



Supporting Afghan Refugees

A Guide to Cultural Competence
Islamic Speakers Bureau of Atlanta

Do's

- ✔ **Be sensitive to the experiences that Afghan refugees have endured.** There is a high occurrence of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder among refugees leaving conflict zones. Many of the refugees from Afghanistan have seen their entire home/village destroyed and may have lost their most precious things. Furthermore, the trauma may have intensified in detention centers.
- ✔ If the opportunity arises, **offer sympathy** regarding the current situation in their home country. Afghans are likely to deeply appreciate the gesture and respond with warmth. However, be careful not to push for details of their personal experiences in Afghanistan.
- ✔ **Recognize that there are many different ethnicities in Afghanistan** and that the experiences of persecution may differ between them. Be aware that members of minority ethnicities may prefer to identify by their ethnic affiliation (e.g. Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, etc.). Pashtuns are much more likely to identify solely as "Afghan", as it is historically the same as "Pashtun."
- ✔ **Be aware that individuals who have been the target of religious persecution may prefer not to discuss faith.**
- ✔ **Remember that Afghan culture has specific gender roles.** In a group of Afghan men and women, expect the men to talk to each other without the women after introductions.
- ✔ **For men,** wait for an Afghan woman to initiate a handshake or conversation before doing so yourself. **For women,** wait for a male companion to introduce you to another man before engaging with him (be that shaking his hand, speaking to him or making direct eye contact).
- ✔ **Keep a positive outlook.** Afghan refugees have been through a lot, having an optimistic approach will be reassuring to them.

Dont's

- **Do not preach or proselytize to refugees,** even if you share the same religion. It is insulting to Afghans who are very proud of their faith and heritage.
- **Do not call Afghans "Arabs" or "Middle Eastern".** Afghanistan is not located in the Middle East. It is a South Central Asian country composed of many different ethnicities, none of which are Arab.
- **Avoid mentioning** the topics of ethnic tension, politics, the Taliban, warfare or women's rights unless your counterpart initiates the conversation or you have a close relationship with them. These are sensitive subjects in Afghanistan and can lead a person to recall negative experiences.
- **Do not assume that all Afghan Muslims follow a conservative interpretation of Islam.** The official positions of many Afghan religious leaders may not reflect the interpretations of all Afghans. For example, not all Afghan Muslim women living in other countries wear the hijab.
- **Avoid teasing, telling dirty jokes or making fun of someone in a humiliating way. Such humor is unlikely to be appreciated.**
- **Do not treat Afghan people like they are uneducated or uncivilized.** Stay away from questions, such as "Are there telephones in Afghanistan?". Many Afghan refugees are skilled, educated, urbanized and familiar with the technologies of the developed world.
- **Do not push an Afghan to tell you about their family.** Some people have been separated from relatives or had family members killed. Others may be hesitant to talk about the family they have left in Afghanistan out of fear that it could endanger them.

