



## Think Globally, Act Locally: Helping Afghan Refugees in Japan

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In August 2021, the Taliban took over the government of Afghanistan. Consequently, the previous governmental employees were dismissed from their jobs, those who had studied abroad or worked for international organizations were persecuted, and women were prohibited from working and from going outside their house unless accompanied by male companions. Three of those who had previously studied in Japan evacuated to Japan through the help of their Japanese contacts. This effort led to several exciting developments. First, many people offered to assist the refugees once they arrived in Japan. Then, it raised awareness among the Japanese volunteers about global issues, especially Afghanistan. Ultimately, it enhanced intercultural communication skills among all participants. In this article, the author will share the stories of these Afghan families, the insights and lessons learned by their supporters, and the implications for global education and English learning.

2021年8月、タリバンがアフガニスタン政府を掌握した。その結果、それまでの政府職員は解雇され、留学経験者や国際機関で働いていた者は迫害され、女性は男性の同伴がない限り就労も外出も禁止された。日本にかつて留学していた3人のアフガン人は、日本人の知人や日本の団体を頼って日本に避難した。この努力は、いくつかの画期的な展開をもたらした。第一に、避難民が日本に到着すると、多くの人々が支援を申し出た。第二に、国際的な問題、特にアフガニスタンに対する日本人ボランティアの意識が高まった。第三に、参加者全員の異文化コミュニケーション能力が高まったことである。本稿では、アフガニスタン人家族のストーリー、彼らの支援者が得た洞察と教訓、そしてグローバル教育と英語学習への示唆を紹介する。

Former US Ambassador to Japan, the late Edwin O. Reischauer (1988) wrote a seminal message to Japanese youth on the true meaning of internationalization, amidst Japan's peak of economic success following World War II. Although it was written almost a half century ago, its message still resonates and has a strong impact today. First,

Reischauer clarified the meaning of internationalization that it is not necessarily the same as Westernization or changing the external lifestyles, but rather the development of internal new attitudes (pp. 14-16; pp. 25-28). He wrote, "We must see ourselves as citizens of a world community of nations which cooperate with one another for their common good" and "For Japan...these new attitudes have to include a willingness to play a much larger role in world affairs than it has in the past" (p. 16). He believed Japan can contribute to the world through contending, "Japanese must be more willing to assume an appropriate portion of the world's problems. In large part this means the sharing of Japan's strengths and good features with others" (pp. 36-37).

Cultivating cosmopolitan thought is a primary aim of English education for Japanese young people. For example, MEXT's *2018 High School Courses of Study* emphasizes the importance of English course materials which "raise students' awareness of themselves as Japanese citizens within an increasingly globalized society, deepen overall international understanding and help to develop a spirit of international cooperation" (Section 13 English, pp. 23-24). Moreover, Yashima (2002) posed a concept of international posture, or "attitude toward the international community," as a strong indicator of motivation to study English. Research has confirmed that greater international awareness and posture can have a positive impact towards students' English language attitudes and learning (Haarmann, 1989; Kobayashi, 2000; Sonda, 2010; Yamamoto, 2000).

In this article, the author shares the stories of three Afghan refugees and their families, discusses insights gained and suggests some ideas for global education in the context of English language learning in Japan. The refugees' names are pseudonyms for their privacy and protection. Moreover, their consent for sharing their stories was obtained.

### Beginning

In August of 2021, the Taliban took control of the government of Afghanistan. Although they had initially promised a softer policy than their previous ruling of 1996-

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2000, in reality they enforced stricter rules and regulations. As a result, all the previous governmental employees were dismissed, and their bank accounts were frozen. Women were banned from working and could only go outside home if accompanied by male companions. Moreover, girls were denied access to education after primary level. Among the targets of this persecution were former students who had studied abroad, including Japan, several years before: Fatima, Ahmad and Mahmud.

Fatima was one of the few female students from Afghanistan that studied in Japan. After graduating from a Japanese university, she returned to Afghanistan and began to work for an international organization. However, after the Taliban took over the country, she was told to leave her job and stay at home. The Taliban started to inspect every home to check documents and the backgrounds of the residents. Anyone who worked for the former Afghan government, international organizations, or who had studied abroad, would become a target of systematic persecution. Consequently, according to Fatima, she buried her documents in the backyard of her home where she lived with her parents, and then stayed with various relatives in the countryside. In the meantime, she contacted one of her former teachers in Japan and asked for help to evacuate to Japan.<sup>1</sup> With the help of her teacher, she managed to get out of Afghanistan and travel to Japan within 2 months.

When the Taliban came to power again, Ahmad was working for the former government and was immediately ordered to leave his position and stay at home. His bank account was frozen. At this time, he and his wife had just begun raising their young family. As their financial challenges were pressing, he sought help from relatives: he sold some of his possessions to survive. However, Ahmad began to suffer from the psychological stress of not having a job or any income and staying at home for most of his time. Ahmad and his family were also able to evacuate to Japan through the help from one of his former teachers in Japan.

Mahmud was a high-ranking officer in a regional government: his office was raided immediately by the Taliban. Since he knew that they were coming, he had previously left his office and went into hiding: staying at the homes of different relatives throughout the country. In the meantime, a local international exchange organization based in the city where he had studied in Japan, was able to help him and his young family to evacuate to Japan.

### New Challenges

Thus, with the help of a local international organization, teachers, and their friends in Japan, these two Afghan families and one Afghan woman successfully relocated to

Japan ensuring their safety. However, once they landed in Japan, new challenges awaited. After finding housing, the next big challenge was finding jobs so they could support their families. All three held a master's degree from a Japanese university, but their Japanese language skills were only at the beginner's level, and jobs that required English were limited. Fortunately, Fatima was living at her former teacher's house, so her living expenses were minimal. She was offered a part-time research assistant job at her former university and was also able to start teaching English privately to a few students to support her income. Thus, she managed to sustain herself financially. Through the help of an international organization, Mahmud was offered a full-time job at a local company. However, it was a simple manual labor position - minimum wage - making it challenging to support a growing family. Moreover, Mahmud was living in the countryside and did not own a car, so to go shopping or visit a hospital, he needed to rely on others' help or public transportation, which was not always available, especially in times of emergency. Ahmad did not have a job or adequate housing at first. However, he soon began teaching some private English lessons and was eventually offered a research assistant job at his former university. However, the income was not enough to support his family. Fortunately, within two months of filing the applications, the Japanese government recognized him and his family as refugees. This expediency was extraordinary, given that - if successful - the process can span several years. Once he and his family were recognized as refugees, they could change their status to long-term resident in Japan, which qualified them to receive financial assistance from the city where they were living. Within a year, all three Afghans and their family members were recognized as refugees.

### Significant Developments

#### Offer to Help

Despite numerous challenges, the Afghan refugees were not alone. The local communities extended their support, including teachers and students from the university they had attended, members of a local international exchange group, and new friends they met at social gatherings. Some of these people started a charitable foundation to help the Afghan families through the Food Bank and sent food regularly. A few other friends collected recycled clothes, toys, books, and more to give to the families. Another group of people started a crowd-funding project in their community and raised enough money to buy an air-conditioner for one of the families. Moreover, a local newspaper offered to write an article about Fatima: how she escaped the Taliban persecution and how she was struggling with her new life in Japan. Furthermore, the president of the newspaper himself joined the interview to prepare the article. As a result



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of this article, a few more people signed up for English lessons. One university professor read the article and offered a generous donation. Several special Afghan events were held across several months, where delicious Afghan cuisine prepared by the Afghan wives each time and a presentation on Afghanistan was given. Each event attracted about 20 to 30 attendees, fundraising to support refugees.

### Global Awareness

The next significant development was the increased level of global understanding and awareness that grew within the community. To study global issues in the classroom is one thing, but meeting and hearing firsthand from someone who experienced them is another. For example, Fatima was invited to speak at a local university's Global Issues class, where she shared her experiences and discussed gender issues in her country. She explained the low status of women, the denial of education for girls beyond the primary level, and how women are banned from work and social life. The students commented that her story opened their eyes, stimulated their cognition, and made them realize that these problems are real and need to be urgently addressed.

Within these events, the Afghans spoke about the history and culture of Afghanistan. Participants were not aware of many aspects of their country, including language, ethnic diversity, food, climate, religion and customs. One question that was often asked at the events was why the Taliban deny schooling and work for women. It was explained that although the Taliban uses Islam to justify their restrictions on women's activities, Islam itself encourages all to pursue education. For example, the Quran states: "But those who do good—whether male or female—and have faith will enter Paradise and will never be wronged 'even as much as' the speck on a date stone" (4:124). Moreover, one hadith<sup>2</sup> says, "Seeking knowledge is a duty upon every Muslim" (Sunan Ibn Majah 224). Another one states, "If anyone travels on a road in search of knowledge, Allah will cause him to travel on one of the roads of Paradise" (Sunan Abi Dawud 3641). There are, in fact, prominent female scholars of Islam: Fatima Al-Fihri is known as the founder of the al-Qarawiyyin Mosque in Morocco in 9th century CE, which later developed into the University of al-Qarawiyyin, presumably the world's first university; Al-Ijliya Al-Astrulabi (10th century, Syria) devised an astrolabe, which is used to measure time and the position of the sun and stars; and Sutayta al-Mahamali from Damascus (13 and 14th centuries) obtained *ijazahs* (a sort of teacher license of transmitting Islamic religious knowledge) in her very early childhood and later became a prominent teacher and scholar. Both of the two Afghan men, Ahamad and Mahmoud, want their daughters to receive the highest education possible.

### English Education

Promoting English education was not part of the purpose of the supporters helping the Afghan refugees: it occurred organically. The aforementioned participants signed up for English lessons with the Afghan refugees, who became positive role models for Japanese learners of English. Japanese learners are generally very shy about using English, while these Afghans are not; they speak English fluently despite making many minor mistakes. The Afghan friends also taught themselves English through improvisational means: watching movies, TV shows, YouTube programs, listening to music, and reading novels since formal English lessons were mostly unavailable. Conversely, Japanese learners have almost 10 years of formal English lessons in school, alongside immediate multimedia access. Thus, the Japanese students who met these Afghan refugees discovered they did not have to be shy about making mistakes using English (they could also be like their Afghan teachers) taking advantage of an environment surrounded by modern technologies and media.

### Moving Forward

Historically, Japan has had a notoriously low rate of refugee acceptance. Between 2010 and 2021, the number of refugee recognitions ranged between 18 and 74 - with a mean of 41 (Immigration Services Agency, March 24, 2023). Therefore, the three Afghans were somewhat reluctant and skeptical about applying for refugee status recognition. However, being recognized would have a significant meaning because it would give them a long-term resident status, which allows them to do many things without restrictions, such as work and study. Therefore, they applied and were all granted refugee status within two to eleven months after applying. This was an encouraging development and a tremendous step forward for both them and their local supporters. However, their quality of life in Japan was troubling; a perception often differed between refugees and their supporters, evinced through the following newspaper article:

Two years have passed since the Islamist Taliban was reinstated in Afghanistan on August 15, 2021. With their safe way of life threatened, many people fled the country, and Japan accepted about 800 people, with the government recognizing some as refugees. However, the government's support for these people to live independently in Japan is inadequate. Many lead impoverished lives. An examination of the acceptance of Afghans also reveals problems with Japan's overall policy of accepting refugees (Ikeo, September 17, 2023, translated by author).



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Mahmud emphasized this sentiment during one of his presentations. He and his family are eternally thankful for being saved from persecution of the Taliban and allowed to live in Japan. However, their first two years were extremely challenging: they lived on minimum wage. After paying all their expenses, there was nothing left each month. Then, his company began to struggle: his work hours decreased, resulting in an even lower income. His children were constantly in need of medical help, but when he visited a nearby clinic, one of his children was denied treatment: it was not a pediatric clinic. Furthermore, he had difficulty communicating with doctors and nurses in the hospitals: few spoke English. Although his supporters were doing their best to assist them, it was still not meeting his family needs. He felt as though he was in a very difficult situation.

Another newspaper article reveals the reality of Afghan refugees living in Japan:

Around 40% of the 169 people who fled to Japan from Afghanistan following the Taliban's return to power in August last year have left their new home due to what they say was pressure and a lack of support from Japan's Foreign Ministry. Although Japan has granted refugee status to 98 people, 58 others returned to Afghanistan despite the risk of persecution by the Taliban, while seven left for the United States and the U.K., according to the evacuees. Six have remained in Japan but have not applied for refugee status (Kyodo, September 15, 2022).

Knowing of the risk to their lives, it is astonishing that many Afghan refugees chose to return to their country after being granted refugee status. This suggests their living conditions in Japan were perceived to be even worse than those in Afghanistan. In a talk given at an event held in October 2023, Mahmud suggested that refugees needed comprehensive support from the government in the first stage of their new lives until they can become independent. For example, Japan was experiencing inflation and as a father of small children, it was becoming more difficult for Mahmoud to deal with the financial burden. Although the Japanese educational system ranks among the best in the world, it is difficult for foreign-born children to acclimate to this environment, due to language and cultural differences. Moreover, in administrative offices such as a city hall, it is difficult to receive services smoothly because of the language barrier. It was the collaboration between the Japanese citizens and the government that made the evacuation of the three Afghan friends and their families possible. Nevertheless, these citizens still need more governmental involvement and assistance in improving the refugees' quality of life in Japan.

### Insights gained

There is a tendency for Japanese people to be too modest and, as a consequence, do not realize how many strengths they possess. Ambassador Reischauer (1988) listed common virtues among the Japanese people: as a great capacity for cooperation, diligence and pride taken in workmanship, great value placed on education, and orderliness of the society (pp. 38-43). However, he did not forget to address the issues and challenges of Japan: not knowing their own strengths and weaknesses, treating global quandaries with the same imperative as their own, and an aloofness towards misrepresenting their national character (pp. 44-51; pp. 62-66). The Japanese supporters for the Afghan refugees clearly manifested some of these virtues by cooperating with each other, caring for the refugees and working very hard to make their life in Japan comfortable. They also showed interest in learning about the culture and history of Afghanistan, tried to understand the problems in Afghan society, and regularly interacted with the refugees and their families.

Several supporters, including college students, commented that they learned a great deal about the state of the world, had their eyes opened and their horizons broadened. These students who learned English from these refugees commented that the lessons were very interesting: they could learn much about Afghan culture and history, enjoying their conversations. College English teachers can also contribute to this context by promoting English as an international language and raising global awareness, as these aspects can be incorporated into their classes. Yashima (2002) proposed a concept of international posture, or "attitude toward the international community," as a strong indicator of motivation to study English. The present author's own research confirms that international posture is conducive to a positive attitude towards English as an international language (Sonda, 2010).

### Conclusion

Ultimately, assisting these three Afghan refugees and their families was a humanitarian project: saving their lives was the first step. It gave the supporters great joy and deep satisfaction as fellow human beings; everyone has the right to live. However, the next step was to help them become independent and achieve a good quality of life, which posed further challenges. These problems were solved one by one or are currently being worked on.

At the time of writing this paper, Fatima has since moved to the United States at the invitation of her younger sister, who relocated there in 2021. Mahmud left his job and is



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now receiving financial aid. He and Ahmad are both studying Japanese so that they can both become independent financially by finding a regular job or even starting their own business someday. In the meantime, their children are all growing healthily and happily, becoming quite fluent in Japanese. The oldest ones already can act as their parents' interpreters on occasion. . The two families now live in the same apartment complex, enabling them to enjoy conversing in their native tongue, whilst continuing to learn Japanese. The supporters are very happy to see these refugees moving on with their lives, prepared to assist to the ends of their abilities.

Local groups, individuals, and local governments have made their lives as comfortable and meaningful as possible, but many challenges remain. To improve their quality of life, and to help future refugees transitioning to live in Japan, a more systematic program of support is vital for the refugees and those who want to help them. As Ambassador Reischauer (1988) suggested, if Japan is a member of the global community, it is our responsibility to work together towards the happiness of people in every nation. Thus, if one nation or one person is suffering from a lack of basic needs, other nations and peoples should extend a helping hand. Therefore, Japanese have the potential to rise to an even higher level of service; helping and giving are inherent qualities of all human beings.

**Notes:**

1. "Evacuation," "evacuate," and "evacuee" are specialized terms used by the Japanese Foreign Ministry. An "evacuee" is someone who flees from their home country to Japan; after arriving in Japan, they apply for a "refugee" status.
2. Hadith is an oral tradition containing the purported words and actions of prophet Muhammad.

**Bio Data**

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