

New Movie Review: In “The Interpreters,” Home Is No Place At All



“The Interpreters,” a new documentary film by directors Sofian Khan and Andres Caballero, is a raw, emotionally vigorous, and, only too often, devastating look into the lives of Iraqi and Afghan interpreters and their efforts to flee home for the United States.

When it comes to narratives of the Forever Wars, interpreters consistently rate as some of the most important people working on the ground, frequently appearing in the novels and nonfiction works coming out of these conflicts, darting the intricately woven fabric of U.S.-focused narratives as charismatic, generous, and occasionally suspect men of two worlds. Very rarely, if ever, do they get to speak for

themselves. This film gives them that opportunity.

“The American forces...call us interpreters, not translators,” a resonant voice narrates over opening frames of desert sand, Americans on patrol, soldiers and villagers deep in conversation. “The translator, he will just translate the word, exactly. We are *interpreters*. We interpret what they say to our soldiers, and what the soldiers say to our people.”

According to the documentary, over 50,000 local nationals have served with U.S. military and coalition forces since the beginning of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. But these so-called invaluable assets have found themselves flung forcibly from one fire into another, having been labeled traitors by their home countries for aiding outside forces, only to find themselves unable to acquire the necessary visa to enter and resettle in the United States.

Khan and Caballero make three such men the narrative focus of “The Interpreters,” which debuted at Telluride Mountainfilm Festival during Memorial Day weekend, 2018. “Philip Morris,” a quick-witted chain-smoker from Iraq; “Mujtaba,” a protective and desperate father of three from Afghanistan; and “Malik,” an Afghan interpreter still serving with the U.S. Air Force, whose striking features are half-concealed by a keffiyeh throughout the film. They are men who, were it not for the efforts of the filmmakers who sought them out, would otherwise be names on bureaucratic paper, anonymous victims of the machinations of the U.S. government.

Phillip Morris, Mujtaba, and Malik are three representatives of a significantly larger whole, men who were promised Special Immigrant Visas (SIV) by the U.S. government in exchange for their work as interpreters. They did this work at risk to their lives and the lives of their families. “When I started working with the U.S. Army, I was trying to help them to help us,” says Phillip Morris. “We spent our lives suffering because of Saddam’s regime.” With the outside support and aid

of his best friend, Minnesota National Guard veteran Lt. Paul Braun, Morris's SIV application moves through the doldrums of Washington bureaucracy and—after some tense back-and-forth traveling between the U.S. and Iraq—eventually sees Morris and his family safely relocated to Minnesota. According to the documentary, by law, the application and approval process should take no more than nine months. Morris's takes four years.

Were it in Hollywood's Midas hands, "The Interpreters" would be made as a kind of filmic victory lap with Morris as the only subject, a golden testimonial to the U.S. military's presence in Afghanistan and Iraq and the generosity extended to interpreters by our government. Of the three subjects in the film, Phillip Morris is the resounding success story, and certainly carries the bulk of the narrative. But what Khan and Caballero have done—smartly, and well—is avoid the gilded trap almost entirely. They choose not to rest on the laurels of Phillip Morris's story alone, and instead show a range of experiences that are far more indicative of what it means to be an interpreter marked for death while waiting, interminably, for a promise made by a foreign government to be upheld.

In Mujtaba's case, the waiting becomes impossible, and he flees the country with his wife and children. After arriving in Turkey, Mujtaba seeks out a smuggler who can take him and his family to Greece. In their desperate attempt to cross the Aegean Sea, the small smugglers' boat capsizes, and Mujtaba's wife and two of their three young children drown.



Following their rescue at sea, Mujtaba and his son are returned to Turkey. Now refugees, they are forced to try and negotiate the SIV application process while simultaneously avoiding deportation. Mujtaba is adamant in his belief that his wife and two children are still alive, and enlists the help of a volunteer from a refugee organization to look for them. It's a painful thing to watch, knowing what Mujtaba is risking by living in denial and extending his time in Turkey because of it. The longer he stays behind to look for his family, the less tenable his refugee status becomes, and if his SIV is not approved, Mujtaba and his young son will be forced to return to Afghanistan.

It is a life lived between impossible choices, every one of which is likely to end in some degree of tragedy. Mujtaba eventually receives approval from the State Department to continue with the SIV application process. The approval, unfortunately, comes two months after his wife and two children drowned in the Aegean. He continues to refuse to go anywhere without them.

Throughout the film, American voices—both military and civilian—maintain what is (or should be) abundantly clear to anyone watching the film: Iraqi and Afghan interpreters are service members of U.S. and coalition forces, and they are being abandoned. It is an ongoing injustice, an ugly stain not only on the U.S. military, but the government that sent those Americans into Iraq and Afghanistan in the first place.

Journalist George Packer, who appears in the film, authored one of the most significant contributions to the conversation surrounding interpreters, SIVs, and America's responsibility toward the people it enlisted to help fight its endless wars in 2007. Packer's *New Yorker* piece, *Betrayed*, drew back the curtain on what was already a messy issue at the time. Reading it eleven years later, one can easily imagine seeing Malik, Mujtaba, and Phillip Morris's names in place of those like Othman, Laith, and Ali, given how similar their stories are, the events and struggles of earlier years repeating themselves *ad infinitum* with each generation of interpreters looking for a way out. It could just as easily be Malik on camera in Afghanistan telling us what Laith told Packer in Iraq so many years ago: "Sometimes, I feel like we're standing in line for a ticket, waiting to die."[\[1\]](#)

In the film, Packer—who reinforces the importance of interpreters in these ongoing conflicts—attempts to draw a line between past and present by referencing the unofficial evacuations from Saigon at the end of the Vietnam War and the interpreters being left behind in Iraq and Afghanistan today: "For some Americans, their finest hour in Vietnam was at the very end, and I wondered if something like that was happening in Iraq—were people organizing some kind of exodus for their Iraqi contacts? It wasn't as clear-cut a situation. But if you're an Iraqi who's gotten a death threat, it doesn't matter."

When the Americans began their own gradual exodus in 2011, Morris knew he faced an uncertain future. "I told [Lt. Paul]

Braun, I told him, 'When you leave, what's going to happen to me?'"



In the case of Malik, another Afghan interpreter and the third subject of the film, that abandonment is a very real life-or-death issue. A marked man (his sixteen-year-old brother was beaten for information regarding Malik's whereabouts), Malik is forced to move his family from house to house and never shows his face out of doors. The film follows him as he continues to serve as an interpreter while he waits on a response to his SIV application.

Malik holds to his belief in America's mission in Afghanistan despite knowing that he cannot stay to help rebuild his country when and if we leave. He works diligently under the pall that is the outstanding threat on his life: "As I go to my work location," he says, "I won't take the same taxi, the same bus, and I won't take the same gate every day. Daesh, Talibs, Al Qaeda...if they find out that I'm still presently working with the U.S. Air Force in Kabul, they may get me, and

they'll kill me."

The SIV program for Iraqi interpreters was enacted in 2008, but stopped accepting new applications in September 2014, leaving tens of thousands of people—interpreters and their families—in the lurch and forcing them to go through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program for resettlement, to little to no success.[\[2\]](#) The same SIV program was extended to Afghan interpreters in 2009 (the Afghan Allies Protection Act) and is still active, but the number of applicants accepted dwindles with every passing year. According to Human Rights First: "As of July 2017, over 11,000 Afghan principal applicants and 13,000 of their family members are still waiting at some point in the application phase."[\[3\]](#)

In the end, too many people are being forced to fight over too few visas—for those principle applicants and their families, for example, a grand total of 3,500 SIVs have been allocated for fiscal year 2018.

"The Interpreters" is a visually striking and narratively incisive investigation into a human rights issue that is as long and convoluted as the Global War on Terror itself. Interspersed with cell phone camera footage throughout, it is very much a documentary of the moment, immediate and jarring, and the stakes are all too real. Any faults are few and far between, a roughness in the editing that does little to take away from the effectiveness of the whole.

In a film full of emotionally resonant scenes, the one that arguably strikes the strongest chord is also the most subdued, the most well-earned: late in the film, having just watched Phillip Morris reunite with his family only to hear Trump extoll the virtues of the Muslim Ban seconds later, one feels braced for the worst. It's impossible to forget, after all, that while throngs of protesters outside John F. Kennedy Airport chant "No hate, no fear, refugees are welcome here," that Mujtaba's wife and children remain lost to the sea.

But then we see Malik, in 2017. A long white line at the bottom of the screen illustrates the amount of time it took the U.S. government to grant him his SIV. It is a freedom moment, a cause for joy, as much as it is a long pause that carries the weight of six long years of mortal uncertainty. We see Malik, and his quiet reveal reminds those of us on the outside looking in that a face is just a face, except when it is a target.

Malik and his family arrive in America in early 2017, just under the wire of Trump's initial ban. His success is nothing short of a statistical miracle: between January and April 2018, only thirty-six Iraqi interpreters and their families were admitted into the United States.[\[4\]](#)

Khan and Caballero have made a landmark documentary, a film that is by turns devastating, uplifting, enraging, and only too timely: as of this writing, the Supreme Court of the United States has voted to uphold Trump's Muslim ban, sparking renewed outrage among American citizens and recalling the most inhumane of Supreme Court decisions past. Having watched "The Interpreters," I can only wonder what thoughts are on Phillip Morris's mind. Is Malik at risk of being deported? How is Mujtaba—still a refugee in Turkey at risk of being deported back to Afghanistan—contending with this latest in a long series of setbacks?

Because of the Supreme Court's decision, it stands to reason that by this time next year, thirty-six Special Immigrant Visas will seem like a lofty goal.

Early in the film, Malik says, "I hope that they won't forget what I do for them." Facing away from the camera, he looks out across the American base in Kabul, his body silhouetted between an aircraft hangar and a broad swath of dusty blue sky, tracking a single C-130 as it flies up and over the sun-bleached mountains in the distance. In that moment, Malik could be any one of the thousands of interpreters left behind

in Iraq and Afghanistan—men still biding their borrowed time behind threadbare keffiyehs in the hot sun, waiting for a piece of paper to decide their fate.

[1] <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/03/26/betrayed-2>

[2] <https://www.stripes.com/news/us/special-visas-dwindle-for-afghan-iraqi-interpreters-1.524194>

[3] <https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/resource/afghan-special-immigrant-visa-program>

[4] <https://www.stripes.com/news/us/special-visas-dwindle-for-afghan-iraqi-interpreters-1.524194>

Exit West and Dark at the Crossing: Two Novels of Syrian Refugees

It has been a long six and a half years since the Arab Spring, the popular movement of early 2011 that toppled dictators and challenged regimes across the Middle East. While Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt have since then followed different political paths trending either upwards, flat, or downwards respectively, Syria has virtually fallen off a cliff. Over six years of constant war between four major belligerents have left the country with perhaps half a million dead and at least two thirds of its people displaced. The formation of Daesh created a new terroristic boogey-man for Westerners that somehow distracted from the consistently cruel inhumanity of the Assad regime.

Meanwhile, the worst refugee crisis since World War II continues unabated. The neighbors of Syria—Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq—have taken in most of the refugees. The [paltry number](#) of victims that have made it into Europe or North America has prompted a xenophobic and Islamophobic backlash resulting in a resurgence of far-right parties. In such a world of hard-heartedness, it is often art that helps us rise above the quotidian news mill and find shelter in stories of compassion, love, and our shared humanity. Two new novels by two very different authors have attempted to tell the stories about Syria and its refugees that we need to hear: *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid, and *Dark at the Crossing* by Elliot Ackerman.

Exit West, shortlisted for the 2017 Booker Prize, is the fourth novel of Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid. It tells the story of Saeed and Nadia, focusing on how their relationship begins in an unnamed city (presumably Aleppo) before and during a civil war. The first third of the novel follows a straight-forward narrative arc of the main characters' increasing desperation in the face of the violence surrounding them. Nadia, independent and rebellious by nature, agrees to leave her flat and move in with Saeed after his mother is killed in her driveway by a stray bullet. Hamid describes the life-altering horror of trying to survive in an urban warzone: "One's relationship to windows now changed in the city. A window was the border through which death was possibly most likely to come. Windows could not stop even the most flagging round of ammunition: any spot indoors with a view of the outside was a spot potentially in the crossfire. Moreover the pane of a window could itself become shrapnel so easily, shattered by a nearby blast, and everyone had heard of someone or other who had bled out after being lacerated by shards of flying glass."

As the fighting escalates, there are rumors of doors around the city that transport you to other places, the kind of

desperate superstition that takes hold when true hope for a reprieve is nearly lost. Eventually, Saeed and Nadia decide to pay an agent to lead them to one of these doors; they give him their money and don't hear back from him for weeks, the victims of con artist. Until he does actually call back and lead them to an bombed out dental clinic with a pitch-black opening where the supply closet should be. They both walk through this portal and find themselves on a beach in Mykonos, Greece. The reader also suddenly finds herself in a new type of book that is no longer realistic narrative but Borgesian speculative fiction. It reminds me of last year's Booker Prize winner *The Sellout*, by Paul Beatty (my review [here](#)), in which straight-forward story of slave plantation brutality opened up to a literal Underground Railroad in which the characters ride from state to state.

The novel changes focus from survival in a war zone to survival as a refugee in a foreign land. After a bit of bartering and wandering between the numerous refugee camps on the Greek island, the pair are helped by a local to another escape door, this one landing them in London. They find themselves in an abandoned but curiously well-appointed condominium with plenty of food and soft towels. Hamid does not ignore details like the pleasure of a long, hot shower after weeks of living in a dusty tent. Soon, numerous other refugees from all over the third world start filling the house. It turns out that the system of transport portals is not limited to Syria and Europe. Hamid writes: "That summer it seemed to Saeed and Nadia that the whole planet was on the move, much of the global south headed to the global north, but also southerners moving to other southern places and northerners moving to other northern places."

As you would expect, the locals do not like the presence of millions of new residents inhabiting their cities, and a violent nativist movement begins to isolate and attack them relentlessly. Unexpectedly, an eventual accord is reached and

people begin to live in relative peace and start a new socialistic society. During their final move to the Bay Area in California, the same pattern repeats. Hamid makes an allusion to the historic promise to freed slaves in America in this passage: "In exchange for their labor in clearing terrain and building infrastructure and assembling dwellings from prefabricated blocks, migrants were promised forty meters and a pipe: a home on forty square meters of land and a connection to all the utilities of modernity."

Throughout the novel there are short episodes of unrelated and often unnamed characters in the same alternate universe, following the tone of the main narrative by telling stories of how other humans are dealing with the radical change of free movement. In one, a Japanese man ominously follows a pair a young Filipinas in a dark alley; in another an elderly Dutch man meets a Brazilian artist and moves to Rio; in yet another an elderly English lady who has never left her mansion watches as society changes around her while she stays in place. As Hamid writes: "We are all migrants through time."

In *Exit West* Hamid has created a convincing and uplifting portrait of what the world could become if humans evolve ever so slightly out of their instinctive tribalism. The author is in fact an avowed optimist with an interesting biography, which he discusses in his collection of personal and political essays called *Discontent and Its Civilizations*. The titles of some of these essays include "When Updike Saved Me from Morrison (and Myself)", "Get Fit with Haruki Murakami", "Nationalism Should Retire at Sixty-Five", and "Why Drones Don't Help". The relatively sanguine attitude he conveys in this quote, for example the picture he presents of modern Pakistan, is indeed a refreshing view in an increasingly unoptimistic world: "But if globalization is capable of holding out any fundamental promise to us, any temptation to go along with its havoc, then surely that promise ought to be this: we will be more free to invent ourselves. In that

country, this city, in Lahore, in New York, in London, that factory, this office, in those clothes, that occupation, in wherever it is we long for, we will be liberated to be what we choose to be." He is also the author of a gripping, enigmatic novella called *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, which I highly recommend and which can be read in a few hours (and has also been made into a film that I have not yet seen).

Elliot Ackerman's second novel, *Dark at the Crossing*, is shortlisted for the National Book Award. It is the story of Haris Abadi, an Iraqi former interpreter who wants to cross the Turkish border to fight in Syria. Haris gained American citizenship in return for services rendered from years of loyally working with Special Forces in Iraq (a plausible but unlikely occurrence in real-life). He was able to bring his sister along to his new life in Michigan, but he loses a sense of purpose for his own life after she gets engaged and he does not have to support her studies anymore. He travels to south-eastern Turkey to fight for a cause in Syria. It turns out that neither he nor the readers ever get a strong sense of what exactly that cause is. A large part of the narrative involves waiting in Turkey trying to cross the border, and flashbacks to his time working with SF.

The only American character (other than the naturalized protagonist) was one of the SF team members named Jim, who seemed to be a stand-in for the muscle-bound, arrogant, secretly sensitive, not-as-smart-as-he-thinks American soldier trope. This is similar to Ackerman's previous novel, *Green on Blue*, in which a mysterious CIA operator known as Mr. Jack is the only American among a cast of Afghans. In flashback scenes, we see Jim involve himself again and again in Haris the interpreter's life, including drunk midnight confessionals in his tent. Jim obviously meets an untimely death, and the guilt Haris harbors is part of the reason for his quest.

During the long period of waiting to cross the border, Haris is taken in by a Syrian refugee couple, Amir and Daphne.

Educated and sophisticated, they were among the first revolutionary protesters before the civil war started. Now their lives and relationship is stuck in place as Amir wants to move West and start a new life, but Daphne cannot abandon the dead daughter she thinks is still alive in their old village. As Haris becomes entwined with these two and other seedier characters, an opening is found to enter Syria, and their journey together continues inexorably, bewitchingly towards its destined climax.

Ackerman was a Marine Corps officer for eight years, serving multiple tours of duty in Afghanistan and Iraq. His first novel, *Green on Blue* (review in *The Wrath-Bearing Tree* [here](#)), was a remarkable tale of an Afghan boy's gradual rise through the ranks of militancy in War on Terror-era Waziristan. In fact, it was riveting reading for me because it is set exactly in the Afghan province of Paktika in which I also spent two years deployed to Forward Operating Bases, specifically around Bermel, Shkin, Gomal, and Orgun. Ackerman has also published a short story in the veteran writers' anthology [The Road Ahead](#) (to which I am also a contributor), and now lives in Turkey.

One of the greatest benefits of literature is that it can build empathy for people whose lives you could not previously imagine (a theme I discussed in my essay [Why Black Literature Matters](#)). I have visited the western part of Turkey, but never the eastern borders of Syria and Iraq, nor have I personally met any Syrians or Iraqis. The only Syrian characters I have previously encountered in my reading are the types of conniving, cultured, expatriot merchants that occasionally dot the pages of a Conrad, Durrell, Naipaul, or Greene. With their characters and their stories that let the reader experience the lives of others, Hamid and Ackerman, like all great authors, show how ultimately we all share the same hopes and fears, and that our humanity defines us more than our nationality.