

Hues of Humanitarianism: Exploring the Inequities of Humanitarian Parole in the U.S.¹

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Abstract

In principle, the U.S. humanitarian parole system is well-positioned to expeditiously provide equal protection and assistance to vulnerable Afghans, Ukrainians, and others fleeing humanitarian emergencies. For example, in 2021 the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan in the wake of the U.S. military withdrawal from the country and just six months later, in 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. Both events led to the type of massive displacement crises that humanitarian parole was theoretically created to address, with thousands of Afghans and Ukrainians seeking urgent refuge in the U.S. However, as evidenced by the robust Uniting for Ukraine (U4U) program and the relatively fragile Operation Allies Welcome (OAW) initiative for Afghans, there are clear inequities in the accessibility and provision of U.S. humanitarian parole benefits. How do recently arrived migrants differentially experience the humanitarian parole program in the U.S., and what may explain some of the variations in their experiences with humanitarian parole? To answer these questions, this article draws on an analysis of humanitarian parole policies as well as data from structured interviews with 160 migrants who recently arrived in the greater Washington, D.C. metropolitan area from a humanitarian crisis-affected country. From this sample, the authors focus on the experiences of 10 migrants in order to better understand the U.S. humanitarian parole program. Based on an analysis of all these data, we argue that one of the primary functions of the U.S. humanitarian parole system is to serve as an internal migration control that meets U.S. national security interests. This article adopts a critical security studies lens to uniquely highlight the disparate impacts this selective humanitarianism has on the experiences of different migrant groups living in the U.S., before concluding that the realization of true, uniformly applied,

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humanitarianism may be even further away as the second Trump administration takes aim at existing humanitarian parole programs.

Key Words:

humanitarian parole, humanitarianism, Afghanistan, Ukraine, U.S. national security

1. Introduction

Mahad and Muhammad⁵ are two of the 124,000 individuals – mostly Afghan nationals – evacuated from Afghanistan in the wake of the August 2021 U.S. military withdraw and subsequent Taliban takeover of Kabul (Dawi, 2023). Both men came with their families to the U.S. through the federal “humanitarian parole” program.⁶ Prior to these tumultuous events and their arrival in the U.S., Mahad and Muhammad supported their families through meaningful careers in Kabul. Mahad worked with the U.S. embassy, while Muhammad consulted with the United Nations Development Program in collaboration with the U.S. and Afghan governments. They both arrived in the D.C., Maryland, Virginia (DMV) region as humanitarian parolees in 2022. However, once in the U.S., the experiences of Mahad and Muhammad diverged significantly.

Mahad, unemployed and dependent on the generosity of friends and family, starkly summarized his predicament in an interview with a graduate student from American University’s Immigration Lab: “Right now, I have zero. [...] It is a very, very bad situation.” In contrast, Muhammad found a job as a consultant in Washington, D.C., within the first 50 days of living in the U.S. and is thus able to support his family. What explains these disparate experiences despite the evacuees sharing similar backgrounds and humanitarian parole status? In short, the answer centers on the possession of a Green Card (or Permanent Resident Card), which allows holders to seek legal employment in the U.S. (McNamara, 2023). Mahad was not authorized to work upon arrival, yet Muhammad received his Green Card on day one. This type of differential treatment is even more apparent when comparing the robust Uniting for Ukraine (U4U) program to the relatively fragile Operation Allies Welcome (OAW) initiative for Afghans. Overall, these discrepancies are representative of larger inequities in the U.S. humanitarian parole system that hinge on the government’s decisions to permit particular provisions to select parolees.

Since its inception as part of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) in 1952 (U.S. Congress, 1952) humanitarian parole has given the U.S. government significant latitude to decide which individuals are “deserving” of temporary protection from deportation as their applications for asylum claims, work visas, or other immigration statuses are processed. To be sure, humanitarian parole was created with noble aims in mind. Prior to the INA, those who entered the U.S. due to humanitarian crises were legally indistinguishable from economic migrants or immigrants who entered the country for non-

⁵ These are pseudonyms. To preserve the anonymity of the study’s interlocutors, all proper names in this article have been changed.

⁶ The Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) allows the secretary of homeland security to use their discretion to parole any noncitizen applying for admission into the United States temporarily for urgent humanitarian reasons or significant public benefit. (See INA section 212(d)(5) (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service, n.d.c).

emergency reasons (Chaudhry, 2023; Lustman, 2019; The Immigration Forum, 2021). The INA gave the Attorney General the power to

“[...] parole into the United States temporarily under such conditions as he may prescribe for emergent reasons or for reasons deemed strictly in the public interest any alien applying for admission to the United States [...]” (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service, n.d.c).

As of 2023, the Secretary of Homeland Security holds the authority to decide which parolees may receive temporary residency and protection under humanitarian circumstances, or in consideration of the public interest (American Immigration Council, 2024).

While the existing academic scholarship helps establish the fact that humanitarian parole is part of a larger ecosystem of migration controls enacted by host-states including the U.S., there are still questions pertaining to the U.S. government’s use of humanitarian parole as an internal form of migration control. And importantly, how this impacts parolees themselves – their lives, their families, and their desires to find housing, work, and social services. This article aims to fill that gap. Through a critical security studies lens and analysis of qualitative data with recent arrivals to the DMV, the authors argue that while U.S. humanitarian parole offers a needed form of protection and assistance for vulnerable individuals, it principally functions as a migration control to meet U.S. national security interests, even after parolees are admitted to the U.S. This leaves refugees with vastly different experiences as it pertains to their quality of life, employment, and overall outlook on the U.S. resettlement process. We argue it is critical to understand the nature and shortcomings of humanitarian parole from the perspective of migrants in order to improve the system as a whole.

1.1 Background

At face value, humanitarian parole provides a mechanism for entry and temporary stay in the U.S. for individuals who are experiencing a humanitarian crisis in their countries of origin, whether or not they intend to apply for asylum or refugee status. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Resolution 429(V), 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (adopted 14/12/1950, 1951 Convention), the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2198 (XXI), and the Protocol of 1967 (adopted 16/12/1967, 1967 Protocol) outlines the following criteria for a refugee:

“[...] owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.”

There are many deserving groups that fall outside this definition, including individuals fleeing humanitarian crises that emerge amid wars, and those displaced from climate-related disasters. Therefore, in effect, humanitarian parole acts as a “stopgap” to respond to people’s immediate need for safety and to prevent people from falling through the cracks of asylum systems. The asylum application process is also notoriously lethargic – with most applications taking up to five years to process – so humanitarian parole offers an expedited way for people to get a modicum of protection (Dawi, 2023). Each parole application receives a response within 90 days, which affords the U.S. government a more efficient way to respond to humanitarian emergencies (McNamara, 2023).

Humanitarian parolees add to an already robust immigrant population living in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. According to George Mason University's Institute for Immigration Research (2022), there were 1,466,403 immigrants living in the Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, District of Columbia (DC)-Virginia (VA)-Maryland (MD)-West Virginia (WV) metropolitan area (also known as the "DMV") in 2022. This amounts to 23 percent of the region's total population, which is a higher share than the foreign-born population nationally (as a percentage of the total U.S. population), at 14 percent. The number of immigrants living in the DMV increased by 19 percent between 2012 and 2022. Ultimately, immigrants to the DMV represent "slightly more recent arrivals" when compared to immigration trends in the rest of the U.S. (Institute for Immigration Research, 2022). These demographics – in particular the top countries of birth among immigrants living in the DMV – are likely to shift in the coming years as intractable conflicts around the world persist. The impacts of the ongoing humanitarian crises in Afghanistan and Ukraine are of particular interest in this article.

Historically, parole has served more than just individuals affected by humanitarian crises in their countries of origin – individuals who serve a "public interest" have also qualified (Chaudhry, 2023). However, there has been remarkable variability and ambiguity regarding what constitutes an adequate or legitimate "public interest". While these interests have shifted with changing U.S. presidential administrations and foreign policy over the last 75 years, they are still often predicated on a security logic. For example, the first widespread application of humanitarian parole came in 1956, as part of President Eisenhower's attempt to counter the Soviet Union at the height of the Cold War (Markowitz, 1973). He responded to the Soviet Union's suppression of the Hungary Revolution – which saw an estimated 3,000 civilians killed and 250,000 Hungarians displaced abroad – by paroling over 15,000 Hungarian refugees (Markowitz, 1973). President Eisenhower's actions created a precedent for his successors, as humanitarian parole continued to serve U.S. interests during the Cold War. In the latter half of the 20th century, the U.S. accepted refugees fleeing communist regimes in Cambodia, Cuba, Hong Kong, and Vietnam under the protection of the INA and humanitarian parole (Andorra, 2020). In effect, these actions helped bolster the U.S. global sphere of influence during a period of heightened security concerns (Bath, 2022).

Based on an analysis of data outlined in this article, and a review of relevant humanitarian parole policies in the U.S., we first argue that there was significant variation in the quality of life of humanitarian parolees in the DMV, and this reality hinges, at least in part, on the differential mechanics of the U.S. humanitarian parole system. Parolees, including parolees fleeing the same humanitarian crises in the same places, can have vastly different experiences of immigration and integration into life and work in the U.S. On the one hand, humanitarian parole offers a needed form of protection and assistance for displaced and crisis-affected people. Yet on the other hand, this same program can leave some of these newly-arrived individuals in the U.S. with new uncertainties, and gaps in services. Perhaps Torpey (1998) was right in his assessment of "the ambiguous nature of modern states, which are at once sheltering and dominating" (p. 241). As will soon be clear, this apparent contradiction stems from the fact that humanitarian parole is yet another migration control that serves U.S. national security interests.

Second, our data and policy analyses suggest there is differential, even preferential, treatment of Ukrainian refugees who received humanitarian parole in the form of the U4U

program. This is compared to Afghan parolees, who at times struggle to settle in the U.S. amid limited support from the government. Finally, we argue that a security logic continues to pervade U.S. humanitarian parole policy, albeit with different manifestations. Most significantly, the September 11 terrorist attacks shifted security concerns to Muslim populations, so parole decisions often reflect anti-Muslim biases (Copeland, 2022). Additional future research with a larger and more representative sample of parolees from different countries is needed to confirm these findings.

2 Literature Review

Despite the political and media attention on physical migration controls – whether it be a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border or coast-guard interceptions of migrant boats in the Mediterranean Sea – the institution of state borders may more-closely resemble a façade instead of a fortress. This is not to suggest that physical barriers are ineffective at keeping people “in” or “out” of a country. Instead, conceptualizing the border as a façade captures the fact that borders, whether tangible or not, are transitory and “acquire their meanings always contingently, through the activities and practices undertaken around and through them” (Soguk, 2007: 284). This view of borders is especially important in refugee and migration studies. As it allows scholars to consider the myriad ways states try to control the movement of people, and retain the fundamental decision of who can “stay” within the state and who must “go”. Walia (2021) brilliantly describes this phenomenon as “territorial diffusion,” in which “the border is elastic, and the magical line can exist anywhere” (p. 6). State migration controls then can either be located “externally” or “internally”.

The instituting of external migration controls – or “externalization” – “encompasses all extraterritorial state technologies and actions intended to prevent migrants and refugees from reaching the legal jurisdiction of the state” (Walia, 2021: 6). Specific “control tools” of externalization include interdiction, refoulement/pushbacks, offshore asylum processing centers and detention facilities, and safe third country agreements (Boswell, 2003; Walia, 2021). A central component of many of these tactics is that externalizing states often partner with (or outsource to) third countries to bolster border control infrastructure and policing (Boswell, 2003). President Trump’s announcement of the “Remain in Mexico” policy (officially the Migrant Protection Protocols, Section 235(b)(2)(C) of the Immigration and Nationality Act) in December 2018 – which his newly appointed ‘border czar’ Tom Homan is anxious to reinstate in the second administration – is a case-in-point (Miroff, 2024). Though the Mexican government has voiced opposition to any restart of the Remain in Mexico policy, Trump is still keen on finding ways for asylum seekers to wait outside U.S. territory as their claims are processed in the U.S. (Madry, 2023). Externalization may also include “prevention” initiatives “designed to change the factors which influence people’s decisions to move, or their chosen destinations” (Boswell, 2003: 619-620). These types of policies and practices are different than the aforementioned control tools because they attempt to address underlying drivers of migration and displacement through development assistance, investment, and foreign policy in (or close to) countries of origin (Boswell, 2003). Vice President Harris’s first foreign trip as part of the Biden Administration illustrates this approach well. Speaking at a news conference in Guatemala alongside Guatemalan President Alejandro Giammattei, she warned against irregular migration to the U.S.: “Do not come. Do not come. The United

States will continue to enforce our laws and secure our borders. If you come to our border, you will be turned back” (BBC News, 2021, para. 6-7).

The waging of internal migration controls – or “internalization” – refers to control measures exercised within a sovereign state’s borders (Walia, 2021). Often, there is an inward Foucauldian “gaze” to (re)exert power over migrants and refugees who entered a country’s borders irregularly (Foucault, 1995). The most visible internal migration controls are detention and deportation. Internalization is quite literally practiced by the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), which has an “expansive interior jurisdiction”, that includes the legal authority to stop and search vehicles 100 miles inward from both the U.S. northern and southern borders (Walia, 2021). Despite the entity’s namesake, CBP has jurisdiction beyond – albeit geographically within – the national borders to better facilitate detentions and deportations. The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) also practices “interior enforcement” as part of their migrant “removal operations” (Office of Homeland Security Statistics, 2023). It is important to note that there are internal migration control practices that *precede* detention and deportation. Consistent with the conceptualization of the border as a ‘magical line,’ authors El-Kayed and Hamann (2018) argue that the border is not just the “physical demarcation of a geographic entity, such as a nation-state” (p. 136), but an internal governance strategy that includes regulation on the “right to housing and the right of free movement and settlement” (p. 138). This is egregiously practiced in the busing of migrants from U.S. southern states (namely Texas) to northern cities such as New York City and Washington, D.C. (Martinez et al., 2022). These actions and policies ultimately make migrants and refugees vulnerable to deportation – whether that be forced or coerced (as is often the case with “voluntary” repatriation).

The leveraging of external and internal migration controls emerges from the state’s commitment to security. If states are considered the main units in the international system (Waltz, 1979) then “the merging of the state with a clearly bounded territory is the geographical essence of the field of international relations” (Agnew, 1994: 56). The security of this territory is seen as a critical determinant to a state’s power, since borders separate the anarchic international environment from a nation’s resources that allow it to survive in the competitive international system (Agnew, 1994). In the government’s view, a fundamental part of territorial integrity is dictating who can enter and stay within a state’s borders. External and internal migration controls are seen as a means to this end because migrants challenge the “old trinity of state/nation/territory” (Soguk, 2007: 305). It is no surprise then that there is a confluence between migration and security in both policy and academic circles. As noted earlier, granting humanitarian parole to migrants served a security function for the U.S. government during the Cold War. Following the Cold War and the heightened outward migration of Eastern Europeans to the West, security studies were expanded to include migration studies (Boswell, 2003; Boswell, 2007; Paris, 2001). The September 11 terrorist attacks, followed by the 2004 Madrid and 2005 London bombings, further conflated migration with national security in the eyes of both politicians and scholars (Adamson, 2006; Boswell, 2003; Rudolph, 2003; Rudolph, 2006).

Ultimately, humanitarian parole can be considered both an external and internal migration control. Other scholars have already highlighted the ways humanitarian parole functions as an external migration control. In her article, “Humanitarian Parole: A Tale of Two Crises”,

Ciullo (2023) focuses on contrasting the application processes for potential humanitarian parolees from Afghanistan and Ukraine. She concludes that, “[d]espite both groups applying for the same immigration status under the same statute, they experienced incredibly unequal application processes and prospects of approval” (Ciullo, 2023: 505). She states plainly, “[i]t is virtually impossible for most Afghans remaining in the country to obtain parole” (Ciullo, 2023: 504). While U.S. government decisions to initially admit Afghans or Ukrainians as humanitarian parolees is a form of external migration control, the noted variation in the treatment of humanitarian parolees once inside the U.S. amounts to a form of internal migration control. This article uniquely focuses on why and how humanitarian parole is utilized as a form of internal migration control. The proceeding data analysis section and application of a critical security studies lens further illuminates this dynamic – and the ways migrants and refugees are negatively impacted.

3 Data Analysis

This article draws data from an analysis of structured interviews conducted by faculty and graduate students taking part in American University’s Immigration Lab. From 2022 to 2024, interviewers spoke to 160 persons who had recently arrived in the DMV from the crisis-affected countries of Afghanistan, Ukraine, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Venezuela, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. These interviews were designed to better understand the basic histories, experiences, and struggles of crisis-affected recent arrivals residing in the DMV. Some of the over 50 questions in the survey required quantitative, or closed-ended, answers, but we also asked open-ended questions that allowed respondents to speak at length about their lived experiences. Occasionally, question probes were used to dive further into relevant topics. Several questions tried to gauge the experience of interviewees settling into the U.S., searching for and finding work, and accessing additional services (e.g. healthcare, educational, and employment assistance). The interviewers also posed open-ended questions relating to education and employment experience, family history, migration journeys, current immigration status, and uses of and knowledge about various local services for refugees and immigrants.

For this article, we selected 10 interviews to analyze that provided the best insight on the nuances of the U.S. humanitarian parole program. These interviews were all with adults who had immigrated to the DMV within the last five years, and most of these individuals came to the U.S. from Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and Ukraine through the humanitarian parole program. It is worth noting that not all interviewees from the in-depth qualitative analysis are listed by name in this article. This is in the interest of brevity and a desire to highlight respondents’ quotes that most effectively illustrate the consequences of humanitarian parole being leveraged as a migration control. In light of the relatively small selected sample, we cannot make generalizations about the “migrant experience” in the DMV more broadly, or even the diversity of experiences with the U.S. humanitarian parole program. However, the in-depth and conversational nature of the interviews allowed the authors to uniquely focus on the relationship between humanitarian parole and the individual circumstances of respondents living in the DMV.

The authors realized early on in data collection that interviewees with comparable immigration statuses, and interviewees from the same countries and similar migration journeys to the U.S., had vastly different experiences living and working in the DMV. This reality prompted the authors to explore the nuances of humanitarian parole in greater depth, specifically gauging from the wide-ranging interviews which aspects of the

interlocutors' lives were most impacted by variation in the accessibility and provision of U.S. humanitarian parole benefits. Moreover, the authors were able to put the respondents' reflections on parole into greater context with this article.

3.1 Ukrainian Humanitarian Parolees

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Biden administration created the U4U parole program to support Ukrainian refugees fleeing violence and a worsening humanitarian crisis. Though U4U is the most fledgling humanitarian parole program in the U.S., it offers more resources to refugees relative to any other available parole program in 2023. Notably, it guarantees two-year residence permits for Ukrainian refugees, and their immediate families. Additional benefits are apparent from the onset of the U4U program – even before parole is formally granted (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service, n.d.a). First, all fees are waived for applicants, which relieves a potential financial burden and further helps 'streamline' the process (Homeland Security, 2022). Second, all accepted parolees are automatically granted work permits, meaning Ukrainians can legally work in the U.S. for the duration of their humanitarian parole. Third, Ukrainian parolees enjoy access to certain 'mainstream' refugee benefits such as cash assistance, supplemental security income, health insurance, and food stamps. Moreover, refugee resettlement assistance – which includes job placement and English language training – is also available through the Office of Refugee Resettlement (HIAS, n.d.).

The experience of one Ukrainian respondent named Darina is a testament to the protection and assistance available to humanitarian parolees in the Uniting for Ukraine program. Darina and her family were forced to flee Odessa and leave their relatively comfortable lives behind after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Darina, her husband, and their two children uprooted their lives in the middle of the night to shelter at Darina's father's home in a nearby village. It was here that Darina first learned of the Uniting for Ukraine program. She described the process of securing the required sponsor:

"[I found] this information in one group in Telegram...we could leave in the group a description of our family and our request (do we need financial help, place to live etc.). I wrote there asking for help in English and Ukrainian—we did not need any financial aid, just a sponsor to help us to fill in the forms. There was a Lithuanian girl in this group and, as I understand, she posted our request in Facebook. And Diana, the Lithuanian girl, contacted us. She asked what we needed from her. We started corresponding with her. She offered for us live with her for some time, as she lives alone."

Immediately upon arriving in the U.S. as humanitarian parolees, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) offered to help Darina and her husband secure public health insurance (Medicaid) and find employment. With work permits in hand, Darina was able to leverage her professional experience to work as a freelance photographer in the DMV, while her husband was also able to secure gainful employment. Darina underlined the fact that this employment gives her and her husband the opportunity to enjoy everyday activities with their children, and potentially reunite with their parents in the U.S. should the war continue.

3.2 Afghan Humanitarian Parolees

Despite also experiencing a protracted crisis, Afghans do not have their own country-specific humanitarian parole program. This reality does not stop Afghans from rightfully appealing for humanitarian parole, but it does complicate the application process and

negatively impact the experience for those admitted to the U.S. as parolees. The U.S. government's seemingly haphazard effort to evacuate Afghans was precipitated by the chaotic U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021. Both President Biden and his predecessor and successor, President Trump, were cautiously optimistic that the over 300,000 Afghan National Security Forces the U.S. trained over the last two decades would be able to thwart a Taliban takeover following the U.S. military withdrawal (Aikins, 2021). Both administrations were gravely mistaken: One week after the last U.S. evacuation plane left Kabul airport, the Taliban were in complete military and political control of Afghanistan (Aikins, 2021). That same month, President Biden directed the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to evoke its authority over the U.S. immigration system and facilitate the safe passage of Afghans fleeing the Taliban. The subsequent coordinated effort between DHS, other U.S. government branches, international organizations, and humanitarian aid groups formed the basis of OAW (the sister program of Operation Allies Refuge), which evacuated tens of thousands of U.S. embassy employees, interpreters, and other Afghans who qualified for Special Immigrant Visas (Jamali & O'Connor, 2021).

Of course, protection – in the form of admittance to the U.S. – is only half of what refugees need in the host-country. Assistance is also paramount so that these individuals can really integrate into the U.S. This is especially important considering that the average length of displacement for refugees today is 20 years, which is over two-times that of the early 1990s (Katz & Brandt, 2017). Afghans and Ukrainians alike do not just need a temporary safe haven – they need longer-term and sustainable support in their country of refuge. While humanitarian parole has the potential to meet this criterion – as is evident with the Uniting for Ukraine program – it falls well short for many Afghans. To start, the application process for prospective Afghan parolees is laborious because they enter the general U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) backlog without any priority treatment. To complicate matters further, the U.S. refuses to process requests for parole from Afghans still inside Afghanistan following the Taliban's takeover of the country (USCIS, n.d.b). One Afghan respondent needed to embark on a month-long journey to Uzbekistan just to apply for humanitarian parole. Out of 46,000 Afghans who applied for parole in 2021, only 11 percent saw their applications processed and a mere 297 Afghans were approved as of June 2022 (McNamara, 2023). This contrasts sharply with the over 70 percent of Ukrainian applications that have been processed with the applicant safely inside the U.S. as of June 2022 (Rush, 2022).

3.3 The Different Shades of Humanitarian Parole

Once inside the U.S., the experiences of Afghan refugees varied significantly compared to their Ukrainian counterparts in our sample. This is potentially due, in part, to the fact that relatively few Afghans receive humanitarian parole. But it also stems from the inconsistencies of humanitarian parole benefits for Afghan parolees since there is no country-specific program. The various shades of humanitarian parole have the potential to cast a particularly long shadow for Afghan parolees trying to settle into the U.S.

The story of Mahad, who was introduced at the outset of this article, is a case-in-point. Mahad recounted the daily struggles he and his family continue to endure in the U.S., despite the fact he remains here through the humanitarian parole program. Although Mahad arrived in the U.S. with humanitarian parole, unlike other parolees or asylum-seekers we spoke to in this research, he did not receive work authorization upon entry,

and thus needed to live with family and friends for his first six months in the U.S. While he was eventually able to secure housing for his immediate family through assistance from an agency, he noted that this support stopped “after only four months”. Still unemployed, Mahad explained his family’s circumstances: “We are now four people in one apartment with nothing. No curtains, no furniture, nothing. No one is helping us, and we have a lot of problems”. Mahad and his wife finally have Green Cards, but the search for employment continues. Sultan, another Afghan refugee, echoed some of the same frustrations, even suggesting that seeking asylum in the U.S. may have been the wrong decision:

“You know from the last one year, I’m just having no paper, having no regular status at all. And still, we are waiting and whenever the decision is coming, we don’t know [...] what will happen. Even though we have solid reasons for why we came here and why we left Afghanistan. But still this uncertainty, it means that it makes us disappoint[ed] and we cannot focus on our goals at all. Sometimes you know that I’m...I did a wrong decision [to come] here, because you know that our time is going to spend without any, any, any activity...I’m dependent on my friends.”

Sultan has not yet been able to receive a work permit or any official immigration status that could eventually help facilitate legal employment. This predicament leaves Sultan in a vicious circle. Without a job, Sultan and his family are especially in need of outside assistance. However, as Sultan explained, multiple NGOs have informed Sultan that he must have an official immigration status or Green Card to receive any assistance for housing and employment.

The indisputable benefits of a work authorization are apparent in an interview with another Afghan respondent. Sayyid received humanitarian parole after fleeing the Taliban with 500 of his colleagues in the middle of August 2021. Though his migration journey was difficult and his formal asylum application in the U.S. is still pending, Sayyid was able to receive his work authorization permit and social security card within 15 days of arriving in the DMV. This allowed him to immediately search for legal employment and secure work in the food service industry. Though these jobs – lacking any employee benefits or health insurance – were less than ideal, Sayyid was eventually able to find a satisfying position at a nearby airport. Sayyid reflected on his experience, which he acknowledged was made easier with his documentation. Unfortunately, many refugees, even fellow humanitarian parolees, do not enjoy this same security:

“Work is different with other people, you know for immigrant people. Actually, yeah...we feel that. And sometimes we feel that and like when we apply for a little bit good job and good benefit, we can do that. We can. We have [the] ability...they’re looking for a long process and for our documents and a lot of requirements they have, especially a government job... they say the requirement is US citizenship. We [do] not have it that. A green card, we [do] not have that. And some companies, they’re looking for a clearance. And many of them [are] like that [...].”

Even in the event that an “undocumented” refugee is able to secure a job, without legal authorization to work they are left in a profoundly precarious position. Desta is one respondent who fits this profile. She arrived in the DMV in 2022 from Ethiopia, after fleeing the Tigray War and endemic corruption at the hands of the government and military. Desta described herself as an asylum seeker, though she has not yet applied for asylum. Since arriving in the U.S., Desta has been working at a restaurant for cash under the table. Her uncle was able to find this job after he contacted a broker who specializes in helping immigrants find discrete work. In her interview, Desta described her frustration over her lack of rights without a green card and work permit:

"I'm OK with working anything. It's not out of disrespect, but as I said...one day [I was] aiming to be a doctor. [I] never worked at all. The second day, there's some forces knocking at your door telling you to get out. On the third day, you just move out of the country, and when you're here out of the blue, you decided and I'm not going back to my country. I will be an asylum seeker. And now you're in work. You don't even know anything about it... I have no rights, but I just...I just go hopefully cause tomorrow is a new day. That's it."

Desta reported that she often fears for her safety at work and during her three-hour round-trip commutes between Washington, D.C. and Maryland using the city's public bus system. She feels exploited at work because she is expected to do everything while receiving significantly less compensation than she is owed. It is evident that people in Desta's position are especially vulnerable to mistreatment, underpay, and overextension in the workplace. Fortunately, negative experiences like this may be remedied if migrants are provided with legal authorization to work, such as through a consistently applied humanitarian parole program.

4. Discussion

Access to humanitarian parole – including temporary protection from deportation and a range of benefits – is certainly not experienced equally by recent parolees in the U.S. These contrasts are perhaps sharpest when comparing displaced Ukrainians with Afghans, but significant variation still exists even within the Afghan refugee community in the U.S. While access to work and benefit assistance were critical for parolees and others, it is certainly not a panacea – as is evident from the vulnerabilities the Ethiopian respondent faces in her job. Humanitarian parole functions as an internal migration control in a multitude of ways. The utility and mechanics of these internal “control tools” become even clearer when examining the security logic that underpins why some humanitarian parolees receive better treatment than other humanitarian parolees. In short, the reason Afghans, as opposed to Ukrainians, are largely on the losing-end of this equation is due to U.S. security concerns.

Most of the larger sample of recent arrivals we spoke to for this research had permission to reside in the U.S. – including the humanitarian parolees introduced here. Yet, it is evident that only a select few have the support they need for longer-term integration in the U.S. Others felt they had been left in precarious and destabilizing positions that shroud their futures in the country with uncertainty. This is exactly how internal migration controls are designed to function, especially when instituted alongside relatively “insufficient” external migration controls. The Biden administration originally told nonprofit organizations serving refugees and other crisis-affected persons in August 2021 that humanitarian parole would be used as a stopgap to receive and resettle over 50,000 Afghans in the U.S. Accordingly, this initiative was used to rapidly evacuate as many Afghans as possible prior to the Taliban's complete conquest of Kabul (Cai, 2021). However, it is no coincidence that the Biden administration's level of support for parolees once in the U.S. would be less ambitious. If Afghan refugees are unable to work or receive support in the U.S., then they are ostensibly forced to move elsewhere. If Afghan parolees are unable to achieve self-sufficiency through employment and the state withholds benefits they depend on, then the government maintains a degree of control over these individuals, and retains the right to end their protection and return them home to Afghanistan.

Migration is not a unidirectional phenomenon: while an exponential increase of Afghan migration to the U.S. immediately following the Taliban takeover of Kabul may have run counter to the government's preferred pace of accepting immigrants and asylum seekers, the U.S. government can also influence the outmigration, return, repatriation, and even potentially the deportation of Afghan parolees. The current debate in Congress over the Afghan Adjustment Act, "which would create legal pathways for Afghans who entered the United States in 2021 under humanitarian parole and are seeking permanent residence and naturalization" (Dawi, 2023: para. 8) underlines this point. In the two years following the Afghanistan withdrawal, the number of Afghans seeking asylum in the U.S. increased to 19,000, fueled by parolees who were evacuated to the U.S. after August 2021 (Dawi, 2023). Considering that the current form of humanitarian parole that many Afghans receive is designed to make it difficult to secure suitable employment, it's no wonder that Congress is hesitant to pass naturalization laws that would make it easier for this population to work (and stay) in the U.S. This is yet another example of the government trying to impact the ability of Afghans to live in the U.S. long-term, despite initially opening their borders to this population.

This "dialectical" relationship between internal and external migration controls is visible in many refugee hosting states. For example, after German Chancellor Angela Merkel famously suspended the European Union's Dublin Procedure for Syrians in August 2015, her government began the process of imposing internal border controls, or what El-Kayed and Hamann (2018) refer to as "internal border regimes". On September 4, 2015, as part of the Dublin Procedure suspension, Merkel and her Austrian counterpart opened their borders for the thousands of refugees stranded in Hungary after Prime Minister Viktor Orban closed his country's borders (Dockery, 2017; Vick, 2015). It is estimated that 20,000 refugees arrived in Germany the following weekend (Horn, 2015). Long lines of refugees leaving Hungary on foot or being welcomed in Munich's main train station by crowds of Germans are images now synonymous with Merkel's decision. In *Times*' "Person of the Year" feature of Merkel, the magazine described the latter scene as "transcendent, almost too good to be true" (Vick, 2015: para. 78). As a matter of fact, for the newly arrived refugees in Germany, this may have been 'too good to be true' as Merkel attempted to regulate this population's "legitimate means of movement" (Torpey, 1998: 239) within the country by dictating where refugees could live during the asylum application procedure. This is a clear illustration of "residential bans and obligations" that author Margit Fauser identifies as a form of "urban migration control" (Fauser, 2017: 9) which has been the focus of many refugee-led protests. When faced with their respective refugee "crises", the imposition of border controls by the U.S. and Germany are very similar. Each country compensated for the "loosening" of their external border controls by "tightening" their internal border controls. This strategy is a way of reasserting control over a central tenet of what it means to be a modern state: deciding who can reside within state borders.

Humanitarian parole, when conceptualized as a form of internal migration control, relies on creating uncertainty among parolees and depriving them of security and agency. Sultan's second-guessing of whether he made the right decision of seeking asylum in the U.S. is incredibly significant. These trepidations were shared by other respondents, including other parolees, and can be a harbinger to a decision to ultimately leave the U.S. Accordingly, the concept of "voluntary" return migration should be scrutinized. Ellermann (2006: 305) describes the "voluntary return of deportable migrants" as being achieved "through a combination of carrots and sticks", to suggest that outmigration is often

coerced. While the aforementioned Afghan Adjustment Act can restore a degree of certainty among Afghan humanitarian parolees, its fate is in the balance as members of congress continue to voice “concerns about poor security vetting of the individuals who were airlifted from Kabul amid a chaotic withdrawal operation” (Dawi, 2023: para. 10). Though this reservation may be presented in pragmatic terms, some are quick to point out the fallacy. Ciullo (2023) notes that Afghan immigrants in the U.S. historically do not have any higher rates of terrorism or crime than other migrant groups, or even native-born U.S. citizens. She goes further to rightfully point out that “many Afghan parole applicants were former employees of the U.S. military [so] if they truly presented a national security threat to the United States, the military would not have employed them” (Ciullo, 2023: 210). Ciullo (2023) concludes that “only racial prejudice and Islamophobia perpetuated by the U.S. government” (p. 495) can fully explain why Afghans do not receive equal access to humanitarian parole as Ukrainians. Just as migration and security have become conflated over time at the external border, there is also a merging of these policy areas at internal state borders which tend to exclude certain migrant groups. In the context of this article, Afghans are seen as a greater security threat than Ukrainians and are accordingly on the losing end of the accessibility and provision of U.S. humanitarian parole benefits – even if they are recognized parolees.

5 Conclusion

While humanitarian parole should ideally operate on humanitarian principles – namely the equal protection and assistance of all vulnerable populations facing emergency situations – there are clearly inequities and gaps in the implementation of the program based on people’s country of origin. We find that humanitarian parole is part of a much larger ecosystem of migration controls fundamentally motivated by security – not humanitarian – calculations and domestic foreign policy objectives. This reality is apparent today in the differential treatment of humanitarian parolees from Ukraine and Afghanistan. These calculations have real and potentially negative consequences for parolees in the U.S. Reform of humanitarian parole is desperately needed. In order to better meet the needs of displaced populations and place “humanitarianism” at the center of the humanitarian parole initiative, the program must commit to serving a wider range of refugees equally – not just those who fulfill national security interests. For example, we find that the proactive measure of automatically granting work permits and/or Green Cards to all humanitarian parolees upon entry into the U.S. would exponentially improve people’s condition and integration. While this translates to a tangible policy recommendation, the implementation of such policies may be significantly curtailed by President Trump’s reelection to the White House. In keeping with his campaign pledges of strict border controls, and mass deportations, the President-elect is also expected to end Biden’s humanitarian parole programs all-together (Hesson, 2024). According to Andrew Selee, President of the nonpartisan Migration Policy Institute, “the first thing we know he will almost certainly do [as part of his mass deportation plan] is cancel humanitarian parole for people that received it” (Inskeep, 2024: para. 4). Trump’s consistent labeling of prospective deportees as “criminals” only perpetuates the security logic also present in Biden’s immigration agenda. In order to break this cycle, any reimplementing of humanitarian parole programs after Trump’s ‘Day One’ executive orders needs to draw on true humanitarianism. Until the inconsistencies of humanitarian parole are addressed, past, present, and future parolees in the U.S. may question the program’s namesake.

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