities around exit permits, the ICRC offered to negotiate, but our experience told us any dialogue with the authorities was unlikely to be successful. We made the difficult decision that my wife and youngest son would travel to Afghanistan and try to depart from Kabul. This was extremely risky, but we knew we could never afford the fines in Iran and time was running out before their visas expired.

In February 2023, my wife and youngest son crossed the border back into Afghanistan and signed a formal document declaring their departure from Iran. They then flew to Kabul and immediately went into hiding as the Taliban were still looking for me.

Travelling from Kabul to Paris is not easy. Most countries have blacklisted Afghan airlines. but the Red Cross found a route through Dubai, one of the only cities with airlinks to Kabul.

Finally, on March 7, 2023, my family went to the airport to board their flight. The authorities were very reluctant to allow a young woman and child board the plane alone without a male chaperone. My son was terrified as my father-in-law negotiated with the Taliban. After paying a large sum to the officer at the boarding gate, they were allowed to board the plane and sent me a selfie of themselves together on-board. I was so relieved.

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Returning to Kabul was extremely risky, but it was impossible for us to pay the fines in Iran and time was running out before their visas expired.

In the early hours of March 8, 2023, my wife and youngest son arrived in Paris. I was so overjoyed to see them: after so many years and so many dangers, we could finally be together. But when we returned to Montpellier, where I had been living, we soon found that our difficulties were not over.

Without a social worker or financial assistance, I had to figure out how to enroll my son in school, apply for my wife's residence permit, and support my family in our two-room apartment. While we were happy to be reunited, the lack of support as we began our new life made it hard to move forward, especially after I was laid off from my building maintenance job.

Our eldest son in Sweden was registered as an unaccompanied minor and placed with a foster family who were given parental rights. We are working with a lawyer to see how we can regain custody, and I have applied for a travel document to visit him. We talk as often as possible, but he was so young when he left he's forgetting his Farsi and we do our best to communicate in English.

Like many families who have gone through separation, we have overcome so much, and are grateful for the chance of a life together, but starting again in a new country, with a new language, and a different culture is extremely challenging. In the future we hope there will be greater practical support for families like ours to find their feet, to give people like us the best chance of making a success of our new lives."

Images are for illustration only