

# The Final Hours

*George Packer*

This is a story about what happens when you are stateless and powerless—the daily humiliations, the endless waiting, the impossible choices, the dependence on strangers, the danger in every official encounter, the high price of survival, the struggle for dignity.

Safia Noori and Fakhruddin Elham are a young Afghan couple who both served in the Afghan special forces, fighting alongside American troops in Afghanistan. After the fall of Kabul, they fled Taliban persecution in their own country, then escaped to Pakistan, where they lived as refugees with their two small children, waiting for the United States to make good on its promise to bring Afghan allies to this country. Last year, Donald Trump returned to power and broke that promise, closing the doors to resettlement. Around the same time, the Pakistani government stopped renewing the visas of Afghan refugees and began deporting them by the hundreds of thousands. The family became fugitives with no legal status, hiding from the police in Islamabad to avoid being sent back to death or misery in Afghanistan, trying to find a way to safety.

On March 24, this magazine published [my story](#) about Safia and Elham. (I gave them pseudonyms for their own protection, but can safely use their real names now.) That day, an acquaintance who leads an international humanitarian organization, and who had brought the family's plight to the attention of high-level Spanish officials back in January, used my essay to nudge Madrid about the family's request for asylum, and Madrid nudged its embassy in Islamabad, setting in motion the maddening, dreamlike events that followed.

The next day, on March 25, the Spanish ambassador sent a letter approving the family's travel to Spain for "international protection." The embassy instructed Safia to send copies of plane tickets for Madrid, as well as all-important exit permits from the government of Pakistan, before their visas could be issued.

[George Packer: 'We are not ordinary people'](#)

Spain's positive decision didn't guarantee anything. The family now had to get out of Pakistan without being caught and deported. This was difficult for Afghans in any circumstance; two wars would make it even harder. The American and Israeli attacks on Iran had shut down commercial flights over much of the Middle East and left only one viable route from Islamabad to Madrid—through Istanbul on Turkish Airlines. The other war, between Pakistan and Afghanistan, received much less international attention, but it had turned Afghan refugees, already a despised underclass around the region, into pariahs in Pakistan. Safia and Elham became enemies of a state that wanted to punish them for the actions of a Taliban regime in Kabul that regarded them as traitors and infidels.

A few days before hearing from the Spanish embassy, Safia and Elham had paid \$1,400 to a fixer at a ["travel agency"](#) that put them on a waitlist for three-month tourist visas issued through a Pakistani consulate somewhere in Afghanistan. (The official cost for such a visa was \$8, but obtaining one the normal way, through Pakistan's embassy in Kabul, was virtually impossible.) Safia explained to me that this sketchy document would keep them relatively safe from the police while they looked for some way to leave Pakistan, but it wouldn't be official enough to legalize their status. Also, the \$1,400 was just a deposit. Delivery of the visas, not including ones for the children, would eventually cost \$3,100—or maybe more. The price fluctuated almost daily, as if visas were being sold like black-market gasoline. Now, with Spain allowing the family to travel to Madrid, the \$1,400 was a sunk cost.

The Pakistani government finds ingenious ways to profit off the desperation of Afghan refugees. It requires every foreigner without a valid Pakistani visa to obtain permission to leave the country—a document called, without irony, a "Humanitarian Safe Passage Exit Permit." Four of them would cost the family \$2,650 in fines and fees for overstaying the expired visas that Pakistan refused to renew. Even then, the exit permits weren't certain. Like most things in Pakistan, they depended on connections and bribes.

First, Elham had to register their 2-year-old son, Yusuf, who didn't have an entry visa, because he had been born in Pakistan, but who couldn't leave without being recorded in the national database. This task required Elham to spend a day driving around Islamabad in the car of his Pakistani landlord, who had become a kind of guardian angel to the family because he and Safia were both Shiite Muslims, co-religionists of an oppressed minority. To prevent Elham's Afghan accent from giving him away at the many police checkpoints, the landlord claimed him as his mute brother.

But even with a Pakistani at his side, Elham was turned away from one registration office after another. “When they checked my documents and saw that I am Afghan, they told me to leave the office and said that this matter was not their responsibility,” he told me later. Finally, the landlord called a friend in the Interior Ministry, who got the matter resolved. But Elham’s day spent wandering through bureaucratic Islamabad, he told me, “truly shows how people take advantage of the suffering of others.”

Pakistan now required all Afghans to pick up their exit permits in person at the Interior Ministry—but this seemed a likely trap for arrest and deportation. The work-around, of course, meant yet another bribe, and on Friday, March 27, Safia and Elham transferred \$600 through the “travel agency” to the bank account of a ministry employee. In exchange, they were told, the exit permits would be issued digitally the following Monday.

“I do not trust the government of Pakistan at all, not even one percent,” Safia wrote to me. “But this situation is about bribery, and I know that in such cases, once they receive the money, they usually complete the work. By Monday, everything should become clear.” Meanwhile, the family would shop for suitcases and clothing to prepare for their departure, which seemed more and more like a jailbreak.

[George Packer: ‘What about six years of friendship and fighting together?’](#)

I was sending money to their landlord by way of Western Union for their expenses. (When I described the situation to my editors at *The Atlantic*, they decided to have the magazine reimburse me for some of the money I spent on the family’s travel.) By now I was exchanging a dozen messages a day with Safia and Elham. As they came closer to escape, I found it hard to concentrate on anything other than getting them out. But every day threw an unreasonable, enraging obstacle in their path.

Monday arrived. Safia and Elham waited all day for their exit permits. In the late afternoon the Interior Ministry issued a single permit: for 2-year-old Yusuf. Apparently, the rest were delayed by a computer glitch. Their fixer at the “travel agency” reported that the other permits would come within an hour if the glitch could be solved. If not, then tomorrow. An hour passed. Night fell. Safia and Elham drank coffee to stay awake. “Only when the exit permits finally arrive will my heart become calm and I will be able to sleep,” Safia told me.

The next morning brought no permits. The word now was that they would be sent at two in the afternoon. Two o’clock came and went. The unofficial price had apparently gone up. At 4:30 Safia wrote with alarming news: “They have stopped all exit permits and are not approving them. They said that tomorrow I and all my family members must go in person to the Ministry of Interior, and only then there may be a possibility of approval.” By now just hearing the word *Pakistan* left Safia trembling. She was, she said, “going crazy from worry.”

I didn’t think it was a good idea for a family of Afghan refugees to show up at the heavily guarded Interior Ministry, which was subordinate to Pakistan’s intelligence service, a rogue agency widely accused of aiding terrorist groups, including the Taliban during the American war in Afghanistan. I reached out to everyone I knew with Pakistani government contacts who could spring the exit permits. A friend managed to reach a top official in the Foreign Ministry, who agreed to help.

But Safia had already made up her mind. Life in Pakistan was unbearable. She would gather her courage and move toward her dreams or be handed over to the Taliban and killed. She was ready to accept either outcome.

The next morning, April 1, the family’s landlord drove them to the white concrete Interior Ministry building. Safia, Elham, and the children went inside the reception hall—a cramped room where two men in civilian clothes sat behind a counter. Safia handed over their passports and receipts showing that they had paid for the exit permits.

According to Safia, as soon as the men realized that these were Afghans standing in front of them, their manner turned hostile. One of them glared at her. “Come back next week,” he told her. “Then your work will be done.”

As politely as possible, Safia explained that their papers were in order, their fines had been paid along with extra “fees,” and they urgently needed the permits so they could leave Pakistan.

The official’s face hardened. “Afghans have no right to speak here,” he said. “Leave the hall.” He threw the family’s papers on the floor.

Safia was 26 years old. The past five years had brought many blows. The loss of her career in the Afghan military after the fall of Kabul, and of any hope for a decent life in her native country. A suicide bombing outside the Kabul airport gate that left scores of corpses all around her in a sewage ditch and barely spared Safia, her husband, and the child in her womb. The [family’s flight from Taliban pursuers](#) across Afghanistan, during which they survived on rice,

bread, and water and slept in strange houses and mountain caves. Safia's overwhelming desire in the worst moments to end her own life, which only her husband's sympathy and the thought of her unborn child prevented. The two weeks Safia spent all alone in a Kabul hospital as she struggled to give birth to their daughter, Victoria, while her family stayed away for their safety and hers. The decision to sell everything she owned, including her wedding dowry, to pay for a black-market passport, then say goodbye to her parents and siblings and escape with her husband and baby into Pakistan. The refugee years that followed—the forms and interviews and medical exams the family was put through as they waited in vain for America to make good on its promise to bring its Afghan allies to safety. Those [last months spent](#) hiding from Pakistani police in a sunless room. The daily insults of petty bureaucrats. The waste of her youth, her life.

### [George Packer: Condemning millions for one man's crime](#)

But instead of breaking, Safia clung with all her strength to the only thing she hadn't lost.

"I've done nothing wrong," she told the men in the ministry. "I'm not a terrorist. I'm a woman." She later told me that her voice shook and rose nearly to a shout. "You must not treat me this way. I deserve to be treated like a human being. We're human beings! Look at my children—what is their fault? You should be happy we're leaving your country. I'll file a complaint if you don't do your job. We won't leave until you do it!"

She sat down in a chair as if she would never again get up. An hour passed. Then one of the men called her to the counter. "You are very stubborn," he said, and disappeared with their documents into an inner office. Half an hour later he emerged and handed over the exit permits. "Go," he commanded.

Safia laughed. "Soon I'll go, and I will never see this place again."

Elham was hearing stories of Afghan travelers at the Islamabad airport separated from other passengers by immigration officers, harassed with impossible demands, and shaken down for hundreds, even thousands, of dollars. One family missed their flight to asylum, their exit permits expired, and they were deported to Afghanistan.

I discussed these last-minute risks with an American lawyer named Tom Villalon—a member of a tiny nonprofit called [Rescue Afghan Women Now](#) that helps keep dozens of Afghan women who'd served in their country's military alive in Afghanistan and Pakistan. (Last week, one of them, a widow with two young sons, was arrested and deported to Kabul. Pakistan is now deporting as many as 5,000 Afghans a day.) Villalon had a colleague who knew the brother of a senior Pakistani official, and this man agreed to contact the immigration chief at the airport to ensure that Safia and Elham would be allowed to leave. I can't tell you the brother's name, just as I have to keep the landlord's name out of this story. Among all the grief that Pakistan caused the family, some Pakistanis treated them with extraordinary kindness, and for that they might be punished.

The Turkish Airlines flight was scheduled to depart Islamabad in the predawn hours of Friday, April 10. That night I was with my wife and daughter in Córdoba, in the south of Spain. We had come for a short vacation, but also in hopes of meeting Safia, Elham, Victoria, and Yusuf at the Madrid airport. A picture appeared on my phone: a family selfie inside the terminal, broad smiles; by chance, 4-year-old Victoria was wearing a T-shirt that read ESCAPE. Sometime before midnight in Spain—1:30 a.m. in Pakistan—Elham tried to reach me on WhatsApp, but the call was dropped. A few minutes later a text message came. Turkish Airlines would not let them board the flight.

Their luggage had been weighed, and they were about to receive boarding passes, when two airline employees noticed the family and demanded their passports. One of the employees, a young Pakistani woman, sneered: "Go away, dirty Afghans, damned Afghans. Sit there. No one will allow you to travel."

When the family didn't move, the other employee, a Pakistani man who seemed to be the manager, snapped: "The lady is telling the truth. Why don't you go over there? Didn't you hear what she said? Do you want us to call the police to force you to leave?" The family abandoned the ticket counter and went to sit down. The manager called Elham back and told him that they couldn't board their flight without return tickets—to Kabul. Elham displayed their Spanish visas and the letter from the ambassador granting their request to travel to Spain for asylum, but it made no difference.

Elham had spent five years in the Afghan special forces, fighting alongside American troops. Military service had given him a highly respected place in society. Now, to save his family, he had to try to put an American journalist he'd never met on the phone with an airline employee who suddenly had the power to ruin their lives. But the manager continued to insult Elham and refused to talk with me, and it seemed as if the family's chance at freedom was going to slip away at the very last minute. If they weren't able to reach safety, I thought to myself, then the world was an utterly hopeless place.

Then Villalon, the American lawyer, discovered that Turkish Airlines had flights from Madrid through Istanbul to Kabul. I got online, bought four fully refundable tickets, and sent them to Safia's email. Their sudden appearance on her phone seemed to upset the manager, but he had to let the family go. A few minutes later, Safia sent me a message: "My heart has grown very dark toward this place."

The last station in this gantlet of abuse was immigration. The family was sent to Booth #8, but Booth #8 sent them to Booth #3. Booth #3 was empty. Then Booth #1 called them over. Several officers examined the passports and conferred. Elham overheard enough of their Urdu to realize that the officers were familiar with the names of his family. One of them told Elham. "We'll check your documents and make sure there's no problem."

The children were exhausted and had begun to cry. "There's no problem," Elham said. "We paid a lot of money to put everything in order." And he added—perhaps with a gleam in his eye, since he was about to recover a morsel of all that Pakistan had taken from him: "If you want, I'll call the brother of the senior official right now."

"No, no, don't call. Your documents are fine."

Passports stamped—the last trace of Pakistan. The family started toward the departure gate, but the immigration officer had one more thing to say.

"If they hadn't reported your names to us, we wouldn't have allowed you to leave from here. We would have deported you to Afghanistan tonight."

"Why?"

Elham would never forget the answer.

"Because you are Afghans."

On the sidewalk outside the departures hall of Terminal 1 at Adolfo Suárez Madrid-Barajas Airport, a dark-haired little girl in a yellow T-shirt is running toward me with outstretched arms. A minute later, in pictures taken by my daughter, Elham, Safia, Victoria, and Yusuf look impossibly young and hopeful.

[George Packer: No one can offer any hope](#)

And now they live in Madrid. Elham quickly mastered the metro, and Safia is competing with her husband in language acquisition, and Victoria and Yusuf love riding on playground swing sets. The Spanish government provides temporary housing in a neighborhood of outer Madrid, three meals a day, metro cards, Spanish lessons, recreational activities, and school for Victoria, while the family's asylum request moves through the system. All alone in this strange country, Safia and Elham are determined to learn, work, and build a life for their children.

One day, Elham showed me a picture of a small desktop stand on which he'd placed the flags of Afghanistan and the United States. It made my heart sink. America didn't deserve his unrequited loyalty. "Why not the Spanish flag?" I asked. After all, Spain had given his family the second chance that America denied them. Elham agreed: He would put a Spanish flag alongside the other two, which, he told me, stood for the bond between us.

When the Trump administration locked out Safia's family and nearly all refugees, the rest of the world did the same. Pakistan and Iran have deported millions of Afghans back into misery; Canada, Australia, and other countries known for humanitarianism have narrowed the pathway to safety; most of Europe has shut itself off from desperate and oppressed people. Safia's younger sister, a talented artist and writer, is stuck in Afghanistan, trying to resist a forced marriage to a Talib. Elham's brother is being held in a Taliban prison because of Elham's military service. It's impossible for me to appreciate Spain's generosity to this family without also thinking of the scale of injustice around the world, the toll of countless humiliations.

At night Safia still dreams of Pakistan. "It is as if our bodies have left, but part of our souls are still trying to escape," she told me. "Those days left such deep marks on our spirits." But after many years of only surviving, she said, "little by little I feel that a new chapter is opening before us. For the first time in a long time, alongside all the pain, I can also feel hope. I can feel that maybe life still holds beauty for us."