

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
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Oral Histories of U.S. Diplomacy in Afghanistan, 2001-2024

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INTERVIEW

Q: Hello, this is Azaad. Today is Friday, October 25th, 2024. I have the pleasure of interviewing Jama Goul Ahmadi as part of the Afghanistan oral history project. Welcome, Jama Goul. I am happy to see you and thank you for accepting our offer to participate in this program.

AHMADI: Thank you. Nice to see you as well.

Early Years, Education and Work

Q: First of all, we would like to know more about Jama Goul. Who is Jama Goul? When and where was he born? Let's start from the beginning.

AHMADI: As you mentioned, my name is Jama Goul Ahmadi. I was born in 1979 in Herat Province, the same year that the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. I do not remember that time because I was just a baby—an infant—but I was still one of the victims of that war. My family was displaced due to the conflict and, unfortunately, lost all their property and business.

As a result, my entire family suffered greatly from war, conflict, and especially poverty. Displacement had many severe consequences: there was no food, no water, no proper shelter, no access to education, and no adequate healthcare services—either from the government or the private sector. We lived in poverty for more than a decade.

Even though there was no proper education system in Afghanistan at the time, I continued my studies. I attended school part-time while also working. My father was the only breadwinner in the family, and his income was not enough to cover our living expenses. Therefore, I had to contribute by working as well.

I completed my primary education and started my secondary education. During this time, although I was still a child, I had to work to support my family. I even worked on weekends, taking jobs as a laborer in construction.

Q: How old were you when you started working?

AHMADI: I started working when I was 13 years old. I had to help put some food on the table for my family, for my mother, for my small brother and sister. During the weekends, I was working in construction. I was carrying a handbarrow, which in the local language we called a “zambil.” My hands were bleeding because the handbarrow was very heavy and it was filled with stone. I was a kid working in harsh conditions. We were reconstructing the Pul-e-Malan bridge.

Q: Pul-e-Malan is a famous, ancient bridge [built around 1110 AD] and a beautiful place.

AHMADI: Yes. I remember that the organization responsible for reconstructing that bridge was called DACAAR [the Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees]. It was a Danish organization that carried out ancient restoration projects. For example, if there was an ancient mosque, gravesite, bridge, or museum, DACAAR would work to repair it. This was after the Soviet Union’s attacks had caused widespread destruction.

One of my relatives was a driver for the organization. He negotiated on my behalf, and they accepted me as a part-time laborer—part-time because I was still attending school.

Q: Do you remember when that was?

AHMADI: It was during the Mujahideen regime, around 1992–1993, when I started working as an unskilled laborer. I suffered a lot and worked under harsh conditions, but I also learned some skills. After three or four years, I progressed to working as a skilled laborer, specializing in stone masonry. It was technical work but not physically demanding.

The people in the organization encouraged me to learn English. Many engineers worked there, and they recognized my motivation to study and work. They told me that if I wanted to join an NGO in the future, I would need to learn English because it was the primary language used in NGOs. They also said that I would not be promoted without a high level of proficiency in English. This motivated me, and from that moment, I started learning English. However, due to limited resources, a lack of good teachers, and the unavailability of quality training materials, learning English quickly was not easy for someone from a poor background.

I hoped to attend university and become fluent in English. Unfortunately, that didn’t happen, and I was unable to complete high school. I was in 10th or 11th grade in 1996 when the Taliban took control of Afghanistan for the first time.

Q: The first regime of the Taliban?

AHMADI: Even before the Taliban took control of Herat Province, we had already heard about them. We were filled with fear and uncertainty, worrying about what would happen

if they arrived. People shared their negative experiences with the Taliban, which made us even more afraid. I was curious to see what they looked like and who they were, so I went out of my home to see them for myself.

They arrived early in the morning. My father woke up and was heading to the mosque for prayer, and I woke up as well. I could hear fighting between the Mujahideen government and the Taliban. The intensity of the fighting kept increasing. Around 11 in the morning, I decided to go outside. Some people told me that the Taliban had taken control of the governor's office. As I approached the building, I was shocked to see nearly twenty dead bodies of former government soldiers lying in front of it. The sight was horrifying, and I remained in shock for a long time.

That night, I had nightmares. For almost a month, I wasn't myself. I hardly spoke to anyone, stayed at home most of the time, and often cried. From the very beginning, my memories of the Taliban regime were terrifying. Their presence only added to our suffering. On top of the poverty we were already experiencing, we now faced severe restrictions and additional hardships.

The western region of Afghanistan also suffered a long and devastating drought, which made everything even worse. People had no bread or basic food. Many were forced to sell their sheep and cows at extremely low prices because they couldn't afford to feed them.

The restrictions imposed by the international community on the Taliban further worsened Afghanistan's economic situation. Meanwhile, the Taliban enforced strict bans on many aspects of life. They placed severe restrictions on women, education, television, and even religious practices. Attendance at the mosque was mandatory, and they kept track of who attended. If someone missed prayers, they would be punished. They also forced young men to adopt their preferred style of appearance. They would cut the hair of those who didn't comply—I was one of them, unfortunately. Men were required to wear a turban or a hat at all times. If someone's hairstyle or clothing didn't meet their rules, they were harshly punished.

Women faced even stricter regulations. They were not allowed to study or leave their homes without a male relative. The Taliban also banned public baths, which were essential for many Afghans. In Afghanistan, many poor families couldn't afford a private bathroom in their homes. In colder regions like Herat, people often lacked the resources to heat water for bathing. Public baths were a crucial way for the poor to stay clean at a minimal cost. Unfortunately, the Taliban shut them down. For the first four months, they closed only the women's baths, but later, they extended the ban to men's baths as well.

Q: You said you were 16 or 17 in high school when the Taliban took power? Did you continue your high school during the Taliban?

AHMADI: During the Taliban era, I completed high school, but the quality of education was not good. The Taliban stopped teaching science, mathematics, chemistry, physics,

and these subjects. They were replaced with more religious subjects. We had to take their subjects. There were still some other subjects, but they were not important for them. If you failed on one of these other subjects, it wasn't a matter, but you had to pass the religious subject. I was very much motivated to get ahead. I had to bring some changes to my life. It was one of my purposes to end our poverty. Ending our poverty was the main goal in my life because in every moment of my life, my childhood, my youth, I was feeling the poverty and restrictions. Therefore, I was studying at home and I was studying in a private training center.

Q: What happened with your job with DACAAR? Did they continue their project during the Taliban regime?

AHMADI: Yes, they continued and it even increased. My work conditions became better. After a while I could enroll my father and my brother as laborers on the project. They were working under my supervision. So, I was the supervisor of my dad and my brother.

Q: Do you remember what happened in 2001 on 9/11 in the United States and what happened after the international forces came to Afghanistan?

AHMADI: Before the Taliban took over Afghanistan, there was not so much discrimination. We had different religions, tribes, and ethnicities. All the people respected each other, and we were living peacefully. Some Shia married with Sunni, and Sunni with Shia, and also the Tajik with Pashtun or with Hazara. The Hazara were not so common in our province. Pashtun and Tajik would get married and live friendly. They had good relations with each other. When the Taliban came, unfortunately, we started to see discrimination amongst the people. For example, if there was a conflict between two tribes, the tribes connected with the Taliban, usually Pashtun, received favor at the expense of other tribes or people. People speaking Pashto got special favors. This was true especially for the people from Kandahar. If the Kandahari people cheated the other tribes, they were not punished. But, if the non-Kandahari people did anything against the Kandahari, they were punished. This discrimination and hatred started growing with the Taliban.

I was young, but I remember what happened when the Taliban came. And the people began to feel hopeless. They felt that the international community was ignoring Afghanistan. To tell the truth, Afghanistan was being ignored. The international community didn't know about Afghanistan. They were not putting any pressure on the Taliban to improve the situation in Afghanistan. Every day the situation was getting worse, but no one heard from us. So, when the United States started bombarding the Taliban, all the people of Afghanistan were happy.

Q: How did you hear about 9/11? Do you remember when and how you got this information? And what was the reaction of the people?

AHMADI: At that time, all the media unfortunately in Afghanistan was blocked. You couldn't watch TV. Also, if you were listening to the radio in public they would stop you.

Still, we were listening to the BBC and Voice of America over a small radio. We heard that President Bush had announced that the United States was starting to attack Afghanistan and the Taliban. We were following the news of 9/11, and many people were really unhappy that Osama bin Laden, the person behind this attack, was hiding in Afghanistan and that the Taliban supported him. We were listening to the radio and we were in the picture about what was happening. But, we didn't have details about what had happened in the United States and what the victims of 9/11 suffered. We were not so much in the picture about that. We didn't see that on the TV because at that time there was no TV in Afghanistan. We were only listening to the radio. And at that time, the Afghan people were sad about the death of Ahmad Shah Massoud, the Mujahideen leader who had been fighting against the Taliban. The people loved him. He had been the only hope at that time that was fighting against the Taliban.

Q: Yes, he was killed two days before 9/11.

AHMADI: He was killed simultaneously. So, after that, the people were very unhappy and they were losing hope. We could foresee that the Taliban would overcome all parts of Afghanistan. Then, there was very heavy bombing. Believe me, even the kids were crying. You know, it was everywhere. And Herat was one of the provinces where the Taliban had much power. It is on the border with Iran and through customs they were making a good income from that province. So, they had many weapons, and the United States was attacking their warehouses and storage of weapons. The storage exploded and some residents were killed and injured. It was very shocking. In the last two days, the people started attacking the Taliban, and the Taliban were more afraid of the people than the United States. The Mujahideen also started fighting and after a while – even though it was hard to believe – we could see that there was no Taliban in Afghanistan.

Q: So, the new regime came, and everything changed. What happened to you? Did you decide to go to university or to continue with your job?

AHMADI: Yes, the Taliban collapsed in 2001 and the new government was established. A lot of things changed in my life and in the lives of many people. These were positive changes, especially for those who were educated. I hadn't completed my university, but I could clearly observe that those people who had studied, were educated, and had just a little bit of English, were getting a salary of 1,000 U.S. dollars. This became a motivation for many people. I remember that during the Taliban regime, if anyone studied hard, then many other people would laugh at him. They would see educated people having to sell potatoes just to live. Many of my relatives had asked me, why did I study so much, especially English? What was the benefit?

Now, with the regime change it was different. I graduated in 2003, then I started working as an English teacher. I began as an English teacher, then I started working as a supervisor, trainer, and project officer. My life changed from 2004 until 2021. I worked in many national and international NGOs. And from 2004, I became richer and I could buy everything for my family. I married and started establishing my own family. This was a

very good start. From 2004, everything changed, especially for those people who were educated. And now uneducated people, they were working for educated people.

Q: You mentioned you got married. When did you get married?

AHMADI: It was at the end of 2003.

Working on a USAID project

Q: When did you start working on a USAID project?

AHMADI: I started working with an NGO on a USAID project in January 2019 and was there until the end of 2021. I was a project officer. I was responsible for project management of a big USAID project, which was a nation-wide project. It covered all the provinces of Afghanistan. The project was strengthening education in Afghanistan. I didn't work on the first phase of that project, but I had a good experience working on the second phase of that project. The project was focusing on empowering women through high school education and university education. For the high school education, we were providing training and support to female high schools.

During the Taliban regime, women were not allowed to study. After the regime changed, we observed that we did not have enough highly qualified teachers because women had not had the opportunity to study. This program empowered women to become good teachers. We were building the capacity of teachers to teach the girls because we had a problem with low quality female teachers who were unable to teach good quality lessons to the girls. We wanted to upgrade these female teachers through studying at the university. In Afghanistan, there is a national exam called the "Kankor" exam for entrance to the university. Anyone who passed this exam had the opportunity to go to university. Otherwise, he doesn't have the chance. Boys would take private courses outside to help them with mathematics, science, and other subjects, so that they could easily pass the Kankor exam and get a chance to go to the university. Unfortunately, girls did not have this opportunity. So, with the support of USAID, we started building the capacity of the teachers. Also, they provided some supplementary training material for the female students. For example, we developed some Kankor applications for tablets and we provided internet and distributed them to the girls.

Q: To practice, to be ready for the Kankor exam?

AHMADI: Yes, to practice, to be ready for the Kankor exam. This gave them a chance to pass the Kankor exam and go to university. This was our first strategy. We would help those girls with poor performance at school so that they would improve their performance and could get the chance to go to public university. The second option for those girls who did not get a chance to go to public university, we would help them to go to private university. The private university charges fees and many girls were poor. The rich girls could take preparatory courses outside of school to pass the Kankor exam and get into the

public university. They could get training in mathematics, physics, and many other subjects, so they could go to public university. For the students from poor families, we helped them by providing scholarships to private universities.

I was a project officer. I was not only responsible for providing the girls with scholarships, I was also responsible for teaching them English, computers, and some leadership training. The leadership training was to help the girls to become change leaders in their community and to be able to advocate for their rights and other women's rights. We established a resource center in each private university. In each private university, we sent 40, 50, or 60 students, and set up a resource center with a computer lab and internet and some training sessions that helped those girls do their assignment because they didn't have these facilities outside the university. I am proud that for 60 to 70 percent of the girls that graduated from the university, I could link them with employment. They found jobs. Many of them found jobs with private companies, with NGOs, or with universities. Some of them became entrepreneurs and they started their own businesses. This was a very good project, but unfortunately in August 2021 our hopes and our future plans collapsed with the republican regime. We know that now Afghanistan, and especially the girls and women, are suffering a lot.

Fall of Afghanistan

Q: Now, we come to late July and August of 2021. Tell us where were you at that time, and what did you do? What happened to your program and to your colleagues?

AHMADI: Actually, before the collapse, I was in Herat. You know that Herat was one of the provinces resisting the Taliban attacks. For almost two months there was a heavy war, led by former Mujahideen leader Ismail Khan. He was defending Herat. The Taliban were closing, closing, and closing around Herat City. During that time, I was in Herat, and I was worrying about my family. They were crying, and they were worrying about their future. We heard about the oppressive actions of the Taliban in Baghlan and in Kunduz. The people had had a bad experience with the Taliban before. Therefore, the people were worrying about what the Taliban would do if they captured Herat. To tell you the truth, one thing I did was to go to the Iranian consulate in Herat. I got visas for all my family members, except myself, and I sent them to Iran before the fall of the city. You will ask why I didn't go too.

Q: For sure. Why didn't you go?

AHMADI: Believe me, my family told me that I had to go with them to Iran. I thought that if I will be killed, I should be killed with my students. I should stay with them till the last moment. My family insisted that I join them, but I didn't join them. I told them that I was responsible for all these ladies, I was their hope. I have to be responsible and be with them every moment. My colleagues were in Afghanistan, but some of them traveled to Kabul. When Herat was going to collapse, I traveled to Kabul at the request of my project director. She told me to please come to Kabul because Herat is collapsing. I went to Kabul. I was in communication with my students and tried to give them hope. Please do

not be afraid. We told them they should destroy the documents they had with them. My director also gave us advice to please delete all the documents and delete your badge number. I took the picture and sent it to my g-mail account, then I destroyed my badge number as well. Everything was not normal in that situation. So, I went to Kabul.

Q: Was there any plan for the evacuation of staff outside of Afghanistan? Did anyone contact you from your NGO or from USAID about evacuation?

AHMADI: Of course, we had regular contact with our colleagues through a WhatsApp group. We knew that the situation at the Kabul Airport was not good. There were large crowds. The director told me that if I went to the airport that it was my responsibility.

Q: Your family, wife and children, were in Iran, right?

AHMADI: Yes. If I went to the airport, I would have to leave alone. But to tell you the truth, I was hearing news from the airport that the Taliban were beating and killing people at the airport, and there had been an explosion. So, I decided I would not go there.

Q: What about your colleagues? Were they leaving the country at that time?

AHMADI: No, my colleagues did not leave because there was not a special program for evacuation of me and my colleagues. The P2 program [State Department's Priority 2 designation for Afghan refugees under the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program or USRAP] was just starting while the Taliban were taking over Afghanistan and we didn't know about how it worked.

Q: That meant that you were on your own and if you did enter the Kabul airport there was no plan for evacuation.

AHMADI: There was no plan for evacuating us. They did say if you go and enter the airport, there might be a chance because if you show your documents that you were from a partner of USAID, maybe they would evacuate you too.

Q: Who was in contact with you, from your NGO or USAID?

AHMADI: We had contact with our local colleagues. We did not have any contact with USAID because we were not direct contractors.

Q: So, you decided to wait, stay in Afghanistan. What happened to your office? Did they continue their operation after the fall? And what happened to your international colleagues?

AHMADI: They stopped the project. My international colleagues were evacuated. Some of them had already left Afghanistan before the collapse and they left their Afghan colleagues behind. The NGO offered the staff in the main office an opportunity to be evacuated outside Afghanistan. However, the staff had to get themselves to Islamabad,

Pakistan. I worked in a regional office, not in the main office, so this offer didn't apply to me. We were ignored and we were not given this chance. We were given the referral for a P2 status, but we would have to get to Pakistan on our own. They encouraged me to take this opportunity. They said please go and try for your P2, but the process will start only if you leave Afghanistan.

Q: They referred your case to the USRAP [the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program] before the collapse of Kabul?

AHMADI: No, it was after the collapse.

Q: There is a procedure when they refer your case where you will receive a confirmation number, which is an ARR or Afghan Referral Record number. When did you receive that confirmation that they had opened your case?

AHMADI: It was in November 2021. I got the confirmation in November and in December I left Afghanistan.

Takeover by the Taliban and Fleeing to Pakistan

Q: What happened after the collapse? What did you do during September, October and November, till you received the confirmation? What happened to your family

AHMADI: My family was living in Iran during the time, and I was in Kabul. I was living in different places in my friends' houses. During the collapse, more provinces were falling every day. All the staff from NGOs and the government were displaced to Kabul. They had the hope that Kabul would resist and not collapse very soon, and they would have the chance to go somewhere. Unfortunately, the reality was that Kabul collapsed very quickly. It was not the expectation of anyone. I was in a hotel in Kabul, and I saw that the hotel was not a good place to stay. So, I went to stay with some friends, and I was there for almost one month. After one month, my family called me and told me that their visas were expiring, and they had to go back to Herat. I told them that you can stay without a visa in Iran, but they said the government would not allow them to stay longer and they were afraid. So, I told them that to come back to Afghanistan we would get Pakistani visas because we had been referred to the U.S. representative and with the confirmation we could go to Pakistan. When my family came back, I applied online for visas to Pakistan. I got the visas in the beginning of December, and we left Afghanistan.

Q: So, your wife and children came back and joined you in Kabul?

AHMADI: No. I met them in Herat.

Q: And in December, you left Afghanistan?

AHMADI: Yes.

Q: So, in December 2021, you started a new chapter in your life by immigrating from Afghanistan to Pakistan. You stayed there almost two years?

AHMADI: No, we were there for more than two years.

Waiting in Pakistan for Processing

Q: Tell us about your lives in Pakistan. How was your case handled by the USRAP? How quickly did they process your case? How was your communication with them?

AHMADI: I went to Pakistan in December 2021. I filled out the Google form for P2 applicants, and the same day I got my PK number. The PK number is a number that shows your status and indicates that you are out of Afghanistan and in Pakistan. The day my PK number arrived, I received a message saying that someone from IOM [the International Organization for Migration] would be in contact with me soon. Soon turned out to be two years. Two years! I never received a single email, a single call from anyone while we were waiting. This was so disappointing.

Q: Did you try to email or call them to describe your situation or to contact them?

AHMADI: In the beginning, we didn't know who we should contact. Everything was not clear for us. We learned about the PIC, the Pakistan Information Center, which was part of the IOM. When we contacted the PIC, every time that office would send an autoreply saying that they would contact us and that we should be patient.

Q: Just autoreply?

AHMADI: Yes, just autoreply. After years of waiting, in March of 2023, we received an email asking if we were still in Pakistan. We said yes. And then we heard nothing from then until February 2024. Then, I received a call from IOM's Pakistan Information Center asking if we were still in Pakistan. I said, "Yes, we are in Islamabad." They said, okay, we will invite you in for an interview with IOM. A week later, they sent me the interview invitation. The first interview was in February.

Q: Where did they do the interview, at the U.S. Embassy or at the IOM offices?

AHMADI: It was with IOM. The first interview was in February 2024 with IOM. The second interview was in March at the U.S. Embassy. On the 4th of March I got my medical appointment. And on the 3rd of September, I was resettled in Houston, Texas.

Q: I have some questions about your time in Pakistan. Did the NGO you worked for contact you or help you during your time in Pakistan?

AHMADI: No, they didn't contact us.

Q: What about your other colleagues from the office? Do you know what happened to them?

AHMADI: Many of them were evacuated outside Afghanistan. Also, some of them had SIV [Special Immigrant Visas] and they traveled directly on their own to the United States.

Q: Did anyone join you in Pakistan?

AHMADI: Yes. Some of them went to Pakistan and some of them stayed in Afghanistan and their cases were processed while they were in Afghanistan.

Q: How was your personal life in Pakistan? Wasn't the visa from Pakistan valid for a limited time, just one year or six months? What did you do?

AHMADI: You are right, the visa was limited, the visa was good for six months. But they told us that we could only stay in Pakistan for two months and then we would have to go back to Afghanistan. We could come back to Pakistan, but just for a stay of up to two months. This was really ridiculous. Why are you issuing us a visa for six months? Because of this limitation, we couldn't get a leasing agreement. Unfortunately, the minimum period for a lease was six months and the maximum was one year. So, the landlords would not rent us a house for just two months. They said, for two months we are not taking the risk on you. Just go. We were forced to go out of the city. We had to go to a village far away from Islamabad. There were no good schools, no services. We were forced to stay out there. There were people in the village who were treating us better than those in the city. They were sharing their empathy with us.

Our suffering and the disappointment started from this point where we came to Pakistan and we couldn't find a good house for living. This was the first issue. And the second issue was the visa. We had escaped from Afghanistan. We didn't want to go back to Afghanistan every two months. That would not be a wise decision to risk going back to Afghanistan. Therefore, I took the decision not to go back to Afghanistan every two months. We stayed in Pakistan and after two months, I applied for the extension of the visa. But, they didn't extend our visas. We hid ourselves in the village, and we didn't go to the city where the police might capture us. You know there were many people who offered to help us get the visa for a commission. They said if you pay a good amount they could get us the visa, but we would have to pay a penalty as well. I asked them how much was the penalty. They said it was 1,000 U.S. dollars for each member of the family. For the six members of my family, that would be 6,000 U.S. dollars. That was too much. So, you know what we did? For almost three years we were in hiding and waiting for that day the United States would resettle us in America.

Q: You talked about having six family members. How many children did you have with you? Did they have a chance to go to school during these years in Pakistan?

AHMADI: My wife and I have four children. All of them are boys. Unfortunately, we don't have any daughters. The oldest one will be twenty years old in November of this year. We have twins and they are sixteen years old. The youngest boy is nine years old.

Q: They were school age in Pakistan.

AHMADI: The senior one almost graduated from high school in Afghanistan and he was waiting to go to the university, but he couldn't do that in Pakistan. In Pakistan, I tried my best to enroll the other boys in the government school, which was free of charge. Unfortunately, the school didn't admit them because we didn't have valid documents. They asked for valid documents and we didn't have valid documents. We were like undocumented refugees in Pakistan. I had to enroll them in private school. Because I had suffered from poverty, I didn't want my kids to experience the same. So, I sold some of my properties in Afghanistan to invest in their education. Fortunately, with the private school education, all my kids are speaking English fluently.

Processing with CARE and IOM

Q: How was your communication with CARE [the State Department's Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts] before receiving your P2 to go to the United States? Did they contact you and explain the procedure?

AHMADI: I didn't receive any emails or have any contact from CARE. Some people did receive messages from CARE, which gave them hope. We were only resettled through IOM. In Pakistan there are two resettlement agencies, CARE and IOM.

Q: Did you try to contact CARE?

AHMADI: I know some families received calls from CARE. They shared with me the CARE WhatsApp number and I tried contacting them. They said that they would be contacting us, but they didn't.

Q: In March you received your invitation for the interview and then after that the medical exam and then you were waiting for the time to travel.

AHMADI: Yes.

Before that, I want to share some of my experience in Pakistan before we went to America. You know Pakistan is suffering from inflation. So, you know, for a family of six persons, living in Pakistan was very difficult. It was very expensive. The living expenses were very high. Before in Afghanistan, I provided for all my family in Afghanistan because I had a good salary. I had a house and had a car in Afghanistan. Once our life changed, my family suffered because we had to manage with limited resources. Now, we had to cut back our food and everything to manage our lives. In the beginning, for almost eight months to one year, we spent lots of money because we were thinking that we would be going to America soon. We overspent our budget. We had planned on a stay of

one year to eighteen months. Then, we faced a very difficult time for budget management. Then we started selling some of our properties. We asked our families in Afghanistan to sell some of our properties and also to send us some of our money. Some of our money in the bank had been blocked when we went to Pakistan. So, we gave some of our family members our representation so that they could get our money out of the bank and send it to us in Pakistan. That money also finished. In that situation, believe me, as a person who is responsible for managing the family, it was not an easy job. We were not allowed to work in Pakistan. Still, the kids were accustomed to having good life conditions and life expenses. In Pakistan, everything changed. That was really difficult.

Q: You stayed a long time in Pakistan and we know that the U.S. government advised the people who had the P1, P2 or SIV cases and had moved outside of Afghanistan to register themselves with the UNHCR [the UN High Commissioner for Refugees] as a refugee. We know that the UNHCR offered some protection and some supportive systems to refugees. How was that process?

AHMADI: You are right. The Google form clearly mentioned that you should register yourself with the UNHCR. And we went and registered with the UNHCR. I passed two in-person interviews and one online interview. In all these interviews, they told us that they do not provide financial aid to refugees. I told them that I was a refugee, and I had worked with the United States, and now I was in a bad situation. Please at least help me with something until the United States resettles me in America. They said that no they don't have anything, any support for you. I was searching every opportunity from people and organizations for support while we were in Pakistan, but we didn't get any support. None of the P2 applicants, not just me, received any support from the UNHCR.

Unfortunately, besides this suffering from inflation, no proper education for my children, no home, and no work, the police would harass us. For example, if we needed to go to the hospital or some other public services with my kids, we were hiding them so that the police did not see us. The police were harassing Afghans. The situation got worse in October and November 2023. At that time, I was not able to sleep at night.

Q: I remember that the U.S. government issued a letter to all P1 and P2 applicants in Pakistan to confirm to the government of Pakistan that this person was a case in process and asked that the government not to disturb them, to not expel them. So, what happened in your case? Did you receive that letter? Did it help you?

AHMADI: Yes. I received that letter on the 31st of October at midnight. At that time, I wasn't sleeping. I was usually falling asleep at 4 a.m. I was trying to sleep, but because of worrying about my future, about my kids, about everything, I couldn't sleep. I received that letter. Many times the police were stopping us. We were showing them this protection letter from the U.S. government. They said that you should pay us and that if you don't pay us, then this protection letter doesn't work. They were not respecting the letter. At that time, we were seeing in the news that every day the police were deporting thousands of Afghans by force across the border back to Afghanistan.

Q: So, during your time in Pakistan, except for that letter from the State Department, did you receive any help or support or contact from the U.S. government?

AHMADI: No – no support, no contact, no help. I would like to mention that during this time from October 2023 until I received the call in February 2024 from the United States for the interview, this was the peak of distress and psychological stress for me. This was the peak. We were worrying that the police might deport us to Afghanistan, what would be our situation there. On the other hand, it had been almost more than two years since we started our case and we had not received an interview. We were feeling hopeless and disappointed. Therefore, my family and I had mental distress. We went to the doctor and received some pills to help us. Without those pills, we could not sleep.

At that time, the Pakistani government was taking very harsh measures against all undocumented Afghans, without exception, and they were being deported. Some of the P2 applicants that were living near to the city were deported. Some of them did make it back to Pakistan, but some of them could not get back to Pakistan. We heard this news and saw on the WhatsApp group that many police were grabbing the children and the women, not just the men, and putting them in the car and going to the police station. This situation was very distressing. What should we do? Sometimes my family would say we should return to Afghanistan. If we went back to Afghanistan we might be killed, and if we stayed, the police might put us in jail. And our economic situation was getting dire.

My expectation at the start was that the U.S. government would give us some kind of timeframe for the process, say 18 months before we are resettled. We only received an email that said the process could take years. If they had told us a timeframe, we could have planned our budget. We found that we had run through our budget after two years. We were stressed and sometimes within the family we were fighting with each other. My kids were stressed. They were asking why should we stay here, maybe we should go back to Afghanistan. My kids started not obeying my orders, and sometimes I was not speaking friendly with them as I should have done. I was talking with them loudly and sometimes I think I used bad words. Afterwards, I wondered why I was doing this and I was crying. I thought that these were my kids, they were my loved ones. I invested everything for them. Because of them, I was going to the United States so they should be out of danger. The waiting was causing so much distress and disappointment.

I suggest that the USRAP program give applicants a time frame and explain the process step by step. For example, they could say the first interview will be in this month and the second interview this month, and this is the time frame so that the applicants can better manage their lives.

We got two years without hearing anything. And we were feeling pressure from the police, from inflation, from a lack of education and facilities. So, this was really, really disappointing for us.

Q: Yes, I am sorry to hear how you and other Afghans suffered in Pakistan. Thank God that it finally worked out for you and your family and that you received your interview at

the U.S. Embassy and then you passed all the medical exam tests. When you received the information that your case was approved, who paid for the airplane tickets? Did you pay for them on your own or were you given the tickets?

AHMADI: The IOM paid for the tickets and all the travel expenses. We didn't pay anything from our pocket. The IOM also paid for the medical exams. We are very happy with the resettlement process. I tell you that this was very proper. When we arrived at the airport, they had people who welcomed us.

Q: What day did you leave Pakistan?

AHMADI: We left Pakistan on the second of September.

Resettling in the United States

Q: And when did you enter the United States?

AHMADI: The third of September.

Q: What was the experience of your family at the airport?

AHMADI: The first thing that I would like to tell you was that IOM services after the interview were perfect. They welcomed us. They treated us very well and very professionally. We were very happy with them. They provided us with food and water while we were doing the interview. They provided a playground for the children, and in Islamabad they provided a good space for prayer. Also, they gave us very clear information about the next steps. For the interview, they told us what questions would be asked so we would be prepared. The IOM sent us to a medical center for exams. They were very professional. They paid all the expenses, and we didn't pay anything except for transportation to the interview, but that was not so much. It was a very small amount. When we arrived at the airport, the IOM staff were waiting for us. They were standing there with a sign with the IOM logo. They welcomed us warmly and they instructed us about the boarding. They properly and nicely guided us.

Q: In Islamabad?

AHMADI: Yes, in Islamabad. And when we landed at the Doha airport, the IOM staff was there and welcomed us at the gate of the airport. They instructed us about boarding the Qatar Airlines plane from Doha to Houston, Texas. When we arrived in Houston, the IOM staff were there, and they greeted us professionally. We are very satisfied with their services. Then we met U.S. officials who stamped our passports for one year and they welcomed us warmly.

Then we were helped by an organization by the name of ECDC, which is the Ethiopian Community Development Council. It is a refugee resettlement agency. When we came

out of the airport, the staff of ECDC was standing waiting for us. Our names were written on a board, and they welcomed us. They picked us up in a big car and they helped us.

Q: So, ECDC handled your resettlement case?

AHMADI: Yes, they work in Houston.

Q: They took you directly from the airport to your apartment? Was the apartment already rented and furnished and ready for you?

AHMADI: Yes. They took us to our apartment, and it was already furnished and equipped. And they provided some food for us. After almost two weeks, they processed all of our documents: social security, work permits, the food stamps, and Medicaid. Everything was processed very quickly, very properly, and I'm very happy.

Q: What about the children? Did they have a chance to start school?

AHMADI: After one month, all three kids have been enrolled in school. With the youngest kid, I had the responsibility of registering him with a charter school. And he is very happy. The other two boys were enrolled in the public school. And the oldest boy recently found a job. An imprinting company interviewed him, and he was good at computer science and also his English was good. So, he found a good job. My investment in their education paid off. My three kids passed the English test. There is no need for them to take English courses at the school. The three youngest kids are studying at regular schools, and my oldest boy has found a job. I am still searching for a job, and my wife has started studying English. I am searching for a car. If I get a car I will take her to the English courses for two months.

Q: Do you have a driver's license?

AHMADI: I got the permit. In the coming week, I will take the road test.

Q: Congratulations.

AHMADI: Yes, we have many achievements here. I am very happy with the services we have received here in the United States.

Q: Talk about the community where you are living now. Are there any other Afghans around you?

AHMADI: Yes, there are many Afghans in this complex. They came about the same time as we did. Some of them came one or two months ago, and only one Afghan family has been here for one year. They welcomed us, and we feel that we are in part of Afghanistan.

And the one thing I would like to tell you, this is the truth from my heart, I love the American people. They are very friendly people. While we sometimes feel strange, these

people are friendly. They say, hi, how are you? We were not expecting that we would be welcomed by the local community. It was very nice to see because we were worried that they would see foreigners and they would not be welcomed. We are greeting them, and they are greeting us. They say excuse me and do you need help? This is very good.

Q: How are your parents back in Afghanistan?

AHMADI: Unfortunately, my parents passed away.

Final Reflections

Q: Thank you for sharing your wonderful story with us. Before we conclude, is there anything else you want to share with us?

AHMADI: Thank you so much for including me in your program. Believe me, it is appreciated. This program is good because we can share our experiences with others, so our voices will be heard. And this might help with future resettlement programs. Also, this helps let others know about Afghanistan, and know about the people. So, I'm happy and I'm lucky to have been given this chance to be interviewed for this program.

Q: Thank you.

End of Interview