

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

GUL [pseudonym]

Interviewed by: Azaad [pseudonym]

Initial interview date: July 1, 2024

Copyright 2025 ADST

INTERVIEW

Q: This is Azaad. Today is Monday, July 1, 2024. I am doing an interview for the Afghanistan Oral History Project. Today we are doing an interview with Gul. Hello Gul.

GUL: Good morning.

Early Life and Education before Moving to Kabul

Q: Let's start from the beginning. Tell us, who is Gul?

GUL: I'm originally from the eastern part of Afghanistan. I was born in Jalalabad and I studied high school there in my district. Then after that, we moved to Kabul and life continued from there.

Q: You finished your high school in your district and then studied at the university when you moved to Kabul.

GUL: Yes. We moved to Kabul. In the meantime, I was working, but I was also very interested in getting a higher education. That's why I preferred studying in a private university. I studied management in Kardan University, one of the leading private universities in Afghanistan. In addition to that, I did my Masters in the United States. I focused on protection issues.

Q: Let's go back. You said you were born in Jalalabad. How was the situation in Afghanistan at that time?

GUL: The situation was terrible, especially when I was a kid because I had been raised at the time of the Mujahideen fighting, before the Taliban. We called those the Dark Days, the Black Days.

Q: Internal war.

GUL: Internal war, clashes, insecurity, no value for education. When I used to go to school, I remember my cousins would tell me you're just wasting your time. You're just wasting your money. School is not needed. You have to work, as a child, you have to support your family.

Q: So you started your school during the time of the Mujahideen or during the first term of the Taliban?

GUL: Yes, the first term of the Taliban. I still remember when the Taliban came for the first time to Afghanistan. I was on my way from high school to home, and these Taliban were firing their guns, not at anyone, but they were just shooting in the air just to terrify the people. I was thinking, who are these people? The Taliban came to Afghanistan. I was looking at them. And when I went home, I told my parents that the Taliban had come and they had captured the province. Then we started listening to the BBC radio and others.

Q: For the period that the Taliban were in power the first time, you stayed in your home province and continued your school, or school was stopped at that time?

GUL: School was stopped for a temporary time, but then it was resumed only for boys. The name of the high school was changed to Madrasah. Madrasah was a place where you could study Islamic religion only. It was not high school. It was a Madrasah. We focused a lot on Islamic religion. We had to wear a turban as children. I still remember, we couldn't afford to buy it because it was so expensive. We were living off farming the land, and to buy a turban was expensive. As a child, I was extremely interested in getting an education.

My parents were also different from other people's parents. They were extremely supportive and committed to me going to school and getting an education. I'm happy that we could pursue those goals and objectives. It was not easy for us. It was difficult.

Q: I assume when 9/11 happened, you were still in your district. Do you remember that day, what happened, how you heard about 9/11?

GUL: I do remember. My family and the families of my three other uncles were living in one house. I still remember we had a big radio. All of them would gather and would listen to the radio. No one could speak in front of the elders because the news was extremely important. I still remember that I listened about 9/11 and then about when America invaded Afghanistan. When America invaded Afghanistan, we had to move from one place to another multiple times because they bombarded a couple of places in our region.

Q: I remember. Your area was the center for Al Qaeda. They focused mostly in Jalalabad for Al Qaeda.

GUL: That was a mountainous area, far away from us. We were living far from the area called the Black Mountain. There was also another place probably with some Taliban or

something there, I don't know. They were bombarding that place as well. That was closer to us.

Q: Tora Bora?

GUL: Tora Bora was far from us. This is called the Black Mountain. When you go from Kabul to Jalalabad, you see that mountain on the right.

Q: How was the situation at that time in Afghanistan?

GUL: The situation was terrible.

Q: When you heard about 9/11, what did the people talk about at that time?

GUL: Honestly, it was very strange because living under a government like Mujahideen and then followed by the Taliban, you saw a totally different regime, now totally different people, Afghan people in our area. It was strange and something we didn't know what to expect. It was difficult because we had to move multiple times from one area to another because of all the bombardments that the Americans conducted. But afterwards, it was getting better day by day. We got used to it. People followed the path of education, going to school and other things. It was getting better day by day.

Q: After the regime changed, you continued your education to 12th grade.

GUL: I not only continued, my interest increased because of knowing the value of education. Not only for me, but most of my other relatives also followed the same path. I did continue.

Life in Kabul

Q: When did you move from Jalalabad to Kabul?

GUL: It was after graduation from high school.

Q: You moved because you wanted a higher education, the university?

GUL: No. Actually, my father had a place in Kabul. He was a shopkeeper. Right after graduating from high school, I also found a job in Kabul because I had to support my family. That's why we moved.

Q: When did you start your first job?

GUL: It was 2004, if I am not mistaken.

Q: How did you join the UN? And before that, where did you work? I think you also had a project funded by the U.S. government. Can you explain that?

GUL: Yes. My first job was in 2004 in the private sector, which was with an electronics company. I was responsible for the administrative and communication matters. Then after that, I worked for a telecommunication company. And later I worked for an international organization. In this organization, we had projects funded by USAID.

Working in those three organizations was not satisfactory to me. I wanted to work in a place where I could benefit people, where I could deliver services for the public, where I could be a reason for change in the life of people. That was my childhood objective, and I found a job in a non-profit. I worked there at this non-profit organization, one the biggest organizations working with refugees and migrants in the world, which is working in 53 countries. We had projects from the Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance and the Bureau of Education of the USAID and State Department with this organization.

My job was extremely satisfactory because I would help returnees coming back to Afghanistan from Pakistan, Iran and all those other countries. I would go there and conduct information sessions, giving them information briefings regarding their rights in the light of international laws, also their rights under domestic laws. What are your rights? You have the right of freedom of speech. You have the right to food. You have the right to shelter, all those rights that a human would have. Then in addition to that, I would refer their cases to the IRC [International Rescue Committee] and also to external organizations so that they could receive help like food, water, shelter, and non-food items. It was very satisfactory. We would also make education centers in the settlement places for all these Afghans. We wanted to make sure that the children were not deprived of education.

Then after six years, I wanted to work in a higher position in a place where I could change more in the life of people. So, I applied to the United Nations for a position with human rights.

Working on Human Rights Out in the Provinces

Q: When?

GUL: I joined the UN in 2014. I started my work out in the field, which was challenging in terms of human rights and which had some fighting with the Taliban. I was working with human rights, like detainee rights, interviewing the detainees in the detention center. And then monitoring and investigating the civilian casualties in the armed conflict. I also was talking about women's rights with the judiciary department with several society activist people, with women activists, talking about the child recruitment by the Taliban and the Afghan security forces. It was not easy. It was extremely difficult and life threatening. But I was doing it very courageously. And the reason is I was entrusted and I wanted to make an impact and change in the world for the people. I worked there until Afghanistan fell once again to the Taliban in August 2021.

Q: Tell us more about what you did with the UN, especially in the human rights section.

How did you face this challenge, especially talking with the people on the ground? When you work in human rights, you have to convey the meaning of human rights to the society.

GUL: It was not easy. It was difficult. I still remember being a human rights assistant, I had to report to Kabul regarding all those activities that I told you: detainee rights, women rights, children rights, civilian casualties, and all those things.

The UN would publish reports twice a year – a half-year report and an annual report. Due to all those powerbrokers and commanders, we would not go to the office after publishing the reports. We would not go for about a week because we were scared. All those powerbrokers were receiving the UN reports that were blaming them for the many civilian casualties inflicted by the government due to airstrikes. For example, the detention centers, the prisons controlled by all those powerful people, it was extremely difficult. We would not go out for a week at least.

On the other hand, we would also blame the Taliban for human rights violations. We knew that it would take the Taliban just a matter of seconds for them to attack you, to shoot you, even in the city. That was risky. The other scary part was when you were contacting the travel agents regarding the confirmation of civilian casualties, we had to find three different sources to confirm a civilian casualty case. So we had to confirm those casualties with independent sources. That was not easy.

In addition to that, we conducted some workshops with civil society members. Talking about human rights, it was an extremely strange idea for them, totally Western according to their experience, and against Islam, which was not true because they had a misinterpretation about Islam unfortunately. So it was really scary, and it was harder being away from home. My mother, my wife, and my family members told me hundreds of times to leave my job and to come home to Kabul. I said, no, I really, really wanted to make an impact.

Q: Did you have a chance to visit various provinces during the time you worked, and how was the situation there?

GUL: Let me give an example, to answer your question. I still remember we went to one province where we had a meeting with the provincial council members. When we left the meeting and reached the guest house where we were staying, which was near to the governor's office, about two minutes later there was an explosion. The road that we had just passed over two minutes before was blown up. I still remember that there were civilian casualties there. You could say that we had been the target.

In addition to that, there was another incident. We had to stay for two nights, three nights, sometimes for a week, out in all the provinces. We were staying in the guest house in one province, which was next to the governor's office. Around 11 p.m. some airstrikes and bombardment started. I contacted one of my sources, one of the society activists who was from the area. I called him and said, "We are in the guest house and I'm hearing a lot of bombardment and airstrikes." And he said, "This is not something new." And I asked,

how far is it from here? He said, “Probably one mile or one and a half miles from you.” “Is there another safe place that I could go?” He replied, “No, the place you are is the safest one because the provincial governor’s office is next to you. If you move, your life is at risk.” Believe me, I could not sleep the entire night.

There are many examples. Another example, we found that, except for the provincial governor’s office and the NDS [National Directorate for Security] office, the rest of the area was held by the Taliban. We were staying with the governor inside the governor’s office. We could not sleep the entire night because the Taliban were attacking the check posts, which were just one kilometer from us. That was not easy, a life-threatening job. But I’m extremely proud of all the work that I have done and the impact that I have made.

Q: Another question related to your job. One of the areas you focused on was the protection of civilians in armed conflict. I remember every year there were annual and quarterly reports with the aim of reducing the number of civilian casualties. Did you see any changes or reduction in these casualties after UNAMA’s monitoring and reporting, such as changing the tactics, in the number of civilian casualties caused by the international coalition forces? Or did you see any positive impact from your reporting?

GUL: That is a tricky, difficult question. The monitoring and investigation was not easy. I went to the hospitals, and I met with the victims in the hospitals. I talked to them because we had to be in contact with all those health care facilities.

In addition to that, we had to do advocacy with the Americans and also with the Afghan security forces. We were receiving all this information about the American troops at the provincial level. We were receiving information about civilian casualties. Sometimes we were identifying some of the special incidents that caused these civilian casualties.

It is difficult to say whether that was reduced. But I think to some extent I would say that, yes, there were some positive changes. At least they were hearing us, listening to us. They were noting what we were saying. However, the military part is quite different from the job we used to do.

Still, I would say, yes, there were positive changes, especially with the Afghanistan National Army. There was a huge impact with the child recruitment by the Afghan National Army. It was reduced by a very high percentage. I think it was due to our advocacy. The national police were different. There were also some changes, but still with the Afghan local police there was child recruitment. The huge impact made through the advocacy of the UN was with the Afghan National Army and reducing their child recruitment. There was a positive change.

The Fall of the Government and Moving to Kabul

Q: You continued your job with the UN until the fall of the government. When the Doha talks started between the United States and the Taliban, how did the people react? What

were your expectations and what did you think at that time about the Doha talks when they started?

GUL: When the talks with the Taliban started in Doha we were very optimistic at first. I think everyone was eager for peace because everyone understood that the conflict could not be won by anybody. There would be no winner in this conflict. Everyone was hungry for peace.

The negotiating process was really weak. The process was really unclear because there was no information sharing with the public. There was no trust actually. Khalilzad would go to talk to the Taliban and the government was not included. There were no women representatives in the negotiations. I was so disappointed with America. You're talking with your enemy. You're talking with the people that you had the reason to attack Afghanistan because of 9/11. You are now trying to bring peace with them and there is no representation of women. There is no representation from the government.

So I think it was a time-wasting process and it was untrusted. I think these negotiations caused the fall of Afghanistan on August 15th. I'm not sure if they were negotiating. I think they were just planning how to take Afghanistan again. I think the process was very weak, unclear. I'm extremely disappointed that we have lost all the achievements that we had made in the last 20 years.

Q: Let's go to the last months before the fall. During June and July 2021, we witnessed some changes on the ground. A lot of districts started falling to the Taliban. How was the situation, what the people said at that time, before August, the last month?

GUL: The situation was very scary. The government was defending some places, but in other places, you would witness the Taliban capturing this district and capturing that province. It was not clear, honestly. There was no stability from the government or from the American side. There was no stability. In some provinces, there was fighting, but in other provinces, they would capture the province in one night.

For the local people, it was really scary. We thought we may go back to all those dark days that we had in the 1990s. That was not expected.

A month before the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban, we were evacuated by the UN to Kabul.

Q: In July?

GUL: Yes. We were asked to go to Kabul to work from home because the Taliban were so close. They were fighting very close to us. We were asked to go to Kabul, and I was working from home in Kabul for a month.

I was in touch with one of my friends. He also worked with the United Nation. We worked together. I remember we were working on the computer, preparing a report for the UN. We were sitting at home and we heard the shooting of Taliban in the air in Kabul.

Q: Before going to August 15th, how was the situation in your hometown near Jalalabad?

GUL: There was nothing too serious. Most of the things going on in August happened in urban areas. Rural areas were not so affected. Those government offices were in urban centers; they were at risk. The situation in Jalalabad was not as bad because people were not expecting it to fall so quickly. Jalalabad is not so far from Kabul. And unexpectedly, it fell in one night. The Taliban came from Kunar Province to Jalalabad then from Jalalabad to Kabul.

The Fall of Kabul

In Kabul when we woke up, we suddenly saw the Taliban instead of the Afghan security forces. It was unexpected. Everyone was thinking the president is here. The ministers are here. The Minister of Interior is here. The Minister of Defense is here. American troops are based in Kabul. How can you expect the Taliban to capture Kabul in presence of all these entities and all these people and officers? It was not expected at all. We thought that even though other provinces could fall, but Kabul would be in government hands for a while. But that was not the case.

The morning of August 15th, I was waking up and seeing the Taliban people in beards and turbans, searching the cars in the parking lot, including my car. I remember I was on the fifth floor when my brother called me and he said, "There are some people searching the cars." When I came, I stood behind the glass so they couldn't see me. The Taliban were searching the cars in the parking lot, including my car. I could not go. I just went back to my home and I was like, what is going on here. It was really scary.

Q: Was your family with you in Kabul on that day?

GUL: Yes.

Q: How did you hear about the fall of Kabul? Tell us how you heard about the president and the fall.

GUL: I was living close to the Ministry of Interior. We had been living in one district in Kabul for more than ten years, but because of all the robberies and insecurity, we had to move the family to another district. We could not live in our previous place and we had to move. Six months before the fall, in February, we moved from that place to near the Ministry of Interior, near to the Kabul International Airport.

I received multiple calls and messages from my classmates around the globe, especially my Master's peers. All those classmates knew that I was working with human rights for

the UN because I used to talk about those situations. They knew how risky it would be for me and my family. They reached out to me and they were like, you see the provinces are falling, the districts are falling to the Taliban day by day. What's your plan? Tell us how we can help.

I told them that I am living in Kabul, the capital. The president is here. Everyone is here, the Afghan security forces, the American troops, and I think it will be okay. I cannot leave my family. I cannot evacuate. My family is everything for me. Whatever is happening will happen to all of us. They were like, you're not planning to move? I responded that, no, Kabul is good.

Two nights before the fall and the night of the fall, since we were close to the Kabul Airport, I could not sleep the entire night. Why? Planes and helicopters were going the entire night from the Presidential Palace and other offices to the international airport. We were really close.

On the 15th, when I woke up that morning, I could not believe what I saw. The Taliban were in front of me, in the parking lot searching through the cars. That was terrifying. Some bullets hit the apartment next to ours, and it started burning. We went and helped the neighbor to put out those fires. It was terrifying because we were close to the Ministry of Interior at Kabul International Airport. We thought that if a clash happened and there was resistance against the Taliban, we would be at risk.

Getting to Kabul Airport and Evacuation from Afghanistan

Q: When did you decide to leave the country?

GUL: I decided on the same day of the fall. Mentally, I felt under extreme pressure, thinking about my family, thinking about my work. The threats that I had received in the past and all those situations were extremely terrifying. I decided on the same day that I will move. I will go. I will leave the country, but I didn't yet know how. I was just looking for a way to go.

Q: What was the reaction from the United Nations, regarding the safety of their staff members?

GUL: Honestly speaking, we heard about the evacuation, that there would be an evacuation by the UN. I was on their list, but the process was extremely slow. We didn't know when we would go. They were saying, just be at home and we will call you. I did not trust the process. I knew that some of the colleagues left, but still I could not trust them because it was really slow. So on the same day, many of my classmates reached out to me.

Q: Classmates in the United States?

GUL: From the United States, yes, from my University. Americans, Indians, Canadians, Brazilians, Albanians, different countries. They reached out to me and they were like, how can we help? And I said, I don't know how you can help me.

One of my classmates told me to reach out to my university in the States. I was like, that is a university. How can they help me? I remember he told me—he was an Indian—that you are not losing anything by trying. Just try reaching out to a professor or an advisor and ask for help. I was like, okay. I reached out to one professor and said, “I'm here in Afghanistan and I'm trying to get out of the country. Is there a possibility that your University can provide some help?” And he replied, “Hold on, Gul. I will get back to you. I cannot promise anything, but hold on. We advise you to stay in a safe place, at your home, with your family. Do not go to the airport. The airport is a mess. We know you were a human rights assistant and working on those issues. Your life is at risk more than other people. We want you to be at home and not try to do anything silly and childish. Just be home.” I was like, okay.

In a couple of days, she reached out to me, and she said, “Okay, we are now thinking about you and your family. We cannot promise anything, but we are in the process. You will hear from us, but we advise you to have your emergency stuff with you and we will let you know.”

It was on 25th of August, at midnight, my professor from my school reached out to me. She told me that, “You have to go to the airport in three hours, you and your dependents. You are allowed to have only eight kilograms of stuff with you. It's up to you to decide what you want to take, computer, clothes, supplements, anything, but only eight kilograms.” I remember I spoke to my wife and my little brother. They did not know about this process at all. The reason was that I would not tell them anything because nothing was confirmed. I wasn't making any promises. I just woke up everyone and that was the first time they got to know.

It was extremely difficult. We went to the airport and it was extremely scary. Fortunately we had my father with me sitting in the front seat of the car. He would tell the Taliban that we are on the way to the clinic. We have a patient here and we are going to the hospital. My father was in the front seat because he had a white beard and he was an old man. We thought maybe he would receive some respect. We went near the airport, but not to the gate.

Tufts University, Michigan University, and Stanford University—those three universities—had coordinated an evacuation for some of their scholars, some of their alumni. We were told to follow a specific person from Michigan University, a scholar. Congresswoman Elisa Slotkin from Michigan helped out with this evacuation.

We formed a group and coordinated our movements. First of all, we had to wait outside of the airport for 24 hours with no food, with no bathroom because we were told not to be outside of our cars. We stayed in the car for 24 hours on the airport road. Two times, bullets hit the car just in front of us, but not our car, because they were shooting in the air.

There were thousands of people in this area. We thought of going back home dozens of times, but seeing the situation at the airport, thinking about what would happen when the Americans left, we decided we could not go back home. We had to be there for 24 hours. We could not sleep much. I still remember that some of them would say, let me go for 10 minutes and nap and I will be back. Everyone would go for a short nap.

They weren't able to get us in at first. We approached the main gate three times. I remember the last time, the Taliban said, go away or we will shoot you. They asked why we were approaching the main gate. There is no referral given for you guys, so just leave. Just go. It was very risky, and we were reporting the developments back to our contacts in the U.S.

Q: Do you remember which gate you reached?

GUL: Yes, the main gate.

Q: Were there other Afghans in this group with you?

GUL: Yes. All of us were Afghans. We were scholars, there were multiple families.

Q: This evacuation was organized by just the universities, not by the UN? The UN didn't help?

GUL: No, the UN wasn't involved at all. It was Tufts, with Michigan and Stanford. Georgetown University also had a couple of families. These people in the U.S. coordinated the evacuation of this group. Congresswoman Elissa Slotkin from Michigan was also involved. A former Defense Department official, I cannot remember the name, was also involved. I had talked to the UN earlier. They told me, you are on the list. Just wait. I thought their process was too slow and my life was at risk, so I decided to use this other option from my school. Every night was like a year for me.

Q: At that time when you reached Abbey Gate, was it before the attack?

GUL: Yes. We just got into the airport when the suicide attack happened in that location. There was probably an hour or two hour gap between us and the suicide attack.

Q: How did you get in?

GUL: We waited there for 24 hours and we were not able to get in. Fortunately, at the end, they found someone. He was an Afghan. Someone told me that he was a Fulbright scholar. I think he had some connection with the U.S. military. There was someone asking, "Are you this group?" We said, "Yes, we are." And our contact from the U.S. confirmed this. They said, "Okay, follow me." We followed the guy. We went from that gate to the North Gate on the backside of the airport. A strange thing happened. We were

seven vehicles with women and children, about a hundred people. Our car had some technical problems.

Q: Inside the airport?

GUL: No, outside. We were asked to follow that guy and immediately my car began leaking. My driver told me that even if my car is destroyed totally, I will try to take you inside because of the risk you guys face, but I'm not sure. I cannot guarantee that I will get you inside because my car is leaking. So what happened because of the crowd and traffic and rush, I had to take a few of my family members out of my car and put them in another car in the group.

My little brother was with me and I was his legal guardian for him. I had to push the car, put water into the car, and then the car would start. We would push again and then put more water in and push again. We went like that. In one instant, I sent my brother to get some more water from the fuel pump station and he was caught by the Taliban. They said to my brother, leave this here or we will shoot you. Then my brother got out a different way. I thought he was gone because firing was going on in the air. That was an unforgettable night.

We reached the North Gate. We waited outside for an hour. The guy came again and he got us inside. As soon as we went inside, we thought maybe we were in the U.S. now. Everyone thought getting into the airport meant you were ready to go. But that was not the case. The airport was extremely messy. What do I mean by that? The toilets were not usable. I went to the toilet and I could not use it because of how dirty it was.

Q: Inside the airport?

GUL: Inside the airport.

Q: Did the military check you and ask you something?

GUL: They did not check the vehicle, but they asked, do you belong to this group, and we were like, yes. Is everyone in this car on the list? Yes, that was true because everyone was on the list. We had to put together a list a few days before. We had to put down all the identification information: name, last name, passport number, document number, whatever we had. And everyone was there. Then they asked, is everyone in this car on the list? Yes, everyone in this car belongs to this group, family members. There were a few questions they asked and then we went inside.

Q: That was a tough situation. Finally, you entered the gate after checking and confirming that you were part of this group. When you entered the airport you said now you felt safe. What happened after that? Tell us about your other colleagues in the UN. Did you inform your office that you were in the airport and what about the other colleagues at the UN?

GUL: No, I did not inform anyone. I just turned off my official phone because of the risk. We were told in the group to delete all the pictures, most of the data related to work. We were told not to have a picture related to our work on the phone because there was always a possibility of being stopped by the Taliban checkpoint on the way to the airport.

We were advised by the group to not access our official email. So I used a new number for this group. I turned off my official phone and put it in a bag somewhere and I did not contact anyone. I did not want to inform anyone of my plans because no one could be trusted. I did not want to trust anyone. I was just trusting the school, the people that I was in contact with. I informed no one including my office. We went inside.

I was hearing from my other colleagues by email at my home that some of them were leaving home and some of them were making their own plans. No one was asking about anyone. Everyone was thinking about themselves and their family. There was no time to check on other colleagues except the respective chain of command that you had to be in contact with.

We went inside the airport. It was a mess. We had to be in the line for the biometrics. I still remember we got into the line at three p.m. We were in that line probably for eight hours. We just moved ten meters in eight hours, ten meters.

Q: With the children?

GUL: With everyone. If you went to the bathroom, you were not able to go back to your spot. You had to go to the end of the line. The system was extremely poor. They could not manage the people.

First of all, my American brothers, you have the list, you have identification documents. You just allowed us through the gate. You have everything in advance. So why this requirement of the biometrics, and sitting in the line for eight hours, ten hours with no food, with nothing. It was so unsupportive. I felt so bad. For years, we had been supporting them and working on those USAID organizations and projects. And now I'm not able to go out, me and my family. You have my information. I'm not some local. I had worked for the UN for eight years. You have my data. I have been to the U.S. for my higher education. You already have done everything on me. You have my data there. It should not have taken more than an hour.

We were there for eight hours and we had moved just ten meters. Do you know what happened? There was a controlled detonation, or controlled explosion, in the area. I think they were burning the documents, but we saw that explosion because it was a big one.

Q: The suicide attack on Abbey Gate.

GUL: With the other explosion at Abbey Gate, we thought the airport was under attack. It was very close. Everyone laid down. My family, my wife, and my sister-in-law, they're still suffering. They're getting better, but they're still suffering. It was very threatening for

them. For a woman, especially an Afghan woman, this was very scary. They didn't know what was going on outside. It was difficult for them to handle the situation.

Then when this explosion at the Abbey Gate happened, the biometric process stopped for hours. We were reporting all this in the group chat. We were told this is something terrible, and just leave the group in the line and go. We were like, if we leave the group we might not be able to come to the United States. They told us, the processing has stopped. So, why are you waiting there? You have to use the toilet. You have to eat something. There were some biscuits and they brought some American military food for us, but you couldn't eat it. It is different from our food.

Q: The packed food, the MREs?

GUL: The packs. The water was not cold because the bottles were under the sun. It was a terrible situation. We left the group after about ten hours because of the advice from the school people. We lost our hope. We thought we're not going to be able to get out.

Overall, starting from the time we got into the airport until getting into the plane, it was over 30 hours. We left our home at 2:00 a.m. on August 25th, and entered the airport at 3:00 a.m., and we left Kabul on the 27th at the end of the day. I still remember it was six or seven p.m.

After the 30-plus hours, we were told by the group they had contacted someone from the U.S. military. He came and guided us inside to the biometric place. That process went smoothly after the guide came. I remember he was in civilian clothes. We were going through multiple checkpoints inside the airport, and he had to explain who we were and who had told him to take us inside. They were explaining to the military and other people at multiple checkpoints. Then they allowed us to go inside and they were checking the list again. They asked about each individual person, who is this, who is that. Then we made it to the airplane.

We were told three times, three different flights, because of the explosion outside and the controlled detonation and because of the pausing of the biometric process, there were changes in the flights. Once we were told we would go to – I don't know – maybe to Mexico. Once we were told we might go to Canada. Once we were told we would go to a different location. We were not sure where we were going. Just get us out of Kabul, and then you will see. We ended up on a commercial flight, not a military flight.

Albania

GUL: We were taken by a commercial flight to Albania. I remember it was a six-hour flight. We made it to Albania at midnight on August 27th. As soon as we landed the U.S. Ambassador and the Albanian Prime Minister came to the plane. They said, welcome. You will be safe. You will have good accommodations and all those things. Nice words.

When we came to Albania, we were told by our contacts in the U.S. that they had information that there had been a threat of shooting down a plane. The time and date given in the threat was the same time and the same date of our flight. One of the group members had been told of the threat, but he was told not to say anything to anyone. We got this information anyway. They took a huge risk to allow us to fly at that time. Everyone in the group was worried, but fortunately we arrived safely in Albania.

Q: How many people were on the flight and were all of them from the same group?

GUL: In this plane, it was only our group, with about a hundred people. I don't remember the exact number, including the children.

Q: Supported by the U.S. universities?

GUL: Yes. Who organized this flight? Elissa Slotkin, the Congresswoman. She contacted the Prime Minister of Albania. She told us "I contacted him and I told him, I have a bunch of people for you. Can you please accommodate these people in your country? They're waiting in the Kabul Airport." And she told us that the Albania Prime Minister asked for six hours. And within six hours, everything was prepared by Albania and they allowed our group to come. While we were waiting in Kabul, all these communications were going on with the Prime Minister of Albania, the arrangements of the plane, and everything was done by this great group.

Q: And finally, on the 27th, you arrived in Albania.

GUL: That's correct.

Q: Let's talk about Albania. How was the situation there? What did you do and your family? How long did you stay over there? What happened with the UN when you arrived in Albania?

GUL: As soon as we arrived, it was midnight. I was extremely tired. You could feel it. We were tired and we could not even eat food. They brought us food, but we could not eat it. We just went to bed, and we just laid down. I remember it was 10 a.m. when we woke up. The first thing I did was inform the UN. I'm in Albania with my family, just to let you know. I was on your list, but your process was very slow. I'm here with my family. I'm informing you formally. If you need me, I'm still able to continue my work on human rights violations reporting. They told me, please do so because we cannot recruit anyone at this moment. You are still on the job. It's okay. Please continue and maintain your humanitarian investigation with the sources that you have. I had worked there for eight years, so I had a lot of contacts. I still continued my job as usual. I was contacting all these people.

We stayed in the capital for two nights and then we were moved to a rural area, to a nice beautiful area in Albania. We stayed there for six and a half months. We were supported by an NGO called SOA, the Spirit of America, founded by Congresswoman Elissa

Slotkin. Again, she contacted this NGO and she told them, I have these people for you and I want you to support them until they leave Albania. They gave us full support, accommodations, food, and some small medical support, not full coverage, but emergency medical coverage.

The overall situation was good in Albania because of the place we were living and because of the food. But mentally, my wife was extremely stressed. My wife went into a depression. They called it PTSD. She was hospitalized in the American hospital in the capital of Albania, Tirana. The name of the hospital is American, but all the doctors were Albanian. I think it was a private hospital. SOA, Spirit of America, was not able to cover her expenses. Fortunately, the school told me to get the treatment your family needs, and we will pay for it. They paid for my wife's medical expenses. My sister-in-law had to go for medical treatment too.

There were so many tensions that we, my wife and my sister-in-law faced. We were thinking about my parents, brothers and sisters back in the country, what would happen to them. They were having to change locations from one place to another because of the security threats and because of the family ties with the Americans and with international organizations. We were called conspirators and supporters of America.

I think it was not easy for us in Albania. I was having a difficult situation keeping my job and doing the reporting on things. We were in limbo. We didn't know if we were going to make it to the U.S. or not. For six months, nothing happened. We thought someday we'll be told to go back to Afghanistan or be sent to a poor country. But after six months, the process started. It took two, three weeks to go through all the medical examinations, the interviews with the U.S. people there from the State Department. We finally made it to the United States.

Arriving in the United States

Q: Under what program did you enter the United States?

GUL: Humanitarian parole.

Q: When you moved, do you remember the date you entered the United States?

GUL: I remember the date and time and everything. Before telling you that, I want to mention an important point. Congresswoman Elissa Slotkin with her team came over from the United States to Albania to meet us.

Q: Wow!

GUL: To meet our group to welcome us, to meet with the authorities in Albania. Moments of excitement. Such a wonderful woman. She was fabulous. I really love her, and not because of helping me, but because for the first time seeing someone fulfilling her promises. She met all the individuals, all the families. She took pictures with every

one of my family, not only my family, all hundred people. She communicated with the State Department here and in the U.S. And she told us, “You will come to the United States 100 percent, but you have to come through our system and through our procedure and you have to respect it. Just be patient.” And we did that.

In March 2022, when we landed in Dulles Airport in Virginia. Then what happened? When we exited the airport, we saw Congresswoman Slotkin standing with flowers, with her team, welcoming all the families. We went to the NCC, the National Conference Center, a place in Virginia where families would go, stay there. We stayed there until April 15. We went through the biometrics again and some medical exams. We stayed there for about three weeks. We could not go out of the facility.

Q: And your friends couldn't visit you inside?

GUL: Not at all. Even our contacts from Tufts University wanted to come, but they were not allowed in. It was a good system, good food, everything, but still feeling like a detainee, not being allowed to go out. But we knew we would be going soon. Then in April 2022, we came here where we are living now.

Resettling in the United States

Q: A new life started.

GUL: Yes, a new life started. We wanted to stay in the D.C., Virginia and Maryland area because of the job opportunities there and the strong Afghan community there, but unfortunately we were told there was a housing problem and we were not able to stay there. Our second choice was [another U.S. city] and they were okay with that. That's why we went there.

Q: When you moved to your current place, how was your resettlement process?

GUL: The process was extremely smooth. When we were in NCC, before they referred us to a resettlement agency, my professor had already found a resettlement agency for my family. When we went to the interview with the IOM [the International Organization for Migration], which has responsibility for assigning resettlement agencies, they said, oh, you are already nominated to [one of the resettlement agencies] and they said your case is easier. The flight was arranged from Dulles Airport to [our new home]. When we arrived there, I remember the refugee director of the organization and some other officers were waiting for us at the airport. They were welcoming us and brought us here to our new home. They gave us good support with housing and everything. And how the community reacted here was fabulous.

Q: How is your family doing now after resettlement?

GUL: My family is doing fine. My wife restarted her medical treatment. Fortunately, she is much, much better now. The sister-in-law I was talking about just had a baby two months ago.

Q: Congratulations!

GUL: Yes. Thanks.

Q: Your younger brother, talk about him.

GUL: My little brother just graduated from high school.

Q: Another congratulations.

GUL: Thank you. He'll be starting college soon, a very good college. My other brother, because we are three brothers, is also here with me. He used to work for a non-profit in Afghanistan. He did a job as a communication officer for a project of the World Bank implemented by the local governance department for the Covid-19 affected families. It was a half government and half World Bank project, something like that. We three brothers are still living in the same house here. Now he is also working as a case manager with one of the agencies helping to resettle Afghans.

In mid-April, I applied for one of the positions in a non-profit organization and I started my job there in June of 2022.

Q: You found a new job very quickly.

GUL: Yes. I arrived in mid-April and started my job in June. I was eager to do a job, not just rely on benefits from the government. I'm a working man. I really want to work. I don't want to stay here to receive benefits from the government. I want to support myself and my family through my job. I got a job, but unfortunately it ended a month ago because it was a two-year contract. I started in June and finished in June. I'm unemployed at the moment. I'm looking for another job and hopefully I'll be able to find something soon.

Q: I'm sure you can. What happened with the UN? How long did your contract continue?

GUL: My contract continued for a few months after we came to the United States. It was good because it was providing some financial support to me. That part was very good. I was working for them. As soon as I came here, I notified them, I just made it to the United States. And they were like, now if you can come back to Afghanistan, it's up to you, your job is safe. But if you cannot, then please send us a resignation and we will recruit someone. I was like, absolutely, thank you so much for the job and everything. My job was automatically dismissed.

Q: Regarding the UN, we know a lot of Afghan employees worked with the UN. They were evacuated to different countries. The UN is still operating in Afghanistan. Did they hire new Afghan employees for your office? Did they reduce the number of employees? Do you know how the UN is operating in Afghanistan now? Do they have the same number of officers?

GUL: No. The number of officers is not the same. I think they decreased the number and the number of staff in the offices. There are still some old faces, some colleagues I used to work for. But they also recruited new people. I think their work is very limited. They don't have the authority. They don't have the access they used to have. They're not allowed to contact people that we used to contact before. Their access and resources are decreased by a huge number and limited. But they are still operating there. They have some old faces and new faces.

Q: Are there other Afghans around you from the program that resettled you in the United State? Could your family find new Afghan friends around the area?

GUL: Yes. There aren't many families close to me, but 10 minutes drive, there are some Afghan families. We have a close relationship with some because we knew each other during our stay in Albania for six and a half months, then the NCC, and then we came here. We have close ties with them. We see them once a month.

I'm a social guy, especially in the non-profit agency that I used to work at. For two years, we had Afghan clients. My brother is still working there as a case manager. He's dealing with some Afghans and other clients, but also Afghans. We know many of them here. We know about their lives and their situation here.

Q: You and your brother worked to help new Afghans immigrants who are coming to the United States?

GUL: I was telling my colleagues that now I am an immigrant helping other immigrants. Due to the experience that I have from Afghanistan, working with the United Nations, working with the other international organizations, then having a degree from a prestigious university here in the United States, has helped me. I think having both practical experience and theoretical knowledge helps me assist new immigrants. That's why I was able to find a job and to help others with resettlement. We help them in terms of finding work. My job was a career coach and I helped them in how to make a resume, how to send an application, how to find a job, what are the benefits of the job, and how to find training opportunities that they were interested in.

Final reflections

Q: Do you have any final thoughts that you want to say before we wind up, about your experience working with these agencies or your experience with the evacuation, or your experience in America?

GUL: America is a fabulous place, a land of opportunity. Living here is not easy. It is difficult. You have to work hard, day and night. It's expensive. I'm thankful to my school, especially the professor who was in touch with me, to Congresswoman Elisa Slotkin, and to all the officers involved in the situation. We are living here now. Everything is good.

Q: Thank you.

End of Interview