

The Migrant Messenger

31 October 2025
Seattle, Washington

Seeking Home

در جستجوی خانه



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Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.

— Robert Frost

SOURCES: Underlined words link to them.

As the late American poet Robert Frost defined it, Masooma Ibrahimi, her husband Masood Eslami, and their three children are homeless. They are citizens of Afghanistan but living in the house near Seattle you see on the cover. The United States of America is their fourth country of residence so far.

I met Masooma in 2017 while working on a *Silicon Valley Business Journal* story about the Institute for the Economic Empowerment for Women, created by Akraya, a Sunnyvale company. Back then, she and other Afghan women were still celebrating entering modernity after years of brutal, male-supremacy rule by the Taliban, a political movement within Afghanistan's Pashtun ethnic majority based on Sunni Muslim fundamentalism. The United States had driven the Taliban from power in 2001 with its invasion, making it safe for her family to return from exile in Iran, where she was born and had lived in poverty for 20 years.

A member of Afghanistan's Hazara ethnic minority who are Shia Muslim, Masooma was intoxicated by this new life in the land of her roots. Post-Taliban, Pashtun and Hazara women were working and dressing as they liked, going to school and college. Over the next 17 years, Masooma graduated from tuition-free universities, began a career as a movie and television writer, married, bore three children, and produced a movie with her husband.

As a board member of the new Afghanistan Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry, she traveled alone to the California conference where I met her, and to other conferences in Europe and Asia. We kept in occasional touch through Facebook, especially each November, when she and my son share the same birthday.

But the Taliban regained power in 2021. President Biden withdrew U.S. forces that year from Afghanistan in fulfillment of the Doha Agreement, negotiated with the Taliban the year before by the first Trump Administration.

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Family chauffeur

Masooma drives her family to Oregon. She did not learn to drive until moving to the United States in her late 30s.

Masood and Masooma's timeline

In 1979, with the Cold War at full steam, the Soviet Union invaded its southern neighbor, Afghanistan, to support the communist government there. In Afghanistan, a country long riven by religious and ethnic strife, the beginning of this 10-year war unleashed a torrent of refugees that — within a year — totaled 5 million people, according to the nonpartisan Washington-based [Migration Policy Institute](#). Because Iran's largest religious sect is Shia Muslim, most of Afghanistan's minority Hazara refugees, an ethnic group who are also Shia, fled there. This is the background against which Masood and Masooma's lives began, intertwined and evolved.

	1983	1984	2001	2003	2007	2009	>
Masood Eslami Masood means “fortunate” in Arabic		Born in Iran	Moves with father to Afghanistan following U.S. invasion that removed Taliban from power.		Graduates from 2-year Youth Cinema College program in Iran.	Masood and Masooma marry after meeting at Tamadon TV, a Shia channel in Kabul where he was a director and she was a scriptwriter.	
Masooma Ibrahimi Masooma means “innocent” in Arabic	Born in Iran			Moves with family to Afghanistan.			

>	2011	2014	2016	2017	2018	>	
			Graduates from private Rabia Balki University in Kabul.				
	Son Arastoo is born.	Graduates from Kabul University in economics.	Graduates from Islamic Azad University in Kabul in business management.		Daughter Meshkat is born.	Named to the board of Afghanistan Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry.	Found ArastooFilm, their own production company.

>	2019	2020	2022		
	Son Arat is born.	ArastooFilm releases <u>Kabul Girls</u> , co-directed by Masood and Masooma and written by Masooma.	Family leaves Afghanistan for Falkenberg, Sweden, before return of Taliban.	Family leaves Sweden for the United States after winning Diversity Visa lottery.	Works for audio-visual production company and also has own photography business.

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I had followed Masooma and Masood as they fled to Sweden just before the Taliban's return. The year before they had finished *Kabul Girls*, their film about four women navigating Afghanistan's patriarchal society. The rest of their families scattered to Canada, Europe and back to Iran. A couple of years later, frustrated by legal barriers that prevented them from doing the work they loved and restrictions on their anti-Taliban political activity, they applied and won a lottery for permanent U.S. visas. They moved to Seattle three years ago.

Yet just as events had prompted changes in their lives, Donald Trump's return to the White House prompted me to wonder if the anti-immigrant fervor he helped create and inflame in the United States through his presidential campaigns made them worry about their decision to come here.

When I spoke to Masood last spring, he said he'd stopped visiting a filmmaker friend in nearby Vancouver, British Columbia, even though "we had a plan for making future films. ... I cannot go to the BC because it's out of United States." He fears not being able to re-enter the country.

The Masooma I interviewed then was not the optimistic, ambitious filmmaker and business entrepreneur I had interviewed for the *Business Journal* eight years ago. She'd abandoned ambitions of a career through which she hoped to make things better for women.

"It's very difficult. But I think this is a nature of the motherhood."

Masooma Ibrahimi

"It's very difficult," she said, struggling to translate the Dari-language thoughts in her head into an English I would understand. "But I think this is a nature of the motherhood. This is not just me; this is not just Masooma. This is a definition for all of the women that accept these challenges."

That cemented my decision to do this newsletter. The Eslamis' immigrant story is unique, as all immigrant's stories are, yet they contain common elements. Most important is the fact that their moving to the United States is just a part of an enormous worldwide migration that many countries are grappling with. Fifty-one percent of these people are destined for Europe and North America.

Hundreds of millions of people are moving among countries worldwide, and the number has quadrupled since 1960, though earth's population has slightly more than doubled. According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, almost 4% of the planet's 8.1 billion people changed country of residence in 2024. That's 304 million voluntary migrants plus another 43.7 million refugees fleeing wars and other disasters.

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Luncheon for a guest

Masood, Arastoo, Arat and Meshkat share lunch with me at their house. Maman is out of the frame on the right.



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Trump's take on this phenomenon — obvious from hundreds of his public comments — is that migration is just one aspect of his world view that other countries “are ripping us off.” Since his first presidential campaign in 2016, he's successfully pitched an image of immigrants as preying on the United States, characterizing them as a teeming horde of uneducated, Spanish-speaking, drug-smuggling, pet-eating people who sneak across the border to have dark-skinned, U.S.-born children whose birthright citizenship status will then qualify their parents for the luxuries of welfare and permanent residency.

Among those who count, measure and analyze these things — such as the United Nations-affiliated International Organization for Migration, based in Geneva, Switzerland — immigrants are motivated by a combination of economic, demographic, social, political and environmental factors.

Masooma distilled her family's moves from Afghanistan in 2020 and Sweden in 2022 into a simple survival instinct. “The only issue that keeps me strong, keeps me to continue fighting, to continue living, to continue trying and provide a better life, is my kids. Just my kids. No, I don't have any, you know, hope or wishes or dreams for my future because of myself. Immigration is not an option. Immigration is obligation.”



Masooma leads a protest in Seattle in support of the Hazara, an ethnic minority in Afghanistan of which she is a member.

Masood Eslami photo

The United States' overarching immigration narrative has been about accepting people — though we often struggled to do so — who felt somehow disadvantaged where they came from and believe they have a better chance here of achieving the lives they seek. Reasonable motives, and — equally significant — the vast majority chose us, not the reverse. Except for the 14% of current-day Americans who are descended from indigenous people or were involuntarily brought from Africa, immigrants and their descendants are who we are.

We have a pretty good track record as a nation to show for it.

A couple of weeks ago I visited Masooma and Masood for photography and more interviews. But the morning I sat down to begin writing, the *Washington Post* published this story: “He supported the U.S. war in Afghanistan. Now he may be deported to the Taliban.”

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Working from home

"I don't wear a scarf for religious reasons. I wear it as a reminder I'm Afghanistan woman."

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It's about a man who brought his family to this country after being granted "humanitarian parole," by the Biden Administration because they were fleeing the Taliban. About 76,000 Afghans entered the U.S. this way. The Trump Administration terminated the parole program and is now claiming the Taliban has changed its ways. In any case, the man was not properly vetted before coming to the United States, it claims. He is now in ICE custody, fighting deportation in court, and believes he will be executed if returned to the Taliban.

I immediately emailed the story to Masooma and Masood. "I want to write about the important issue of immigrants trying to create stable lives for themselves and their families," I said. "But I do not want to endanger your family or further complicate your lives." I asked them to think carefully about this project and gave them three options. The choice would be theirs alone: 1) Continue as planned, 2) Continue following the *Post's* model with no names, places or pictures that would identify them or their location, or 3) End the project.

Four days later, Masooma wrote back: "Our response is First option."

So here we are.

They moved to the United States under different circumstances from the subject of the *Post* story, which Masooma said makes them feel somewhat more secure. They won their visas through what is known as the "green card lottery," officially called the Diversity Immigrant Visa Program, created in 1990. It's a name whose purpose makes the program controversial because the intent is to diversify the group of about 1.2 million annual green card recipients to a wide group of nationalities. China, India, Pakistan and most of Central and South America are among countries excluded.

"No, I don't want to get back to 20 years ago. I want to go the future, not the past."

Masood Eslami

Under the program, about 50,000 green cards — "lawful permanent residency" in legal language, which include a pathway to citizenship — are given out in a drawing from about 22 million applicants each year. That means the Eslamis beat odds of about 440 to 1.

They applied to the lottery after spending two years in Falkenberg, Sweden, a town of about 25,000 on the country's southwestern coast across the Kattegat strait from Denmark.

"They are thinking that we are the refugee," Masood said of the Swedes over a lunch of soup, chicken, fruit and salad that we ate sitting on their family room floor. "[They said] we should start work from the cleaning at the hospital or the shop, the restaurant and anywhere. ... I was saying, 'No, I don't want to get back to 20 years ago. I want to go the future, not the past.'"

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Arat

Arat means “brave and daring” in Turkish

Country that most feels like home: USA

“Here I like to play soccer and talk. And also in Sweden. I like to sit and watch TV. And then, in Afghanistan, I like to just sit around and look at everyone who's doing what.”

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Masood frequently calls the U.S. “opportunity land,” and in Seattle he found a job with an audio-visual production company that was closely related to the filmmaking work he did in Afghanistan. “My boss is very happy because I have 10 years, 15 years’ experience of video. They are very happy. Always they appreciate me. It’s made me happy.”

“Any job is OK,” Masooma added, “but as artists, we felt that we have responsibility — even outside the Afghanistan — to continue our mission to raise women and Afghan voice. So, I don’t know what happened. We were very lucky, or God helped us, and we won lottery.”

After starting with a part-time job with the YWCA and then almost two years with the non-profit Afghan Health Initiative, she’s now interim community engagement director with Seattle’s Community Police Commission.

As a 5-year-old in Iran, Masooma began working with her father in a brick factory. She said that for immigrant workers, the factory provided one room in which their family of seven could live rent free and paid a fixed wage for each brick produced. She made bricks for an hour or two before school began at 7 a.m., and returned to work with her father at noon after school until at least 7 p.m. The work year ran February through October; during the break she went to school full-time.

“Any job is OK, but as artists, we felt that we have responsibility — even outside the Afghanistan — to continue our mission to raise women and Afghan voice.”

Masooma Ibrahimi

“I do not have any [good] memories from my childhood,” she said. “All things that I have is just, you know, it was dusty, it was water, it was brick, it was sun, hot weather.”

Masood’s father, Sayed Mohammad Eslami of Mazar-e Sharif, Afghanistan, was a well-known Hazara mullah, a scholar and cleric educated in Islamic law and doctrine, with three published books to his credit. He was trained first in Iraq and then in Iran, where Masood was born. They moved back to his father’s hometown of Mazar-e Sharif in northern Afghanistan in 2001 while the U.S. was winding down fighting.

The return trip took three days in the car with three brothers and his father “and I remember that on the way, I saw lots of people were dying because of the bombing. My father said, ‘You born in Iran, you should think about [moving back to] Iran.’ I told my father I feel safe. I don’t know why. I feel good when I’m in Afghanistan. I know I never born here [Afghanistan]. I did not grow up here. But I feel this is my country.”

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Meshkat

Meshkat means "light and brightness" in Arabic

Country that most feels like home: Sweden

"Sweden is like a small country. And the apartment that we lived in, like, the park was like in front of us."

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Masood remembers his father disputing Taliban interpretations of the Quran because he said they pulled words or phrases out of their larger context, in part because the Quran is written in Arabic, which few Afghans read or speak outside of memorized daily prayers.

"In our family, my father give us lots of rights to do anything we want," Masood said. "But the Taliban said, 'No. This [another interpretation] is Islam.' But my father always said, 'They are wrong. Don't worry about them. This is the crazy people.'"

As Hazara, and because they came from families with more liberal religious beliefs, Masooma and Masood are a minority of a minority in the United States. Accepted in urban, left-wing Seattle, a woman script writer who says she'd like her stories to explore issues such as those faced by transgender persons and a husband willing to help make it happen might not be welcome in eastern Washington State or Idaho.

"I feel myself very alone when I sit with other women, Afghan women," Masooma said. "We are totally different. For example, if you sit with other Afghan women, they think, 'OK, how many golden things do you have? Oh my God, your TV, your carpet, your curtain — it should be this and that — you should be very stylish.' They're just thinking about materials. But the way I'm thinking, maybe I prefer to think about my film script. I would like to have an organization to support other women, you know, to empower them."

In their third year in the United States, their children are already speaking American English, beginning and punctuating sentences with "like ... " and "yeah ... " and taking interest in school sports.



"About the scarf, I will talk to Meshkat when the time comes," Masooma said. "I will say, 'You do not have to wear it. It is your choice.'"

"I'm trying out for soccer, gymnastics and — yeah," said Meshkat, their daughter and middle child, who said she's beginning to pick up some Spanish and whose favorite subject in fourth grade is math.

Arat, her younger brother who's a first grader at the same school, also likes math, but "what I like to do at school is climb on the monkey bars." He refers to his school friends as "my brothers."

Arastoo, a high school freshman, lived long enough in Afghanistan to have memories of the fruit trees that grew in their yard. He treasures their family travels through Europe to visit the aunts, uncles and cousins who moved there, and their trips to Texas and California. But he misses Sweden, where he liked "to go around the town because it was really small. I could bike around it and just hang out with my friends."

All due respect to Robert Frost, but the Eslamis — having bounced halfway around the world — are acting pretty American. Or maybe families and kids, no matter where they're from, are more alike we think.





Arastoo

Arastoo is "Aristotle" in Dari, Afghanistan's predominant language

Country that most feels like home: Afghanistan

Future ambition: "Who doesn't want to be an astronaut, right? But then I realized, whoa, you got to spend a lot of time in, you know, colleges, universities. And then I wanted to be a police officer. I just liked, you know, helping people."



On-the-job training

Masood shoots many weddings in his own photography business. As this one is for a conservative Afghan family, he's giving instructions to a female assistant because during the ceremony, the only male allowed in this dining room will be the groom. The other men will eat behind the far wall.