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**MARY ALICE KLEINJAN**

*Interviewed by: Robin Matthewman  
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**INTERVIEW**

*Q: It's March 22, 2024. Today I am interviewing Mary Alice Kleinjan for our Afghanistan Project. Mary Alice, welcome. I want to start off if you can give us a brief overview of your experience working in the U.S. government and working on Afghanistan prior to 2021.*

**Career Prior to Fall of Kabul**

KLEINJAN: I joined USAID in 1979. I was trained as an Arabist before going to law school. I worked for a Wall Street law firm for a while and then for the Bank of America in New York. The Sultan of Oman was among our clients at the law firm. I was one of the few lawyers at that time who also had fairly good Arabic, so I had a lot of interesting work.

Due to changes at the law firm, there was no longer Arab work, so I moved to the Bank of America legal department. I enjoyed international corporate lending, but wanted to return to Arab work if possible, and if not, at least work with the developing world. I joined USAID in 1979 with the intention of converting to the Foreign Service as soon as a legal position became available. However, I got married before there was a position. Then I stayed in Washington for quite a while as a civil service lawyer.

In 1995, it was time to do something for me, family-wise. We went to Egypt for four years where I was head of the legal office with four lawyers, three Americans and one Egyptian. At that time, USAID's post-Camp David program in Egypt was large, \$815 million annually.

In 1999, I returned to Washington for eight years. I stayed in Washington until my younger child finished high school, which is not particularly career enhancing. But you make your choices, and this was the right choice for me.

For six years, I was the Assistant General Counsel for Africa. Then, from 2005 to 2007, I was the Assistant General Counsel for the Middle East and Asia, which included Iraq and Afghanistan. Our section had three to four lawyers.

*Q: That's after our presence began in Afghanistan and Iraq. That was after 9/11.*

KLEINJAN: Yes. We were involved with several tricky legal issues with Afghanistan, although I probably focused more on the Middle East.

*Q: Can you give us a brief synopsis of what they were?*

KLEINJAN: One tricky legal issue concerned separation of religion and state. USAID was already funding non-religious aspects of government-run schools. The Government of Afghanistan proposed to set up some additional government-run schools, to attract students away from the madrasas run by fundamentalist religious groups. They would have a bit more religious education than the existing government schools, but not a lot. It was the label that drew interest.

The Afghan Government had an important—counter-religious—reason for establishing the new schools—to draw children away from the madrasas run by fundamentalist religious groups. This was an effort to make education for many more secular and undercut the influence of the religious extremists. We did find a way to support the non-religious aspects of the new schools, but it was a fairly nuanced issue. We certainly were not going to make legal decisions based simply on a label.

We also looked at the way our funding flowed through multi-donor trust funds and the kinds of controls we would have. That was also a fairly nuanced issue.

*Q: In one of my interviews with a State Department officer working on a rule of law program, we discussed the issues related to sharia law versus other kinds of law. Did that issue come up for you?*

KLEINJAN: I wasn't involved in that issue. When disputes arose, they were usually worked out through negotiations, on their facts, rather than being resolved on the fine points of sharia law.

One of the issues I have been interested in over time is the role of women as judges in Muslim countries. When I was in Egypt, women were not allowed to be judges. This was simply a matter of custom. It was not a requirement under Egyptian law and is not a requirement of Islamic law. I was supportive of the women's NGO movement that was working to change this.

I attended events with them. Sometimes women lawyers were comfortable attending the evening portion of day-time training events only if I also attended in the evening—which I did. Eventually women did become judges after I left. I love talking about one. USAID supported a Voluntary Visitors Program visit to the U.S. of senior Government of Egypt legal officials. The delegation included two or three women who had recently become judges. I contacted the U.S. female Supreme Court justices, who met with the entire

Egyptian delegation. This probably wouldn't have happened without the recently appointed women judges.

*Q: That's a terrific story.*

KLEINJAN: Unfortunately, when the Muslim Brotherhood took over, they removed the women as judges. The last I heard they haven't been reinstated, but hopefully that will happen, because now there is precedent.

I have long thought that an analysis of Islamic law and women as judges would be interesting. One of USAID's former Afghan FSNs [Foreign Service Nationals or local employees] lawyers is now in the U.S. and has both the Arabic language skill and the training in Islamic law to do that. She and I have talked about this issue, and I'm hoping that she will be able to carry through with it.

*Q: Any other work on Afghanistan before you retired in 2014?*

KLEINJAN: I returned to Washington in 2011 as one of the two deputy general counsels. There were issues about access of other U.S. Government entities to information about Afghanistan within USAID. USAID always readily and fully provides information when it is requested within the scope of the requestor's authority. But where requests were outside the scope of the requestor's legal authority, legal lines had to be followed. Sometimes that was contentious.

### **Helping Afghans to Resettle in the United States**

*Q: You had a big job. Where were you in 2021 when President Biden announced that we were going to withdraw troops by September 11 of that year?*

KLEINJAN: I was here in Washington. It might be helpful if I first talk about the work I did with Afghans after I retired and before August 2021. That's what led to my support for Afghans after August 2021.

First, when I retired, there were several women FSNs who were my friends in my overseas posts who emigrated to the United States on SIVs—Special Immigrant Visas—earned as a result of their work for the USG. We continued our friendships here and, spending time with them, I saw some of the challenges to adjusting to life in the U.S.

After the “Muslim ban” was announced, our church and several other D.C. churches decided that we wanted to support a refugee family. At that point, the wait list for sponsor groups to be assigned a family was almost a year.

I had hoped we would have a family from Syria to burnish my own Arabic language skills. However, fortuitously, we were assigned an Afghan family. The father had been a Corps of Engineers FSN in Afghanistan. Even SIV families came through the formal

refugee program. We were three well-off Washington D.C. congregations, so there was a large reservoir of people available to help one family.

FSNs immigrating to the United States on SIVs before August 2021 received a huge amount of support. A sponsor group supported a family for a year. We paid the rent and the family received a stipend from the resettlement agency, for a year. The Afghan FSNs who came in August 2021 and later were quite aware of the difference between what they received and what earlier FSNs had received.

I learned a lot about resettlement and some of the challenges that immigrants face. Even though our group and the FSN were sophisticated—he was a professional engineer—the job search was daunting, and none of us knew how to go about it. It took some months to figure it out.

The first job is the hardest to get. We learned that one of the best ways to get the first job is to have an Afghan friend already working in an organization and undoubtedly doing a first-rate job. An employer will think the current employee is good and so want to hire his friend who must also be as good. It may be the least desirable job, night work at the minimum wage, but it's a professional engineering job. Subsequently, I've seen this approach work elsewhere.

We also learned that it is important for a foreign engineer to become a certified field engineer—FE. That involves passing an exam which takes serious study. It's a lot like a lawyer taking the bar exam after graduating from law school. There are fairly expensive software prep courses, which we bought. Our engineer studied hard—and passed—during which time our group spent significant time with his family. One of our group stayed with his wife in the hospital when she gave birth. We drove them to medical appointments and played with their children.

*Q: Would this kind of certification vary by state?*

KLEINJAN: I'm not sure. It's an exam that U.S. engineering students usually take in their final year of engineering school. It shows employers that a foreign engineer can work in yards, feet and pounds, not just in the metric system, as well as having a sound knowledge of engineering.

This engineer subsequently helped other Afghan engineers prepare for and pass the exam. That's important because there are press stories about former Corps of Engineers Afghan engineers delivering pizza in Prince George County and being miserable. It doesn't have to be that way. He also helped a number of other Afghans resettle, especially after August 2021.

After I retired, I also did PSCs with USAID overseas.

*Q: What is that?*

KLEINJAN: It's a Personal Services Contract. It's serving as a temporary employee for most, but not all, purposes.

When I was overseas and met USAID Foreign Service Officers [FSOs] going to Afghanistan or who had been in Afghanistan, I talked to them about our church group's work. I asked for their advice about what would help us in the U.S. I also encouraged those going to Afghanistan to talk to Afghan FSNs about what would help them resettle in the U.S.

As a result, my USAID colleagues introduced me to a young woman who was a former Afghan FSN and had taken advantage of her SIV eligibility to emigrate to the U.S., alone. I helped her and also learned a lot from her.

*Q: How was her experience?*

KLEINJAN: Things took a while. She was an administrative assistant, which USAID Missions value, but there are not a lot of administrative assistant jobs in the U.S. Some workplaces did things like wage skimming, which shocked me. It's among the nefarious practices that immigrants, even sophisticated immigrants like SIV FSNs, experience. She eventually found a supportive Afghan family to live with. Then she got a job at a local university through an Afghan friend who was working there. The supervisor knew that her Afghan friend did a superb job, so she was hired. She also did a superb job for them.

Covid was rough because her job, like many, depended on students being on campus, and of course there weren't students on campus. After Covid, she was rehired, and now is an assistant recruitment and admissions officer at a different university. It takes time, and building on the first job.

*Q: I would hope that by working at a university she might get some tuition benefits to be able to study other things.*

KLEINJAN: Yes, she is in an evening degree program with tuition remission.

At this point, within the year before Kabul fell, I wrote some notes about what was important for FSNs emigrating to the U.S. to know, and I shared them with a couple of colleagues in Kabul. I was only comfortable putting in writing points I was confident of, not just my impressions, since different people can have different experiences. I understand that the Mission shared it with FSNs about to depart for the U.S.

*Q: One of the people I've interviewed explained that people in countries like Afghanistan are well aware that they can apply for a SIV after two years of working for the U.S. government. Is that the case?*

KLEINJAN: My understanding is that most, but not all, new applicants were aware of that. I think it became one year of service toward the end in Afghanistan.

*Q: A lot of times the possibility to emigrate to the United States on an SIV is the main reason people in these countries in conflict decide to apply for positions at the embassy or USAID. So, I would imagine there was a rolling staff in Afghanistan at the embassy and Kabul as people came and went. Is that true?*

KLEINJAN: My understanding is that there was significant turnover in the FSN staff, but some also stayed for a number of years. I know of several who were there around ten years. I also know one FSN who was a highly qualified and experienced professional, who took a job at USAID well below the level of her qualifications in order to get an SIV. The Mission gave her assignments commensurate with her skills, not with her formal job description, so it was win-win for both.

*Q: So, you developed a certain sensitivity and knowledge about some of the more difficult things involved in resettlement beyond just getting here.*

KLEINJAN: I hope so. It was important to help our former FSNs for several reasons. One is that when I went overseas, as a student in Beirut and Damascus, and also as a working mother in USAID Missions, I needed the support of local nationals, both at home and in the office. I can't directly repay those people who helped me, but I can help others. I tell Afghans whom I'm helping that the best way to repay me is to help others. And they are very, very much doing that.

Secondly, helping each other is who we are in USAID, both American staff and local staff. Sometimes in USAID, we say that we are a family.

And I'm also aware that when the next conflict comes, local nationals will look at how the U.S. treated Afghans who risked a lot to help us. Helping our Afghan staff to resettle in the U.S. is important for national security reasons.

### **The Fall of Kabul**

*Q: I think you're right. Let's go back to 2021. Tell me in your own words what happened as Kabul started to look increasingly unstable.*

KLEINJAN: Several of us in the USAID Alumni Association with an interest in Afghanistan discussed what we might be able to do to help our Afghan FSNs. There was a list of things we recognized as likely needs.

Some of the items we recognized as likely needs included help with resumes and job search, locating affordable housing and donating vacant basements, driving to appointments and driving lessons, donating old vehicles, English language tutoring, and general mentoring.

We realized that what we took on had to be within our manageable interest. So we agreed to help arriving Afghan FSNs with their resumes, cover letters, and job search. The hope

was that this would evolve into a long-term one-on-one mentoring relationship, which it has in many cases.

*Q: In August 2021, I'm not sure of the number of employees, but a group of 3,000 embassy employees and their families evacuated during that 10-day period. I assume a fair number were USAID families.*

KLEINJAN: At the time of that evacuation, USAID had 145 Afghan employees and all but three to five wanted to leave. The three to five felt they had to stay for family reasons. My understanding is that during that short window all the current USAID staff and their immediate families (spouse and minor children) were able to leave. In most cases their extended families (parents, adult children and siblings) were not able to come along. In Afghanistan, the extended family is important. USAID Administrator Samantha Power has been working aggressively to bring them out, but three years later only some are here. Some of the families went to Pakistan, hoping it would be easier to leave from there. Living in Pakistan was expensive. Afghan FSNs in the U.S. have been supporting their extended families since August 2021, in addition to supporting themselves.

On a lighter note, I heard that a number of the Afghan FSNs were single, and so people joked that they were looking forward to a number of weddings coming from the evacuation.

Only recently most of us alumni learned that there is another group of former USAID FSNs that is having a hard time getting out. The group consists of FSNs, including former drivers, who were employed by USAID long enough to qualify for an SIV, but who were no longer employed by USAID at the time of the evacuation for various reasons. A few alumni did know about their situation and have been trying to help them for several years, including supporting them in Pakistan. A few of them eventually made it to the U.S., but others are still in limbo.

*Q: There was a big group of people, some with families, that arrived in August or September of 2021. Is that right?*

KLEINJAN: Yes. Most arrived fairly quickly. A few had to spend significantly more time in the camps in Qatar and maybe Albania due to quirks, but the issues eventually were resolved. It was probably the end of September, when most started coming.

USAID and the Alumni Association were really helpful to each other. I don't know who approached whom first, but there was a mutual discussion. We were each able to do things the other couldn't do. For privacy reasons, USAID could not give us the FSNs' names and contact information. So the Alumni Association gave USAID names and resumes of alumni willing to help. USAID identified the FSNs who wanted to participate and did the matchmaking.

We heard that some other agencies were not able to do this, so their alumni set up a table at Afghan job fairs and made connections that way.

*Q: At some point in time in the fall of 2021, you all got very busy as they came out of the military bases.*

KLEINJAN: Yes. The FSNs spent some time in the bases. We generally connected while they were in the camps, usually by phone calls or Zoom. I know of at least one USAID alumna who drove from D.C. to a camp in Ohio to meet her matched family in person. Most of us were not able to do that, though.

One contribution we made was just being there, as someone who cares. Our being from USAID provided some continuity from Afghanistan to the U.S. We alumni understood where the USAID Afghans were coming from. We knew and respected their professional skills, their personal status, and their capabilities.

*Q: For the USAID employees—once they got all their paperwork and their quirks taken care of and they left the military bases in the United States, for example—were they being directed into going to certain places? Were they part of the resettlement agency process that PRM was working? Or were they on their own and able to come to Washington or wherever to get set up?*

KLEINJAN: My understanding is that they talked to the resettlement agencies while they were in camps and expressed preferences as to where they wanted to go. Most of those who had close family already in the U.S. wanted to be near them. Others wanted to go where there were already large Afghan communities. Those who had worked for USAID often preferred Northern Virginia, to be close to USAID-related jobs as well as close to the large Afghan community there. Northern Virginia, Sacramento, and Texas received the largest groups of USAID Afghan FSNs.

I believe that even in the first wave everyone did not get their first choice. After Northern Virginia reached its capacity, some went to Maryland, Baltimore, and the D.C. area. I remember discussing with one family that Prince Georges County was in the D.C. area for job opportunities, and that eventually a move to Northern Virginia would likely be feasible. Philadelphia was also an alternative for those who could not settle in the D.C. area, not too far away.

*Q: What did it mean to be at capacity? Was that the number of caseworkers and the number of apartments that they could acquire?*

KLEINJAN: Yes, the biggest constraints seemed to be the number of caseworkers, especially experienced caseworkers, and the availability of affordable apartments. Resettlement agencies had to lay off staff after 2017, when the number of refugees admitted to the U.S. declined, so there was a shortage of experienced caseworkers in 2021. Since payment to resettlement agencies is based on the number of refugees they resettle, one hopes that the number of refugee admissions does not decrease again and thereby require another staff reduction.



One of the differences between now—2024—and 2021, is that now there is a large cohort of Afghans, such as USAID’s former FSNs, as well as Americans, with experience in helping new arrivals resettle. They know how to find housing, where to find appropriate jobs, what the many adjustments to life in the U.S. are. This means that many more Afghans can now be resettled, with less reliance on the resettlement agencies—which are still very important, though. The USG refugee admissions program has recognized this, and opened new programs with greater reliance on the U.S. sponsors.

### **USAID Matchmaking**

*Q: When USAID was doing the matchmaking, were they giving each retired officer particular employees to work with?*

KLEINJAN: USAID did the matchmaking, which worked out well. Gender match is an important factor, where possible. Matching their technical area—health officer, engineer, et cetera—is helpful. Being in the same geographic area is also helpful, although not essential. About fifty FSNs initially signed up to participate.

*Q: Were you given one family to work with or several?*

KLEINJAN: I was matched with a single woman, who resettled in California with relatives. And I continued to work with my earlier mentee. I also tried to help her extended family, which unfortunately is still in Kabul as of 2024. Over time, the group I have been helping has grown—her friends, and sometimes other former FSNs, who are here. In Afghanistan, some had worked for USAID while others had worked for Western-financed NGOs. I’ve been privileged to become friends with an amazing group of people—mainly young women—modern, intelligent, articulate in excellent English, determined, and hard-working.

*Q: What kind of help beyond employment have people hoped that you could help with?*

KLEINJAN: Being there to listen—being someone to talk to—is important. The departure was traumatic and the experience in the camps was traumatic. The August 2021 evacuees were aware of how their experience contrasted with the experience of SIV holders who arrived before August 2021, who flew directly from Kabul, were met at the airport, et cetera.

The August 2021 arrivals, and those already in the U.S. before August 2021, were very concerned about their extended family left behind. They were hearing stories of family members who were picked up and tortured by the Taliban, including family members eligible for P1 or P2 visas, but who couldn’t get on a plane. Some witnessed the results of torture when they were hiding in Kabul after the city fell before they got on a plane.

Our work included driving to appointments, giving driving lessons, drivers test coaching, donating furniture, and making home visits. We provided information about potential providers of *pro bono* legal services, for both immigration and non-immigration matters,

and read leases before they were signed. Some alumni became involved in an NGO effort to support small business start-ups for immigrants. That program involved provision of training and technical assistance, coupled with a microloan after the beneficiary had saved a specified amount of money.

We provided math tutoring for kids, and edited English-language documents for smoothness. We provided information about quirks of the U.S. educational system and the advantages of being old for one's grade. We provided information about colleges. We helped explain FAFSA and other aspects of the financial aid system. We pointed out the dangers of for-profit universities and how they snare one into taking out an education loan for a worthless degree.

In the medical area, we helped locate *pro bono* dental services and other medical services—especially important before their Medicaid became effective, or for areas not covered by Medicaid. We provided information on how the crazy U.S. health care financing system works.

In 2021, we noticed news reports that Medicaid was going to start removing beneficiaries from Medicaid unless they could prove their eligibility anew, since the Covid emergency was declared at an end. Most Afghans were eligible for Medicaid when they arrived, since they had no income. During Covid, states were not allowed to remove existing beneficiaries from Medicaid.

We alerted USAID's Afghan support section, which in turn alerted the former FSN group. We emphasized the importance of ensuring that Medicaid always had one's current address, since new arrivals often move a lot and many Medicaid recipients are removed for administrative, rather than substantive, reasons. We emphasized the importance of having health insurance at all times—something I repeat a lot. We explained the Affordable Care Act and suggested talking to employers about accessing employer-based health insurance mid-season if terminated by Medicaid.

*Q: Hopefully, that was practical for everybody.*

KLEINJAN: I know of some cases where it did work, but don't know about everyone.

We served as sounding boards when something sounded like a scam. We double-checked information they received that sounded questionable. For example, resettlement agencies could not always keep up-to-date with changing USCIS policies, and it was easy for us to check the USCIS website. In short, we served as a resource on the many, many quirks of life in America.

We were not particularly centralized in our efforts, and no one of us is aware of the many ways that others were helping, so undoubtedly a lot more was done than what I just mentioned. For example, as mentioned earlier, most of us learned only recently of the huge efforts a few alumni were making to help former FSNs—who were no longer working for USAID in August 2021—to get approved to come to the U.S. USAID and

the Alumni Association are discussing how to institutionalize all this information to help future newly arrived FSNs even more.

*Q: Why was the Taliban torturing people? Is it that anybody who worked with the U.S. government was considered suspect and the torture was to find out where they were?*

KLEINJAN: Right, and who they were. Afghan FSNs were cautious about telling anyone where they worked. Some USAID FSNs learned for the first time after August 21 that their relatives also worked for the U.S. government.

Bad actors came out after August 2021—those who were unsuccessful in the existing legal system—and tried again with the new Taliban regime. That also created stress, even for those who were able to leave, since it affected their families who remained behind. Afghans who are here in the U.S. hear of incidents where the Taliban is harassing their families or killing them. For example, the family apartment of one former FSN is periodically searched by the Taliban. Another former FSN was upset over the killing of several family members on the way to work, in a manner associated with the Taliban. They also have family members who had worked for the USG who are still in hiding from the Taliban. That's stressful, to say the least.

*Q: The numbers were so high and the press of the work was such that I imagine that there wasn't a sufficient queue of mental health professionals lining up to help these people who had arrived here in Northern Virginia. Is that right?*

KLEINJAN: USAID has a Staff Care arrangement, which in 2021 Afghans FSNs could use for six months. I believe that USAID subsequently obtained legislation to extend the time. Depression was pretty common at first. It likely came from a variety of sources, including the shock of sudden departure and collapse of their country, being in a strange new place, lack of a fulfilling job, the uncertainty of whether they will be able to support themselves or have a job they're happy with, and financial stress. Thoughts of self-harm are not uncommon during that time. It's more prevalent than I would have ever imagined. I only hope that going forward there are ways to deal with it.

Some Afghans who have been here a while are alert to the risk of depression in new arrivals and proactively get help for them.

### **Helpful Skills for Afghans Resettling to the United States**

*Q: With the established Afghan diaspora, here in this area of greater Washington, a lot of them had restaurants or other kinds of service industries. For the people that you were talking to who were coming out in 2021, I imagine that they were not eager to do that just to get started, to go into those businesses? Was that a false impression of mine about that?*

KLEINJAN: Most of the FSNs that USAID directly employs overseas have educational qualifications (often master's degrees or higher) and technical skills, such as in financial

management, public health, or project management, that are directly transferable to the U.S., as well as excellent English skills. Because of the suddenness of the departure from Kabul, USAID was able to keep its Mission intact, in the U.S., and thus the full staff employed, into winter 2021, to implement the winddown. This provided time to look for more permanent jobs. USAID also maintained an Afghan program from exile after August 2021, but with the Taliban government fully excised from the program. Afghan staff were needed to make this shift, to manage the revised program, and to provide in-depth responses to Congress about the USG's withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Some Afghan FSNs were hired by USAID for skills that USAID needed unrelated to Afghan activities. For example, a physician was one of the few people in the world with on-the-ground experience in polio eradication. Another FSN was an on-the-ground expert in NGO security in high-risk areas.

A number of FSNs were hired, both by USAID and by outside organizations, in senior financial management/accounting, public health, and IT/software engineer positions. In the NGO sector, several became technical directors, program analysts, program managers, a Country Director, a deputy chief of party.

Some worked in areas unrelated to USAID—for instance, one became a scholar-in-residence at Georgetown University Law School. Others became a high school teacher, a college lecturer, a project/construction manager, a refugee resettlement agency case worker, and a human resources manager.

Several FSNs earned graduate degrees, including an LLM, an MBA, and a graduate engineering degree.

The employment landscape varied more for accompanying spouses, substantially depending upon their technical skills and English language skills. One accompanying spouse, a talented pediatric surgeon, won a highly competitive fellowship at the Sheikh Zayed Innovation Institute at National Children's Hospital in D.C. I helped polish his resume. Others became nurse practitioners, entrepreneurs (small business owners), and realtors. Some spouses needed more English and job skills training, while a few spouses were not literate in any language.

For those without good English—i.e., not USAID's FSNs—restaurant kitchen jobs are one of the more difficult places to work, although they regularly appear at immigrant job fairs. One Afghan in a kitchen primarily staffed from a different ethnic group gets the worst jobs, and there can be sexual harassment. Food and package delivery driving is available for those with some English and access to a car, although the pay depends mainly on tips. Some people don't tip, while others provide a generous tip with their orders and then cancel it after delivery. These stories reinforced my own sense of the importance of always tipping very well. There are also ride-sharing driving jobs, although D.C.'s rigorous traffic camera fines can negate days' worth of income.

Several Afghan professional women who had worked for USAID-financed NGOs in Kabul had the polish and strong English skill to get their first job as a Starbucks barista—which is a good first job, compared to many. Afghans who have been here a while know of some of the better places for a first job. They have been proactive in helping other new arrivals find first jobs in better places.

Again, because we were a decentralized group, I'm sure that there were many more positions that they moved into that I don't know about.

*Q: Did most of the people that you encountered have strong enough English to navigate?*

KLEINJAN: Everyone who had worked for USAID—and many professionals who had worked for international NGOs—had excellent oral English. Sometimes I listened to see if I could detect any mistakes in their oral English, and I rarely heard any. The English was also pretty unaccented. Written English was generally quite good, although occasionally not perfect. Making their written English absolutely perfect, and ensuring that all family members have excellent English, are areas that FSNs planning to immigrate to the U.S. should work on before coming, and again after arrival, because they are competing with highly educated native English speakers.

Several Afghan lawyers have taken advantage of courses offered by U.S. law schools to improve their legal writing. FSNs who have been here a while often know of places for further English language training appropriate to various levels of English language skill.

I have several used English grammar and syntax books that quality high schools and middle schools used to help their students' writing. One of my plans is to have several Afghan FSNs beta test them to see if they are helpful.

The English skill of family members varies significantly. Weak English is probably the biggest barrier to satisfying employment for family members. Many children of USAID FSNs arrived with good English—a testament to the broad influence of American culture in Kabul before the Taliban returned.

*Q: Is getting a car and learning to drive important for new arrivals?*

KLEINJAN: Absolutely. Another piece of advice for FSNs planning to come to the U.S. is to ensure that every family member who is eligible learns to drive before coming. So many women arrive not knowing how to drive. Many of the places where housing is less expensive have poor public transport. Prince William County—with its large Afghan diaspora—is an example. Sometimes people can't take jobs because they can't get there.

Some women were amazingly resourceful in teaching themselves to drive. A learner's permit is sufficient to purchase a car. YouTube has instructional videos, while others read the instructional manual and practiced on rural roads. Driving instruction was another area where USAID alumni helped.

*Q: Did most people come into an apartment as soon as they came out of their base or wherever they were?*

KLEINJAN: It varied. Some people initially moved in with their relatives already here. That housing could be hugely crowded. In some cases, the resettlement agencies signed a lease, while in other cases, they didn't. Once someone got a job, that could be used to qualify for a lease.

The City of Alexandria public schools have a good program for English as a Second Language children. A number of Afghans were resettled in Alexandria, although I don't know whether it was for the supportive school program or for other reasons. Even if the resettlement in Alexandria was for school reasons, it had the positive side effect of being closer to jobs and good transport than more remote counties.

*Q: Is your sense that women and children are excited by the differences between this part of the United States and where they were living in Afghanistan? Or is that too naïve, because Kabul was fairly sophisticated?*

KLEINJAN: Overall women and children seem pleased to be here, although there are upsides and downsides. There are broad educational and professional opportunities here, especially for women who have the capacity to take advantage of them, and for their children—and that's huge. There is not the constant drumbeat that women are second-class citizens, or continual male harassment. They are grateful to be able to send remittances to their families in Kabul, since there are no jobs there. Sending remittances to Afghanistan is an expense that everyone has, in addition to living expenses. And of course there is no war.

Separation from the extended family is difficult, especially for more traditional women who depended on it. Many have relatives still pursued by the Taliban, and it's impossible not to worry about that. Overseas, the ease of life in America is often idealized, and FSNs see American foreign service officers with a lot of disposable income—which we, too, don't have when we return to the U.S. There is also awareness of the robust support that pre-2021 arrivals received from resettlement agencies that is not possible today.

### **Lessons Learned**

*Q: I want to ask about other people besides USAID's local employees. But before I do that, did you have any other lessons learned or experiences that you thought would be interesting to share?*

KLEINJAN: Help with job search is foundational. Having an appropriate job provides personal grounding, as well as income. Writing personnel evaluations over many years in the up-or-out foreign service system turned out to be an eminently transferable skill.

I usually spent two one-hour sessions asking someone to describe what he or she had done, including what was the hardest and what was the most impactful. Many resumes

were initially simply position descriptions. Position descriptions are bland and so understate what someone did and is capable of doing. I usually asked whether the FSN had received any awards. One response was—yes—FSN of the Year award my first year. They had done so much. Eliciting and conveying that is a skill we as former foreign service officers have.

I helped write cover letters. And I tried to pass along tips for writing them.

The other thing that alumni can do is reach out to our friends and former colleagues and ask them to provide career advice or in some cases even encourage hiring a former FSN. A current USAID employee could not ask, or appear to ask, that someone be hired.

*Q: That's right.*

KLEINJAN: I also tried to make connections. Some alumni were able to directly persuade someone to hire, although I was not in that position.

*Q: At ADST, we had a young Afghan lady come and start working with us as an administrative assistant but at an NGO salary. We didn't have a high enough salary. She moved to work for a USAID implementer relatively quickly, which was wonderful news for her and for her ability to help her family.*

KLEINJAN: The first U.S. job that ADST provided was so important—thank you.

To reach the USAID implementer community, I always recommend that FSNs join Devex, an online international development exchange. Implementing partners post their jobs on Devex, and FSNs can post their resumes for potential employers to find—it's an easy one-stop shop.

*Q: Are they competitive for those jobs even though they're not always Afghanistan folks?*

KLEINJAN: Yes, in many cases. The biggest challenge is getting the first job. With the first job, someone can show that, yes, he or she can work in the U.S. in a competitive environment. Then subsequent jobs are easier to get.

### **Providing Legal Support**

Another of our activities was connecting new arrivals to *pro bono* legal services. For immigration matters, our first point of referral was to the International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP). IRAP, which provides immigration-related legal assistance solely on a *pro bono* basis, is supported by top-tier law firms nation-wide.

The large law firms also provided significant *pro bono* support for Afghan immigration and asylum cases, including for USAID FSNs. I'm aware of one law firm—which is likely typical of others—which had staff dedicated to Afghan cases. That firm hired a

USAID FSN and some of their Afghan friends to translate, interpret, and accompany people to court.

Our alumni group put several FSNs in touch with *pro bono* legal service providers in other areas, such as landlord-tenant and unemployment matters. We provided coaching on how to approach the legal service providers, e.g. have evidence of your financial need for *pro bono* services and gather the facts of your case, before approaching them.

We also listened in on several brainstorming sessions of a group of excellent NGO providers of *pro bono* immigration legal service providers and passed on useful tips.

In August 2021, contacts in a law firm showed us how to get a USAID FSN's brother, who worked in a sensitive position related to the U.S. military, on the evacuation list. He was not SIV-eligible because he had not worked for a prime contractor. Unfortunately, he has still not gotten out, although eventually about half his group has been able to leave. He has been tortured by the Taliban and is in hiding.

*Q: I'm sorry. You said he is in a group that are not SIV employees?*

KLEINJAN: His group of employees is not eligible for an SIV because they did not work for a USG prime contractor. He is only eligible for a P1 visa.

Around August 15th it looked as if legislation would be enacted to extend SIV eligibility to employees of USG grantees and to employees of USG subcontractors. It overwhelmingly passed the House with this expansion of SIV eligibility. We thought it would surely be successful in the Senate after overwhelmingly passing the Republican-controlled House. However, one Senator blocked it, and has continued to do so. His publicly articulated reason, in numerous press articles, is concern that Afghans are not sufficiently vetted for security issues. In fact, Afghans are much more thoroughly vetted for security than any other refugee group seeking admission to the U.S.

Many of USAID's agreements in Afghanistan were grants rather than contracts, and thus their employees are not SIV-eligible. USAID's culture is to carefully follow the rules, and it could not always provide the amount of oversight technically required to use a contract. However, the Taliban doesn't care one whit whether USAID carefully complied with the Federal Grants and Cooperative Agreements Act and awarded a grant (no SIV eligibility for employees) rather than awarding a contract (is SIV eligibility for employees.)

We were so grateful to people who responded when we contacted them for job advice. Even if they were not able to come up with job leads, the fact that they responded and said, yes we care and want to see what we can do, mattered, and provided much-needed encouragement.

*Q: The group of fifty FSNs that the Alumni Association was working with, did they mostly stay and get settled, and have jobs?*



KLEINJAN: To my knowledge their feet are on the ground, although there is still more to do. I think everyone has a job or is studying, although some jobs—such as some of those with the USAID Afghanistan program—may have ended.

The USAID alumni group is decentralized, so we as a group may not be aware of every situation. We did become aware of one issue that we could speak about, although USAID could not. That issue concerned the immigration status options for the small group of FSNs not eligible for SIVs because they worked for the U.S. government less than a year.

*Q: They weren't able to come right away, or they did?*

KLEINJAN: All the FSNs employed by USAID in August 2021 were able to leave around August 2021, except for the three to five who elected to stay for family reasons.

*Q: They were paroled.*

KLEINJAN: Yes. We encouraged those not eligible for SIVs to apply for asylum, which provides a pathway to a green card, rather than temporary protected status.

Almost all the FSNs, irrespective of length of service, were initially paroled into the U.S. Processing an SIV application takes a long time and an SIV had not yet been issued for most of them by August 2021. Many remained in a temporary status—without a green card—for months. Without a green card, temporary work authorization is valid for only two years.

As the two year mark approached, there was concern about the time, cost and hurdles to renew work authorizations. In one case I drafted a letter for the employer to sign, explaining the significant harm to the Afghan's workplace if his work authorization was not renewed on time and he had to leave his job. The renewal arrived less than a week before the expiration date.

One Afghan I know could not travel to Europe to present a medical research paper because his green card had not yet been issued. In contrast, an FSN with a green card did travel to Germany to present her prize-winning research paper at the Max Planck Institute.

*Q: Did you also come into contact with people that didn't have this kind of support like the people who had been grantees or in the Afghan government ministries who had worked with USAID? There are a whole lot of categories of people that either got out of Kabul, but couldn't get to the United States, or got here and weren't going to get into the system easily.*

*I met a benefactor of one family as I donated furniture. She was a lawyer at the Department of Justice whose friend had asked her to take care of this one family, until they got social services. She was paying for the apartment herself and trying to guide them to services. Did you hear any of those kinds of stories?*

KLEINJAN: Yes, many stories. Many people, from everywhere, from all walks of life, stepped up. Quite apart from the USAID alumni and FSN community, I heard multiple stories of prominent Americans who gave generously of their time to mentor Afghans, in addition to financial support. The American Bar Association has a program to mentor female Afghan lawyers now in the U.S.

One young Afghan FSN woman put me in touch with several other young professional Afghan women who arrived alone, who had worked for other Western-financed organizations. I helped them with resumes, job searches, and similar matters.

USAID Afghans have done a huge amount themselves—much more than we USAID alumni have done—to help Afghans arriving after them, whether friends, friends of friends, or new acquaintances. I know of instances where they provided significant material support to new acquaintances, found housing, guided job searches, gave driving lessons, did airport pickups, provided counseling, and provided overall Afghan community leadership. A USAID Afghan engineer, who had arrived here prior to August 2021, won the USAID Alumni Association's Alumnus of the Year award in 2023 for his support for new arrivals.

### **Concluding Reflections**

*Q: Is there anything else that you want to mention?*

KLEINJAN: Most importantly, a few key themes came to mind, reflecting on our experience over the last several years. First, USAID's Afghan FSNs, and their colleagues, are highly capable. They have made significant contributions in their short time here, whether as engineers, doctors, lawyers, IT and financial management experts, or in other areas. Secondly, over time we and they learned a lot about how to resettle, so that it is happening faster and more easily than before. Finally, there is a large reservoir of people helping Afghan new arrivals resettle. Afghan FSNs already here are doing a huge amount, far more than we as USAID alumni have done. And I'm continually awed by the wide array of Americans, with no prior connection to Afghanistan, who are helping.

Thus, there is now the capacity to resettle far more Afghans, and faster, than before. So I hope that the U.S. will really speed up the volume and pace of our Afghan allies coming to the U.S., as we promised.

*Q: It sounds like it's been a very fulfilling thing that you all have been doing. I appreciate all these insights. Did you have any other reflections that you wanted to make on anything related to Afghanistan before we break off?*

KLEINJAN: There is still more to do. While many of the family members of FSNs who are here are satisfactorily employed, there are others who need further training and support. One of the lessons is that for an FSN to successfully resettle, the family needs to be happy and settled as well.

Many of the extended family members of FSNs have not yet come. Many of the employees of USAID's contractors and grantees, and allies in the broader community, are not yet here.

I hope that all the Afghans who supported us can get out of Afghanistan. They're at risk. Many are still hiding, and we promised to get them out.

The USAID Alumni Association is also planning to compile a guide to resettling in the U.S. for USAID FSNs worldwide, whether coming in an orderly manner after 15 or 20 years of service to the U.S.G. or coming under unexpected circumstances such as occurred for Afghanistan and Ukraine.

*Q: A big part of it is working through the system of people that are in the pipeline, and I would assume there's a subset that needs that change in law to allow them to also be supported. Is that right?*

KLEINJAN: A number of Afghans could be eligible for P1 and P2 status if someone could interview them and get the process going. If they could get out of Afghanistan into a camp in Qatar or similar place many could be helped.

I hope that you can talk to some of the Afghans, some of the USAID FSNs.

*Q: We will, thank you.*

*Mary Alice, it's late March right now, tax time. Filing tax returns for the first time can be bewildering. I imagine you have been helping some people with that. What was your experience with that?*

KLEINJAN: We encouraged new arrivals to file income tax returns even if their income was not high enough to require it. First, even a small refund is helpful. Secondly, one has to submit five years' worth of income tax returns as part of a citizenship application. It's good to start doing that early.

One year I was able to get a much bigger tax refund for an FSN than either of us expected, because of quirks in the tax regulations relating to the last Covid stimulus. I read every relevant IRS notice three times to be sure that I was right. I learned a lot about income tax rules from a new vantage point—new immigrants.

*Q: It changes so fast. I was reading this morning the IRS is trying hard to make their new self-application work better with better technology.*

KLEINJAN: This year the IRS is piloting in a few geographic areas a new free electronic filing software program that sounds reasonable. The past mechanisms were free for the federal return but usually charged for the state return. You also had to agree to allow the preparer to use your financial information. And many tax return programs don't contain

the software for the quirks applicable to a new arrival—such as not allowing the Standard Deduction for the first partial year of residence.

*Q: There's always so much to think about. Switching to the social services agencies, did most of the people you're aware of have caseworkers? Which social service agencies were most commonly tapped by the bureau of PRM to work with? I think there were nine of them.*

KLEINJAN: PRM contracts with specific resettlement agencies for specific areas. The contractors for the greater D.C. area have been Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service; Catholic Charities; International Rescue Committee; and the Ethiopian Community Development Council.

*Q: Did the people that you were working with or aware of, did they have trouble getting the attention of caseworkers because of the volume? Did it get worse or better over time?*

KLEINJAN: The earlier arrivals seemed to get more attention from caseworkers. Their caseloads seemed to significantly increase over time. Later on, I know of new arrivals who had to get on a waitlist to be assigned to a caseworker.

*Q: A good caseworker would be someone who knew well what the rules were and were taking initiative to help get them enrolled for particular services?*

KLEINJAN: It was a challenge for overworked caseworkers to keep up with the changing rules. Several times Afghans were given erroneous information. When something didn't sound right, we checked the USCIS website for the current information.

For those who arrived in November 2023 or later, there was no longer federal assistance, at least for single people, although the State of Maryland continued to provide some aid. A single person received one month's rent and one month's allowance, and that was it. Perhaps federal assistance continued for families with children.

*Q: You still have USAID people coming?*

KLEINJAN: All those who were direct employees of USAID in August 2021, together with their immediate families—spouses and minor children—came right away.

However, several groups are just starting to arrive, three years later:

- One, those who had been USAID direct employees long enough to qualify for an SIV but were no longer employed by USAID in August 2021.
- Two, extended families, i.e., parents and adult children—not cousins—of those directly employed by USAID in August 2021.
- Three, young women who worked for USAID grantees or Western-financed organizations.

For these groups, from my observation it helped a lot to be outside of Afghanistan in August 2021—although I may not be seeing the full picture.

*Q: So, they didn't get caught up in that as much.*

KLEINJAN: Resettlement agency support was easier for those arriving immediately after August 2021, although I still heard comparisons to services that new arrivals had received before that time.

*Q: Thank you for taking the time to speak with us.*

KLEINJAN: Thank you. I very much appreciate your time.

### **Postscript**

KLEINJAN: I would like to note that this interview reflects the resettlement and employment successes of USAID's Afghan former FSNs as of the date of the interview, March 2024. However, as of the date of publication, May 2025, a number of them—employed by USAID or its implementing partners—have lost their jobs due to USAID's demise.

*End of Interview*