

## NGOs and Refugees: The Afghanistan and Central Asian Association

By **Jessica Rush**, Oxford graduate and legal intern at the **Afghanistan and Central Asian Association**



The media – in particular the tabloids – has a tendency to label asylum seekers ‘scroungers’. Asylum seekers and refugees are painted as embodying the antithesis of ‘British Values’, flooding the country with degenerates who are attempting to game the system (see examples [here](#) and [here](#)). This narrative has come to the fore as the refugee crisis has mounted. The UN has **estimated** that 65.3 million people across the globe have been displaced, an all-time high. Thousands of these ended up on the coast of France, at Calais, and the UK watched as the British and French government negotiated the placement of these asylum seekers. The accusations that **men from the Calais camp were falsely claiming to be children** fanned the flame of an ugly mistrust of those who were throwing themselves on the mercy of the UK for protection.

But behind the rhetoric are the facts: in the past 17 years, the **UK has taken in around 100,000 refugees** (altogether less than 0.0016 % of Britain’s population today, and in 17 years some will have left the UK once their home country has been deemed ‘safe’ again). And behind the headlines are individuals; each refugee has been driven from their home and the life they had built, and the challenge before them is to find a safe place to settle and start again. An office on the ground floor of 24 Deptford Broadway is the fruit of one refugee’s family rebuilding their lives. The office is home to a charity, the Afghanistan and Central Asian Association. Its director is Dr Nooralhaq Nasimi, and he is assisted by his family, a handful of staff and a pool of volunteers. The charity aims to assist refugees’ and migrants’ integration into UK society. It provides English lessons, a supplementary school, a legal clinic and runs Prevent counter radicalisation programmes funded by the Home Office. The ethos of the charity is informed by the personal experience of the Nasimi family, who arrived in the UK as refugees in 1999.




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Dr Nooralhaq Nasimi was born in the Parwan province of Afghanistan to a father working in the government. From the beginning of his career he was a passionate activist, organising literacy

classes and promoting human rights and gender equality during his time as a young man in the Afghan military. In 1989 he began a 9 year journey to gain his PhD in Political Science in Odessa, Ukraine. During this time he and his wife, Mahboba, had two children before returning to Afghanistan in 1999. Their homecoming was brief. The **Taliban had come to power in 1996** and a family who had been expatriates in Soviet Ukraine were in a very precarious position under their brutal regime.

In March of 1999 the family had decided to leave Afghanistan. It was a decision that meant undertaking a very dangerous journey, leaving their homeland and their family behind forever. Adding to their concern, Mahboba was pregnant with their third child. It was not an easy decision, but in the end it seemed the only real possibility for survival. The family walked to the airport in Kabul in order to catch a plane to Odessa. They could not stay in Ukraine, either, but managed to remaining enough for their third child, Darius, to be born. Then their journey west began.

The UK had a reputation for being a tolerant, multicultural country. To a student of political science, it seemed a relative haven of liberalism. Since they had no official passports, they relied on officials to be either kind or corrupt. Throughout the summer and into the autumn, the young family moved westwards, walking and sometimes hitching a ride where they could. When they reached the coast of Belgium it was November, and they faced the daunting prospect of having to cross a freezing sea to get to the UK. An agent promised to help them cross the channel, so the parents took their three children into a container during the night. For 9 hours, they were locked in a dark container importing perishables into the UK. Whilst the container was moving, the refrigeration mechanism was turned on and the children – particularly the baby – were at serious risk of hypothermia. Running out of oxygen was another worrying possibility; the next year it emerged that **58 trafficked Chinese migrants had died** while making a similar journey in a refrigerated container.

The container finally landed in Dover, where the family were discovered by Border Control and sent to the Refugee Council. The dangerous journey was over, but their battle was not nearly over. The Nasimis were classed as asylum seekers and allowed to stay in the UK on temporary admission while their claim to be recognised as refugees was processed. This took three years, during this time the parents were not permitted to work.



Afghan diaspora.

Far from being a scrounger trying to subvert the British system, Dr Nasimi wondered how he could help others in the same position as himself. The linguistic and cultural barriers had been a significant obstacle to the Nasimis settling into their new life, so they began their efforts to smooth the transition for others. At first, this meant organising cultural events for other Afghans in London. In 2004, Dr Nasimi became the director of a registered charity now known as the Afghanistan and Central Asian Association. The charity now works with all migrants and refugees who are local to the Lewisham based office. Beneficiaries from places such as Iran, Somalia, Eastern Europe and West Africa often use the services alongside the

Running English lessons, supplementary schools, women's groups and other services is a hard task, and one becoming increasingly vital now that the number of migrants in Lewisham is growing and public funds shrink. The charity operates 7 days a week and Dr Nasimi sometimes takes calls at odd hours beyond the working day. Dr Nasimi speaks at conferences and panels, campaigning for human rights for the people of Afghanistan. Driving all of these operations is a love of British

culture and a sense of purpose that comes with a second chance. The Nasimis, and the community they serve, are hard workers with a deep appreciation for the opportunities their adopted country provides. They don't want to undermine the system; they have proved they want to make the most of it.

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