



# Learning *through* mobility: the story of Habib, an asylum seeker from Iran

As told to **Tali Padan**

(Please note, the interviewee asked to change his name for the purposes of this article.)

I am, and have always been, stateless. I was born in Afghanistan and moved to Iran when I was very little. Afghans in Iran are not as respected as Iranians, and there were many things that we could not do, just because of our nationality. For example, I couldn't continue with my studies after high school, because Afghans needed a much higher mark than Iranians to get into university. I started working, but Afghans also get paid much less than Iranians and get treated much worse.



One day, when I was about 21 years old, I was working in a factory, and my uncle told me that he was leaving Iran for Turkey and then Europe.

We were close, me and my uncle, and I got sad, because I also wanted to go, but I didn't have the money, and my family was very strict. After he told me this, I stopped working and didn't talk to anyone for three days. I finally called him and told him I wanted to go with him. He agreed to let me come, and I was surprised that my family also agreed, as long as I could borrow the money from relatives. I spent an intense week gathering as much money as I could to pay smugglers to make the trip to Turkey and then Greece. When I was leaving, my family were all crying, but I couldn't turn back, because I had already made the decision to go.

We met in Tehran and took a taxi to the border, about 10 hours. We stayed at the border for about one week, with a lot of people who were making the same trip. They didn't really care about us, gave us a little food and a little water, and finally told us we can walk across the border, and it will take us two or three hours. In reality, it took us 12 hours, and we walked through a difficult path in the mountains. I was tired, stressed, thirsty and hungry, and I remember hearing shooting in the mountains; I was very scared. We finally made it to a city near the border and stayed there for two weeks and waited for the smugglers to take us to Istanbul. We stayed in Istanbul for two weeks in a small place that we didn't leave very often, because it was too dangerous to leave.

One day in Istanbul when we were outside the apartment, we saw people talking to policemen about us, and the policemen started shouting in our direction. I told everyone to run, and we all ran through the streets of Istanbul. I ended up hiding under a car, and the rest of the group got stuck in an alley, and I watched from under the car as they were arrested by the police. I stayed under the car

for a while, and when it was quiet, I got out. I was alone in the middle of the city and had no idea where I was or how to get back to the apartment. I had some money, and I also had the phone number for the smuggler in Iran, so I went to a kiosk and bought a calling card to call him. I couldn't speak much English then, so the smuggler talked to the kiosk worker, and they arranged for a taxi to pick me up and take me back to the apartment.

When I finally got back to the apartment, my uncle and the rest of the people were there, and we were so happy to see each other. They all had to pay the Turkish police and then were released on the spot. A week later, we went to the Greek border, where there was a river that we had to pass. I heard a lot about this river, that many people drowned in it, and they filled up rubber boats for us to cross. We made it to Greece, where we went to the police to get registered, and then we took the bus to Athens. I still felt I wanted to keep going and not stay in Greece, but in Athens we had to pay the smugglers. My uncle and I talked about not paying the smugglers, or paying less, because the journey was so dangerous and we had to pay the Turkish police. One of the smugglers heard us and asked us to come with him, so he can give us a place to stay. I didn't have a good feeling about this, but we went with him. When we got to the place, the smuggler locked the door behind us and took us to a room, which only had a TV and about eight guys, with knives, swords and guns. The room smelled of blood. One of the guys said: "You don't want to pay us, do you think we are stupid?", and took the TV and threw it at my uncle. Then the fighting started. Three of them came to me, punching and kicking, and the rest were beating up my uncle. When it ended, I saw my uncle was very bloody and had a knife wound in his back. We paid them the money, and my uncle was taken to the hospital, but I had to stay so they could make sure we didn't escape or call the police. We stayed there for one week.



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My uncle finally decided not to continue with the journey, but I wanted to keep going. We agreed that I would keep going, and my uncle would make the journey back to Iran. He tried to convince me to go back with him, but I wanted to keep going. I stayed in Greece for eight months and tried many times to leave the country. I was in and out of prison because of my many attempts to leave. Finally, I went with a smuggler to a forest, where I stayed for two nights, and then a very small boat came to us. We were around 40 people there, but many people were too scared to get on this small boat and knew they would drown if they got on. We ended up being 12 people, including myself, on the boat.

I was happy to be on the boat, and the waters were calm, but when night came, the waves got bigger and bigger. I had never been on a boat in the middle of a sea like this, and I was really scared. The other people were screaming because the waves got so big, and it was raining, and I thought this would be the end. I didn't know how to swim, and I thought I would definitely die here.

After 8 hours on the water, we saw the lights from Italy. When I got off the boat, I was just happy to be alive. I thought – I don't care if I get asylum or if I have to go back to Iran, I'm just happy to be alive. The Italian police picked us up and sent us to a camp, but I escaped from there to go to Rome. From Rome, I took a train to Paris, where I slept one night on the street, and then I took the next possible train to Cologne, Hamburg and finally Copenhagen.

What did I learn on this journey? I am so happy to have been able to get out of my small and closed environment and meet people from different cultures and different places. Before, I didn't know anyone from another culture. I had never seen anyone from Africa, or Asia, or even a Sunni Muslim. I come from a very conservative Shiite Muslim community. Through meeting different people, I realised that everyone believes their own truth. This made me think for a long time about what religion really is. It brought up a lot of questions, and I could no longer think my religion has to be the "right one", especially when one type of religion makes you hate people from another type of religion. I saw how religion mixes with politics and how brainwashed you can be. I started to listen to other people and their truths, and I opened up and made space for people to express what they feel is true.

Because I had this dangerous journey, I was almost forced to learn, spontaneously, through these experiences. I think I am lucky, in a way, to have survived and learned all of this, but I would also like it to be combined with knowledge you can learn without fear and danger. Imagine if all these international organisations that are giving opportunities to people to go abroad would help people that must get out of their countries. This would be a nice combination of spontaneous and planned learning, and would be truly inclusive.

Immigration and mobility are big journeys in life that can change your learning process in many ways. I feel like I got more than I expected. I didn't expect to learn so much, and that this learning would be the most important part of the journey. The most important lesson was in being open to other people and other cultures – this is something that has not left me, and I practise it every day in Denmark. The more we open the borders, the more people will have the opportunity to gain this learning experience and this openness to accept and welcome others.

