

## Handout: Additional Testimony

Sahand, Leila, and Mani left Tehran, Iran in 2012, taking a flight to Istanbul Turkey, where they immediately applied for asylum.

Leila tells her therapist that she knew she was pregnant by Sahand but never considered having an abortion. She also says, “I risked everything and left my country. Not for money or the good life. I wanted to give my child a life, where his mother and father live together.

We left because we just wanted to live like a normal family.”

Mani was four years old when they fled. Leila shares that, “Leaving Iran was hard on my son, psychologically speaking. He lost everything overnight. All his toys, his room, his stuff. And his uncle turns out to be his real father.”

In Turkey, Sahand initially worked as a laborer, cleaning and painting, just so he could earn a living. As their stay dragged on, both he and Leila obtained needed work permits, and through Mani’s school, found jobs as teachers. They wanted to be able to support themselves, and perhaps even purchase a house.

Leila tells Sahand, “I dream of going to a safe country where we can live in peace as a normal family. I'd be lying if I said I don't mind where. Deep down I'd like to go to Canada. Because my friend lives there and speaks highly of it.” Later we learn that Mani has “decided” they should go to America, where he thinks he can make lots of money.

Leila and Sahand apply to UNHCR to be given status as international refugees. Such status will grant them permission to seek asylum and permanent residency in many different nations, including the U.S. Their case is repeatedly delayed because of bad timing - the conflict in Syria has overwhelmed UNHCR with applications from Syrian refugees fleeing the violence. While the case is pending, they have the right to stay in Turkey. Once the case is resolved, they will have to leave, to a country of their choice if approved, or back to Iran if denied.

The “last straw” that caused the couple to flee was that Iranian intelligence asked Sahand to recruit Leila as an informant. Sanhand reports that, “intelligence asked me if I could get Leila to work for them, too. I couldn't say no because I was afraid that if I refused, it would provoke them. And they'd get suspicious. I said: ‘I'll ask her and then tell you.’ Then we got really scared. We had to get out of Iran as quickly as possible.”

In order to prove that he had been coerced by Iranian secret police, Sahand filmed and recorded intelligence officers. When he crossed the border, he turned over secret

information. This made him fear that Iranian intelligence would pursue him, especially if he remained in Turkey. “We aren't safe here. We're neighbors to Iran. They could come and get us any moment.”

Though Leila and Sahand want to marry, there are legal delays in getting their divorces. While they wait, they establish with DNA tests that Sahand is Mani's biological father. This is just one act in a long series of trying to do everything possible to obtain refugee status legally.

Leila says this about her legal limbo in Turkey: “I went to the doctor, and he writes down in his paper: Stateless. That word tore me apart. In this whole world, you don't even belong to a little piece of land. Stateless. Where do I come from? Who am I? Stateless is a very big word. Being a refugee is as if you're here, but you don't exist. You're dead. You're not dead, you're alive, but not really present.”

Sahand dismisses the harm that their actions caused people back home, but Leila feels guilty: “People got hurt, right? Yes, we got out, but it puts pressure on those who were close to us. They had no guilt in this. They're being blamed, like your wife right now. What did she do? Whatever problems you had, she doesn't deserve this. And the same thing goes for my family.”

Sahand goes to the UNHCR office for an interview as part of his appeal. He reports: “They kept questioning me, putting pressure on me trying to find cracks in my story. They didn't let me bring my lawyer. They didn't let me look at my files. And they said I knew people could be tortured because of me. Since I worked for the intelligence and I reported about Azeri activists, I should have known they'd be tortured. I told them only one person got tortured, and I apologized to him. I even filmed our talk when I apologized, and he has forgiven me. But I was in a desperate situation. I'd have been in great danger if I hadn't reported.”

After several years in Turkey, UNHCR approves refugee status for Leila and Mani and says they can go to America. Many months later, Sahand is denied, but his appeal succeeds. It is now 2017 and they have been in Turkey for five years. They have been cleared to go to the U.S. when Donald Trump is inaugurated and imposes a ban on refugees from seven Muslim countries, including Iran.