

REPAIR PROJECT

FRANCE

ZAAHIR'S STORY

Separated from his family while still a child, Zaahir* found sanctuary in France, but continues to face administrative and legal barriers to housing and full reunification with his loved ones.

"I was 11 years old when I fled Afghanistan with my family in 2015. A fight broke out at the border and there was panic. I was swept one way and my family another, and I lost them. I crossed the border hoping to see them on the other side, but they weren't there. I didn't know what to do without them, but I continued on my journey, eventually arriving in France where I was given subsidiary protection in 2021.

The same year, my father went to the ICRC in Kabul to see if they could help find me, and he recognized me on their Trace the Face database. A videocall was organised between me and my family, and that's when I found out they had been deported back to Afghanistan after we were separated at the border. As soon as I found out they were still alive, I wanted

**name has been changed*

to start the family reunification procedure. As an unaccompanied minor, I was eligible to apply for reunification with my parents and siblings.

With no French embassy in Kabul, in March 2022 my family requested a visa appointment at the closest alternative embassy, in Tehran. The application had to be filed in person, and my family had to pay for tourist visas to travel there. The visa application process and the journey were a big financial commitment and I supported my parents and brothers and sisters as much as I could.

In July 2022, the ICRC delegation in Tehran printed my family's visa applications and my parents and seven siblings submitted them to the French Embassy. Four months later, in mid-November 2022, we received a decision. My parents and five youngest siblings were granted visas, but my older sisters – only teenagers when we were separated but now in the early twenties - were rejected because they were over 19.

Both unmarried, they have always lived with my parents and are dependent upon them, but they now faced being separated from everyone. This was in Tehran during the protests following the death of Mahsa Amini, in a country where it is almost impossible for women to access services without a male guardian. Sami, my 15-year-old brother, insisted on staying behind with my sisters while our parents and four younger siblings travelled to France. The



This project is funded by the European Union



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

French Red Cross quickly prepared a legal appeal for my sisters' visas which had to be submitted within two months of the initial decision.

It was a big risk for Sami – even if the appeal was successful, by that time Sami's own visa would have expired and he would need to apply again. But in February 2022 Sami became ill and went into hospital in Tehran. With only two weeks remaining on his French visa, the French Red Cross organised for him to travel to France to access the healthcare he needed. Since then, my sisters have been in Iran, alone and unable to work. As a family we are covering their accommodation and living costs, which is a big burden for us.

When my parents arrived in France with my brothers and sisters it was bitter-sweet, we were so happy to be together again, but at the same time so sad that my older sisters weren't with us. After arrival, we quickly had to focus on finding somewhere to live. In my family reunion application it did not say I needed to provide accommodation for my family in France, but there was no commitment that the government would provide housing either.

I was living in a tiny studio apartment and there was no way we could all stay there. I temporarily borrowed a friend's apartment so my family could all stay together, but it became too complicated and was only ever a temporary solution.

My parents had been issued settlement visas and after arrival in France these should have been upgraded to residence permits enabling access to housing support. However, the local authority refused to issue the permits. They argued that because I was over 18, and considered an adult in law, my parents were not entitled to residency.

Our legal advisor and my social worker approached the authorities, requesting that – regardless of the decision on residency – they at least allow my family access to housing support. With no movement from the authorities, and my family's situation critical, the only solution was for my whole family to apply for asylum in France – the authorities would then be obliged to provide housing while their application was processed.

“

In France with my brothers and sisters it was bitter-sweet, we were so happy to be together again, but at the same time so sad that my older sisters weren't with us.

That is how, despite having settlement visas and travelling under Family Reunion, my family ended up in an asylum seeker reception centre 75 kilometres away from where I live. I visit them as much as I can, but I can't move closer because of my work. They often need my help, but because of the distance I can't always be there. Having managed to finally be reunited, it's frustrating to be living so far apart.

My sisters' appeal was rejected in March 2023, but, with the support of the French Red Cross, we are still trying to reunite our family. There is currently no obligation for Member States to reunite adult children with their families, but the risks faced by families like mine mean that in many cases adult children – like my sisters – are just as vulnerable as younger family members.

Eligibility should be based on the reality of the risks people are facing and prioritise keeping vulnerable family members safe. It should not just be about how old people are, which can have little bearing on the risks people are facing, and places no value on their importance as part of the family unit as a whole.

Reunification which results in families being further separated is not unification, it is extending the pain of our family's separation, undermining efforts to provide safety, and creating further barriers to us being able to move on with our lives.”

Images are for illustration only