

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

**NOORULHAQ LALI**

*Interviewed by: Azaad [pseudonym]  
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**INTERVIEW**

*Q: Hello, this is Azaad. Today is Wednesday, August 14, 2024. I'm doing an interview for the Afghanistan Oral History Project. Today, we are doing an interview with Noorulhaq Lali. Thank you for joining us for this interview. So, let's start from the beginning. We would like to know who Noorulhaq Lali is, when and where were you born, and how was the situation in Afghanistan at that time?*

**Early Education and Work Experience**

LALI: Thank you so much for having me here. I was born on May 10, 1986, in a very remote district of Afghanistan in Ghor province. I graduated from high school in 2004, and completed two years of college of Persian Language literature from 2008 to 2010 in Ghor province and then joined higher education in 2013 and got my bachelor's degree in business administration from Mashal University in 2017. Actually, the Afghanistan situation is clear to everybody. We never had a stable situation there. I started my first class in school during the Mujahidin regime and then continued during the first regime of the Taliban. And then I stopped going to school for a while. And then the Taliban regime changed, and we had a democratic government. I went back to school and finished high school in 2004.

*Q: What do you remember of 9/11? How did you receive the news and what was the reaction of the society about that?*

LALI: During the first regime of the Taliban the mass media was very restricted. The only valuable source of getting news was the radio. We weren't allowed to have a TV at that time. I was in seventh grade when 9/11 happened. For a student in middle school, political issues weren't very important and we weren't paying too much attention to this. I really remember the 9/11 attack and what happened after that. We witnessed the withdrawal of the Taliban from Afghanistan.

The new regime was very welcomed, especially after the dark times. Schools had been opened for boys during the first regime of Taliban, but they were very limited. The school subjects were very limited, mainly they were teaching religious subjects in the schools.

Now, it was a new chapter for Afghan pupils, and it was very welcomed. I can say that no one in my province resisted against the fall of the first regime of the Taliban. There were even parts of the province that were not occupied by the Taliban. The south part and also the north part of the province were under the control of the Mujahideen. And they were always attacking. There was always war in the province. So, when the Taliban left the province, it was very welcomed by the people, especially by those who were against the Taliban.

We didn't have a lot of information about the United States and other outside countries. But for those who were fighting against the Taliban, the killing of Masoud was shocking news for them. I remembered that very well. And then, the Taliban left the province, and it was celebrated. The schools reopened, and girls were going to school. Then the media was established, and we got our local radio down there. After some time, we had the international community show up in the province. So, there were lots of changes.

*Q: And you finished school, your high school, during the Republic era and then went to university?*

LALI: Yes. I finished high school in 2004 and then due to my family situation I had to postpone university. I am the oldest son of the family, and I was feeling more responsibility to take care of them. My family was not in a bad situation in general because we had a lot of farmland and our economy was in pretty good shape then. I was feeling that if I went to the university, then my younger siblings would not be able to go to school. Right after I finished high school, I got admitted to the Jalalabad University in Nangarhar Province. But because of the family situation, especially because of my siblings, I decided to postpone the university for a while. Later, I finished my university and got my bachelor's degree in business administration/human resources from Mashal University in 2017. We moved from the district to the center of the province so my siblings could go to school. I got my first job with the international community. I worked for the Provincial Reconstruction Team [PRT] as a translator. The Provincial Reconstruction Teams were from different countries. The PRT I worked at was led by the Lithuanians and we had members from other countries, including the United States and Denmark and Georgia.

### **Working for the U.S. Embassy in Kabul**

*Q: When did you join the U.S. Embassy?*

LALI: It took almost nine years. Actually, I was not even looking for a job at the embassy. At that time, I was living in my own province, and I had a job there. I had started to continue my higher education at a teachers' training college and went there for two years. It was a good experience for me. I was working with the international community. I used to travel around the province, going on missions to all the districts and meeting a lot of stakeholders, the influential people, and the local commanders and fighters who had fought against the Taliban or the Soviet Union. I learned a lot from that work.

And then I joined another international organization. It was a humanitarian organization called World Vision. It was an American NGO [non-governmental organization]. I worked there for two years. And then I moved to Herat Province, where I started a job with a USAID-funded project that was called SIKA [Stability in Key Areas] West. That also was a fun project. I worked as a senior provincial coordinator for four provinces: Herat, Ghor, Farhah, and Badghis. The western region. I was looking a little bit young then, and when I was attending the meetings with provincial and central authorities at the beginning it was not very acceptable for them and then later on everybody was welcoming to me. I had some good and some not very good memories from that job. It was a short period of time. We used to work with the people where most of them were pro-Taliban, if not exactly Taliban, and also, we worked with the government. And we were trying to bring stability to the most insecure districts.

*Q: Just to allow you to implement the development project in the area.*

LALI: I remember one day I traveled to Farah Province, and we went to Khak-Safid District. It was the first district I think where Daesh [ISIS] showed up in Afghanistan. And then after we returned to the center of the province, we were called by the National Security Department and the Secret Service of Afghanistan. They asked us, how did you go there? And with whom did you meet there? What were you really doing? I mean, we cannot go there with all our army, but you are traveling there with the USAID project and meeting with the Taliban or the elders who are supporters of the Taliban. And recently the Daesh or ISIS were there too. Working in Afghanistan was not easy.

Then I joined the U.S. Consulate in Herat as a regional political assistant. We were covering these same four provinces. We had regular meetings and activities with the local government entities, including the governors and provincial councils. I worked there until the consulate was attacked. Then they shut down the consulate in 2015. Many of my colleagues had SIVs [Special Immigrant Visas] and moved to the United States. A few of us joined the embassy in Kabul and I joined the human resources office.

*Q: Now, we have reached the second and I can say the main part of our session today. August 2021. Before doing that, how was the situation in late July and early August? For a long time before that—because of the COVID—we all had to work from home. But later on in 2021, staff started to go into the office at least once a week. I think you were part of the team that went back into the office. So how was the situation in late July and early August? Could you go to the office and where were you on August 15?*

LALI: During the COVID time, I was in the embassy. I think it was in September 2020, when I went into the embassy as a quarantined employee. I used to stay inside the embassy compound. We stayed overnight because we were not allowed to leave the compound. We had to stay there for almost four months. People volunteered from our teams to stay, and there was a need especially for people working with human resources. Many of the local employees had already departed to the U.S. The employees who worked for one year in the U.S. Embassy in Kabul were eligible for a special immigration

visa or SIV. So, during the COVID most of the local employees moved to the U.S. The embassy was almost running out of local staff.

*Q: And the recruitment stopped for some time because of the COVID.*

LALI: That's correct. We stopped recruitment for a while and then we resumed it. I'm sure that it was about 240 new employees that we recruited during the COVID period for the embassy. Most of them joined before the evacuation. Before the collapse of the Afghan government, I was mostly in the embassy. But for a while, I did go to my parents' home for just a short period of time and then I moved back to Kabul. Even on the day when the Taliban took over Kabul, I was in the embassy. Just a few of our colleagues were there. We had started the process of evacuation even before the Taliban entered Kabul. Most of the computers were already shut down and they were collecting the IT equipment. I was the lead of the human resources section for the local employees in the mission, so they kept my desk operating.

### **The Fall of Kabul**

On the morning of August 15, 2021, I went into the office. There were just a few colleagues—the management officer and a human resources officer, and then we had another colleague from budget. Scott Weinhold, the Assistant Chief of Mission was there, but I think the Ambassador had already moved to the airport. I worked until lunch, and around noon we got a signal that we should leave the embassy.

That morning when I went into the embassy, the situation was not that horrible. We weren't expecting that the Taliban would enter Kabul. I went in expecting a normal day in the office. We were pretty sure that Kabul was not going to collapse in a day. The office was not in a normal mood, but we still continued our jobs. I was working and that day was actually a day for new employees to join. So, we were receiving new employees. On that day we had around ten to fifteen new employees coming for their first day of work. I got a message from management that we should stop all recruitment and not bring anybody on board that day. So, when they came to the gate to start work, we asked them to go back home. It was around noon when suddenly my supervisor came to me and said to go home.

When I went outside, I found that the situation was different. There weren't Taliban in the street, but nobody was trusting anyone else. The taxi drivers wouldn't stop for you. Fortunately, I was living very close to the embassy, within walking distance. I walked back home. After a few hours, I saw the Taliban flag passing through the street. It was a horrible day that one could not forget.

*Q: So, your family, your parents and siblings, they were in Herat, yes?*

LALI: Correct.

*Q: Herat fell a few days before that. How was their situation, what were they telling you at that time?*

LALI: Actually, Herat fell twice, not one time. For the first time, I was there. It was about 10 days before and the Taliban were coming very close to the city. They were almost in the city. I remember the flights to Kabul had been canceled. I had a ticket for a flight from Herat to Kabul, but it was canceled. I was thinking, how can I get back to Kabul? Fortunately, after a few days, the airline companies resumed their flights from Herat to Kabul, and I was able to get a flight out. After a few days, Herat came totally under the control of the Taliban. The government collapsed there.

I can say that Herat witnessed two wars in a short period of time because the first time they came even inside the city and then they were pushed back by the local forces. We had the Afghan army there, but unfortunately due to political reasons or whatever they were not fighting. And we had Ismail Khan [the “Lion of Herat” warlord] there. He actually fought against the Taliban at that time, and with the support of the people, they pushed the Taliban out of the city. Unfortunately, they were not able to maintain the security and the Taliban came back.

### **The Evacuation of Embassy Staff to the Kabul Airport**

*Q: You were part of the management team who helped the staff with the evacuation. When the Taliban entered Kabul, the staff were worried about the evacuation process. They kept receiving messages that they should stay home and wait for the instruction from the management team. Can you tell us about the evacuation process and about yourself, your family, how you got to the airport, and how was the process?*

LALI: We were not prepared for the evacuation at all. Nobody, not even our American colleagues, were expecting that the Taliban would come and take Kabul in one day. The expectations were different, but unfortunately it didn't happen. Then, we were waiting for a message from management, who were at HKIA [Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul]. We were called a few times. One night we were told to go to the airport and to show our identification card or the U.S. embassy badge to the soldiers, and then they would allow us to get into the airport. To be very honest, I was not very interested in leaving Afghanistan. I have four kids, all of them are young. My youngest kid was six months old, and the oldest one was eight years old. I was thinking about how I could go with them there considering the situation? And there were the crowds outside the airport that we would have to try to get through. So, I was not planning to leave Afghanistan for a while.

During the first days after the Taliban came to Kabul, I was staying at home all the time. I used to live very close to the airport and embassy. They were both within walking distance. So, after four or five days, I went out one day walking and I wanted to check out the situation and analyze the situation. If we were to try to go out or go to the airport, how could we do that? Nobody bothered us as I had on traditional clothes. I was like

other people, just wanting to see the situation. When I saw the crowds at the airport, I decided to stay at home and did not plan on leaving.

But what happened actually? After a week or so, it was August 22nd, I needed to go out because we needed some food and other stuff for the family. Before, we used to go out on a daily basis to the market for food. So, I decided to go out in the car with my kids. As we were going out of the housing complex, just before getting to the main gate, I was stopped by the Taliban. There were four of them and they started asking questions. Who are you? You have a nice car, a good car. What's your business? I told them that I was a businessman, and we have some local shops. And then they asked me to show them my WhatsApp. I asked them, why WhatsApp? They said that way we can see if you're a real businessman. If you're a businessman, you must have something in your WhatsApp communicating your business. I tried to convince them that I didn't have a smartphone, but they started to search me. So, they found my phone and they opened it. That was the worst experience that I ever had because I had been collecting the IDs of all the employees on it. We had been told that we should burn our ID cards or throw them away. My supervisor had advised me to collect as many IDs so in case the evacuation happened the employees would not face any challenges.

When these four guys stopped me, they wanted to rob my car, and then they started shouting at me. They found out where I was working. They saw the pictures and all the messages that I had exchanged with my colleagues. They started to rob my car and wanted to take me out of the area. They said, you can send your kids back home and then you should come with us. I was saying no, I will not go with you. But, I didn't have any other choice. Fortunately, someone came and helped me. It was the guard who was responsible for the residential complex. He had already been alerted by somebody, that if somebody came and created problems for the people, you should call us. The guard had this number, and he called it, and another group of the Taliban came. In a few minutes, we got another group of Taliban. This new group came, and they started investigating the other group that had stopped me. When I explained the situation to the new group, they said that those other people were not the right people. And then instead of asking me to go with them, the new group took away the other group. They said that I should come to the police station in the area and fill out a complaint against them. I said, no, I didn't want to file a complaint against anybody. I just wanted to stay here at home. But the new group insisted, and they even took me to the police station. So, I went with them and then they investigated. They also found out who I was, but they assured me that nothing would happen to me. They said, you're good and you can go back home.

When I came back home, I learned that the evacuation was planned for that night. We were called to come to the airport. They said you can come as early as the early morning on that night. There was me and my brother, who also was an embassy employee, and we hired a local taxi to take us to the airport.

*Q: You went to the airport to help support the evacuation, not for your evacuation?*

LALI: That was the first plan, but it failed. I mean that was management's plan. They called everybody on the local staff and told them to come with your family to the airport, to the gate, and somebody would be there to let you in. This plan failed. I went there, but we couldn't manage to get in. We were struggling for almost five hours in the airport to get to the gate. Actually, some of our colleagues stayed there the whole night.

*Q: You went with your family, with your children?*

LALI: You know what I did? I hired two taxis and then I asked the drivers to keep my family members in the cars as long as they needed to stay there. I will pay you. But I didn't ask the family to try to go through the crowd, just come near to the crowd. By myself, I went through the crowd with my younger brother. We were not able to get to the gate. And then I thought that if I'm not able to go to the gate, how can my kids and family get there. After four or five hours, we went back home. And then I decided to call my human resources supervisor. At that time, I think he was in Canada. He was not even in Afghanistan. He had left Afghanistan earlier because of a family issue. Still, he was in contact with me 24 hours a day, all the time. When I came back, I was very angry. I shouted at him. I said, I know a lot is wrong. He is a really nice guy and very supportive. He said, calm down, Lali, instead of starting on us, you can give us an alternative plan or option. You guys should cooperate with us.

And then the idea of buses came up. It was my idea honestly. It was actually a new plan from scratch, from the beginning. He asked me what is your plan? What can we do? I said that you know we could hire buses, we can discuss with the Taliban. I said the Taliban are here now, and they are saying that they are the government. They are not killing everybody. I knew that lots of people were in contact with the Taliban, including from the mission and the military evacuation teams. They were in contact with the Taliban. I said in coordination with the Taliban, we can manage the evacuation, or we can organize the evacuation.

*Q: What was the process?*

LALI: We needed to hire buses. I told them that we will pay for the buses. He asked how we could pay for the buses. I said that the local employees can do that. I told them that I will manage the process, and I will hire the buses. I will charge a specific amount of money from each local employee and then we will use that money to pay the bus drivers or the bus company. So, they agreed to this plan, and they even told me that I should start working. It was the human resources officer that asked me to come up with an idea. He liked my idea. He shared this idea with the management in Kabul. After a day or so, my supervisor told me that he had provided my contact information to the management people in Kabul, and they might reach out to me. I said, okay. One good thing was that I already had a list of all the local employees. Earlier, we had made a list of the local employees, including their extended and immediate family members. It was more than 8,000 people with all the employees and their extended and immediate family members.

*Q: I heard that during July and June you asked everyone to provide you with the names of all our siblings, parents and family members with their contact information and address.*

LALI: That's correct. That list was mainly for the P1 [immigrant visa] process, but also in case of an evacuation they might be able to help our families as well. And then they said that I had to separate the extended family members from the immediate family members. That was a difficult job for me, especially because at that time we did not have computers, and we did not have stable internet. So, I had to work day and night to do this. I had a few of my colleagues who were really good, and I asked for their support. They helped me with preparing the revised list. The first thing management asked from us was to separate the extended family members from the immediate family members of the employees. I mean we collected all this information and differentiated the family members and prepared another list with only immediate family members. It took more than two days to do this. We worked night and day. We prepared this list, and we submitted it to the management. Then they said, okay, so the next step is go ahead and hire the buses. They asked me to do that. What I did was to reach out to some of our local employee colleagues in GSO [the General Services Office], and I asked them to help by providing a list of those bus and transportation companies that could help us. I asked if they could introduce them to us. There was a guy from GSO, and I asked him for points of contact. With that we hired the buses. The buses were charging us based on the hours that they were spending with us.

And after that, management called me and said that I had to come to the airport. I said, how can I come to the airport? I have my family here. They said that you can bring your family too. They said we will send a car to you. You all can stay at the airport during the evacuation and then you can take your kids with you whenever you leave. I asked him, is there really enough facility space for my kids? I had a very young kid, who was only six months old, and he needed some special care. They said in that case, okay, you can keep your kids at home, and you can come to the compound at the airport and then on the last bus you can schedule your own family. So, I said, okay, that's fine. And we scheduled the first buses. We wanted to test if the plan worked or not. It was on the 26th of August.

*Q: And you were outside of the airport?*

LALI: At that time, I was outside of the airport. I had another colleague, another local employee, who was already in the airport, and he was by himself. He had got into the airport by passing through the gate.

*Q: Without the buses?*

LALI: Without the buses. He arrived earlier actually, a few days earlier, because he was single. Those who didn't have a family could make it through the crowds to the gate easier.

*Q: The first bus was planned to enter the airport through which gate?*



LALI: We had two gates, both of them were on the north of the compound.

*Q: The backside of the airport?*

LALI: Yes, the backside. It was always on the backside. The main entrance was crowded all the time. Even on the backside there were a lot of people. But the good thing was that we had the Afghan security forces taking care of the security situation in the back. The main entrances were controlled by the international forces, which was horrible. But the backside was controlled by the local forces, which were the Afghan Special Forces. And that was much better because they knew the culture, they knew how to deal with the people. They could force the people back. I tell you that I am not exaggerating, most of this idea came from me. And with the first bus, we faced challenges because the bus got close to the entrance and then people had to get off the bus and walk through the crowd to the gate, which was the same problem as before. The people in the crowd around the gate rushed forward and they tried to join us.

So, what did I do? I made a list for each bus. We started with the general list of local employees and then we divided the people into individual buses. We made a schedule, and we had a certain number of employees for each bus. Then I had the list for each bus. So, for the first bus we stopped at the main gate and then we all got off.

*Q: You were on the first bus?*

LALI: I was on the first bus. I was not able myself to get into the airport initially because the other people in the crowd rushed and joined us. When I got inside the gate, I read the names one by one of our colleagues on the list. Some of them had left their spouses back home and some of them had left their kids. One by one we took all of them inside the gate to the airport.

So, I asked JP [JP Feldmayer, Internal Political Affairs Unit Chief at the Embassy], what sense does it make if the buses are coming here and then they are stopped outside the compound and the people have to get off the bus and go through the crowd. It is the same situation as before. They asked me, "What can we do?" I told him that there were a lot of barriers, big concrete barriers, T-walls, and we had machines to move them and staff to operate the machines.

We could use the machinery to move the T-walls to make a car passageway and have the buses come through it inside the compound. Then the military guys or the security guys could do their searches of the buses. JP said, "Let me think, but I cannot promise anything." He asked me to go to the operation center. He put me in a car, and I went there. I was worried about my family and getting them to the airport. So, what did I do? When I was scheduling the next buses, I put my family on the list for one of those buses. I asked JP to please let me know when the next buses arrived at the gate so that I could go and help my kids get into the compound. And I was in the operation center and the buses were scheduled. It took about two hours, and then JP came to the operation center. I

asked him, what happened to the buses? He just tapped me on my shoulder and said, Lali, your idea worked. The buses are all here inside the compound. They brought the buses all the way to the runway, near to the airplanes. They said your idea works - bring the buses inside the airport and then they could do any security procedure inside the airport.

For the first two days, we had a lot of buses. We scheduled, I remember, exactly 62 buses. Each bus had at least 60 to 70 employees and their family members. And then we scheduled 60 more buses. We had very short, limited time. We were advised that we would have to stop the evacuation by August 29. I mean evacuating the local staff. We had only two to three days. We were bringing in just immediate family members, not the extended family members. The first buses came in smoothly, without problems.

After the second day of the evacuation, we had four people working on the evacuation of the local employees. Two American officers, JP and another one named Charles, and there were two local employees, me and another one. Honestly, with JP, we didn't have any problem. Whatever we were suggesting or advising him, he was accepting. And he was always consulting with us. And then Charles was a little bit difficult because he always wanted to change the routes. One night we scheduled eight buses at one time. You can imagine eight buses each with a minimum of 60 people, local employees and their families.

We were not able to bring them inside the compound because the route was changed. They were talking with the Taliban, and the Taliban said they would allow the buses to use another entrance at the Ministry of Interior building. They said that the buses could come to the compound of the Ministry of Interior, but when the buses came inside the compound, the Taliban stopped them. And the Taliban had very bad behavior towards the buses. They even tortured some of our colleagues. They said a lot of things and, in general, they didn't have good behavior. They were not allowing the bus to go out or to come in. Our local employees on those buses were kind of like hostages. We had cases of our colleagues calling and saying that you guys just put our lives in danger. We are not expecting that we will leave alive from the Interior Ministry compound. We managed after many hours of negotiation with the Taliban - actually 24 hours - to get the local employees and their family members released. We then rescheduled them on other buses and brought them in through another gate. We used to work day and night for four nights. I can tell you that I didn't sleep for three nights, not even for a single minute. And then I was totally exhausted, and I was not able to work at all.

*Q: The group that went back, were they finally able to enter the airport?*

LALI: Yes. They were released and allowed to go back home. We rescheduled them on other buses on another route. We were talking to the Taliban. Although they were talking with us, they were not accepting of us, I mean they were not welcoming, honestly. Also there was another point of contact with the Taliban from the military side. The military had their own interpreter named Muhammad. So, whenever we called the Taliban, they asked, "Who are you? Are you Muhammad?" I would say, "No, I am a colleague of Muhammad, and I am working on this issue." They would say, "We just can talk with

Muhammad, not with anybody else.” It was not easy for us to get to Muhammad because he had his own tasks. We had the military guys working there and they were taking care of the American citizens and colleagues, other staff, especially the Afghan military. So, they were not paying attention too much to the local employees, the Embassy employees. Still, we managed to schedule buses to go back another night and bring this group into the airport. I think the last bus came to the airport on the night of the 29th of August 2021. I left Kabul after the last bus came in.

*Q: What about your family?*

LALI: My family made it to the airport on one of the first buses. There wasn't space to keep them with me inside the airport.

*Q: And your brother and his family?*

LALI: He had his own family. He was not even with them because he was working with the IRM and the IT unit. The buses were scheduled based on the units or section. He was not even with my family. He had his own kid and wife. I had my wife and kids put on the bus that was meant for my unit, the HR unit, and I asked my HR colleagues to take care of them for me. So, my wife and kids made it to the airport and left Kabul on August 26th or 27th. They went to Qatar and then to Germany.

*Q: I remember. I went with my family from Kabul to Qatar and from Qatar to Germany on board a C-17 with 500 people.*

LALI: I asked my wife and kids to leave Kabul and to go with my colleagues. When their bus came inside the compound, I went over and just said hi and then goodbye to them. And then they left Kabul. I was thinking all the time about them and once they left Kabul I lost connection with them. They didn't have internet. I lost contact with them because I was staying and helping the others. I had to make a sacrifice.

### **Abbey Gate Bombing**

*Q: What about the Abbey Gate suicide attack? Were you and your family there when that incident happened?*

LALI: My family had already left before the attack happened. But, I was in the airport when the attack happened.

*Q: Were buses still on the way?*

LALI: The buses actually were there at the gate when the attack happened. They closed the gate and so the buses had to go back.

*Q: Were the buses scheduled to go through Abbey Gate?*

LALI: The buses were scheduled at the same gate, but the attack happened off to the side, not very close to the gate. The buses were there and the local employees were on the buses.

*Q: Did the attack affect the local employees on those buses?*

LALI: Yes. We stopped the evacuations for almost 12 hours. They were totally stopped and the gates were closed. Everybody's attention was on the victims of the suicide attack. We had some of our colleagues who lost their lives there or had injuries. We needed to take care of them. After 12 hours exactly, we resumed the local employees evacuation.

My family left on the 26th. They went to Qatar and then to Germany. They told me that you will get reunited very fast with your family, but I had lost track of them. I didn't know where they were.

### **Leaving Kabul and Arriving in the United States**

*Q: I know that some flights went directly from Doha to the United States.*

LALI: So I left Kabul on the last day of the evacuation. Actually, I left in the morning and then the last soldiers left at night, August 30. I went to Bahrain, and from there, I was able to get in contact with one of my HR colleagues. I learned that my family was in Germany. I spent two nights in Bahrain. They told me that I could go to Germany to reunite with my family. But I preferred to go directly to the United States instead of going to Germany because it was not clear how long they would have to stay in Germany. I said that I will go directly to the United States from Bahrain. I asked that they help to schedule my family on an early flight to the United States. And they did so. We were reunited in the United States on the 3rd of September.

*Q: You entered the United States on the first of September?*

LALI: I entered on the first of September and then my family member came two days later. We were reunited on the third of September.

*Q: Where did you enter the United States?*

LALI: Dulles Airport. There was a processing center at the Dulles Expo Center.

*Q: You stayed there for two days?*

LALI: Actually, I spent another three nights at the Dulles Expo Center to wait for my family. It seemed like a long time, especially in this horrible, crazy situation.

*Q: What happened next? Did you move to a military base or go directly to where you started your new life in the United States?*

LALI: They wanted to send us to a military base in New Jersey. I wanted to go to one of the military bases in Virginia because I was planning on eventually settling there. They said, you know, the bases in Virginia were full and not accepting any new arrivals. They told me that we could go to a military base in New Jersey, and it was not so far away.

*Q: You had your Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) in hand?*

LALI: No, I had my SIV approved, but it was not processed. I had my SIV approved a long time ago, back in 2014. But I hadn't processed it yet. So, when I came here and I showed my documents to the officer, I was told that now I would still have to go through the interview process and some other stuff.

They said we could go to one of the military bases in New Jersey. However, we could leave and go out on our own, but then that would be our own responsibility about what happened next. They wouldn't be responsible for us if we did that. So, we went to New Jersey, and we spent a couple of months there. And then on November 15, 2021, we left New Jersey to start a new life in Nebraska.

### **Resettling in Nebraska**

*Q: How did you end up in Nebraska?*

LALI: I was new and didn't know anything about Nebraska before that. But, I remembered something from when I was at a very young age and going to school. I don't remember exactly which grade that was, but the books had a mark in them saying they were printed at the University of Nebraska or something. Anyway, they asked me if we would be willing to go to Nebraska to resettle there. And then I remembered that day in school and that Nebraska was printed in the book. So, I said okay. Then we went to Nebraska. We didn't know anybody there, and none of our colleagues, none of our relatives, no one was there in Nebraska. We went there on November 15.

*Q: There was a resettlement agency to take care of your case? How was the resettlement process with the society, with the neighbors, with the resettlement agency?*

LALI: That's true, we had a resettlement agency. That was another bad experience. There were a lot of people abusing the situation. So, after just a few days in Nebraska, we found out that the agency was not really supporting us. They really didn't support us at all. I mean the only thing that they did for us was that they rented a home for us, an apartment. And then after a few days or exactly after a month or two, they told us that now they are done with us, and we would have to take care of ourselves. You know the problems that you have to deal with I would have to do by myself.

*Q: What about your brother? Was he also in Nebraska with you?*

LALI: Yes, my brother was there also. We were together. We went to Nebraska in November and left in May of 2022. I got a job there, and later I found an opportunity here in the Washington, D.C. area with a contractor for the State Department. Since I had friends and colleagues here, we decided to move to the Washington area.

*Q: I know that while you were in the military base you still supported the Embassy team, especially taking care of the administrative matters for the local employees who had moved to the United States. How did you manage that when you were on the base? There was a place to work?*

LALI: I still had my laptop with me. At the beginning, a few of us, especially the HR colleagues, were asked to leave the base and come to DC for a TDY [temporary duty] period. We still had our employment contracts with the embassy through the end of November. They asked us to leave the base without our families and come to Washington for TDY work here. Later on, that plan was canceled for some reason. Then they asked us to do work as a TDY at the base. We took on that responsibility. We helped with the processing of colleagues that were arriving at the base. We were identifying them and listing how many colleagues were there and what they were doing and where they had shelter. We gave them SIM cards for cellular phones.

*Q: How did you feel about leaving Afghanistan and resettling in the United States?*

Sometimes you have to sacrifice things. You know, we all were the bread earners for our families and we all had to take care of them. But besides all those things, we had a goal. I mean, that was our country, that was our people. So, for me and my family, we never intended to leave Afghanistan. Honestly, if the situation were another way, or at least we had another government, or even actually if the Taliban had come to Afghanistan and took power in a better way, I would not have left Afghanistan. I was thinking that we have responsibility for our country, for our people. That was my mindset. Still, actually sometimes I'm really feeling guilty that I left my homeland. We moved to the United States, and they have accepted us, they have welcomed us, they have helped us a lot. And this is our second home now. So, we have responsibility here for our second home and the communities here. But, our people, they were in need. I mean, they actually required that somebody should help them.

You know, I didn't bring my own parents. And nothing is more important to me than my family. Nobody was more important to me than my own parents and my own siblings. Still, my own parents are still in Afghanistan and my siblings are in Afghanistan. I was the coordinator. I could have put them on the buses and brought them to the airport. But I was asked by the management to apply the rule on limiting family members. I thought, you know, that if I brought my family, how unfair it would be to the others. They also have parents that they love. And they also love their siblings. They also wanted to bring their siblings with them, but they couldn't because of this rule. So, I mean, I had this responsibility. I had to do my job, not take care of my own family. Trying to help out my colleagues was honestly my pleasure and it was my responsibility. Up to the day that I left the military base, I was trying to do something for my colleagues, my friends.

Unfortunately, I couldn't do so much, but whatever that was in my capability, in my authority, I tried to do for my friends and colleagues and countrymen.

*Q: So, let's go back. You said the situation was not good in Nebraska. When did you decide to move to the Washington, D.C. area?*

LALI: Actually, Nebraska was very nice. In fact, right now I'm having regrets for moving from Nebraska, especially the community, the people there. The people are good people, and they were so friendly. Everybody was trying to do something good for you as a new member of the community. Honestly, it was not like here, because, you know, we have a lot of Afghans coming to the DC area. We cannot blame the people because they are already full, out of capacity. But, in some states like Nebraska, the people were so nice. Our American friends and neighbors were accepting us. They were welcoming us. They were supporting us. They were showing us how we could start our new life. Easily you could get a job there, especially if you're active, you can find a job there very fast. I had my job, and my brother started a job there. And the ladies that were living around us were coming to my family and saying that you should not feel that you're isolated from the community. They said we are all here for you, here to help you. They were welcoming us.

The problems we had in Nebraska were with the resettlement agency. This was especially true in the beginning days when you needed support in terms of financial support and help with legal processing and legal documents, and with housing and other matters. The agency didn't give us an option with housing. They said the house that we found, you have to move into that house. You don't have the choice to look for another house. We had these challenges with the resettlement agency, but their people were nice.

And then one of the reasons that I moved here to the Washington, D.C. area was because I got my current job. I'm working with the State Department as a contractor. I moved in May of 2022 to Silver Spring, Maryland, and I'm still here. But the cost of living here is too high. I'm working now with the HR domestic team for NEA/SCA [Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs and Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs] handling some HR matters for our American colleagues.

*Q: One thing more about the evacuation of the local employees, were all of those who wanted to leave the country able to do so?*

LALI: Nobody was left behind in the evacuation, but there are a few colleagues that decided voluntarily not to come. We still actually have a few of them there for their own reasons. I mean, we evacuated all of those who wanted to come.

*Q: So that was a fully successful operation?*

LALI: Yes, it was. I mean, with all those challenges and problems, we still succeeded to have all of those who wanted to leave Afghanistan, they did.

*Q: What happened to your SIV case status? Did you get your green card?*

LALI: Finally, yes. But, you know, it took a lot of time. I got my green card in early June of this year.

*Q: What about your parents and siblings who received P1 cases? Were they able to leave Afghanistan?*

LALI: They are still in Afghanistan. My parents didn't receive their P1 cases. I'm not joking, I reapplied for P1 status for them today. I faced lots of challenges. One of my younger siblings was underage and living with me when we left Afghanistan. He was only in grade six or seven in Kabul. He came with us here. I filed for a reunification case for my parents because of him. Even that case actually is still up in the air. They did an interview, but it's still not done. Whenever I'm asking them for an update, they say that we cannot give you an update. That's the answer they give you.

*Q: That's sad. So, what about your wife and children? How are they adapting to their new life?*

LALI: It was not easy honestly for the adults, and especially for me, for my wife. My wife had a higher education in Afghanistan, but she used to stay home. She never worked outside. For her, it was not easy. And it's still not easy. Sometimes we are saying that if one day we have the chance to go back to the country, we would. She would be excited to go.

For my kids, of course, it is easy because they are very young. They have started school here, and two of them are going to school. They are really happy and they have adapted and they know the language and everything. For us adults, we have no choice. We have to get used to the situation. Culturally, it was a shock for us, especially the way that we left Afghanistan. It's not only my family, but for all our Afghan colleagues and friends that left Afghanistan. For most of them, this was not easy. But, it was their dream to come to the United States or some other place. I know it was not a dream for every Afghan house. It's still not easy for many of them to adapt to the situation, to accept the cultural shock, to accept the loss that they have suffered. Being an immigrant, from my perspective, sometimes I'm thinking that, you know, we are alive, but some part of us has died. We're not with our loved ones anymore. We're not surrounded by the people that we used to know anymore. Now we cannot take part in their happiness and their sadness and, I don't know, lots of stuff that we used to have. We are still alive, we are still breathing, thank God.

### **Return Visit to Afghanistan**

*Q: Since you came to the United States, have you had a chance to go back to Afghanistan and visit your family?*

LALI: I did. I had a short visit back to Afghanistan. It was a kind of emergency situation. My dad had heart surgery in Herat Province. I learned that he was in hospital and thought



that nobody knows what could happen tomorrow. Fortunately, I had received my green card a week earlier than my father's surgery. So, I got a ticket that night and then the next day I went to Afghanistan. Without thinking about the risks of going or thinking about losing my job here. I did talk to my supervisor and told him that I'm going to Afghanistan. He said that you don't have any leave days and asked, how can you do that? I told him that I would take leave without pay. They accepted that and they were actually so nice. They asked, how long are you going to be gone? I told them I would return as soon as I can and I will not spend a lot of time there. I have my wife and kids here. I just want to make sure that I can see my father alive once more. Nobody knows what might happen next. So, I went to Afghanistan for a very quick visit, it was just 17 days. While I was there, I used to stay at home. I can tell you that I was not feeling secure. I was just at home, kind of like in hiding.

*Q: How is your dad now?*

LALI: He's getting better. So, I went back to Herat. When I arrived in Kabul, I thought that they might ask me a lot of questions. And I was really kind of scared, facing different situations, different people. Right away, when you get off the plane, you can see the different faces. But the way that they accepted the people, it was quite good. I mean, they didn't have tough questions. They even somehow were trying to support the people. There was a guy in front of me at the immigration counter. I was following him to see how they were accepting or welcoming him or how they would interact with him. I think he also was coming from the United States, but he didn't have a passport. I think he had just some sort of travel document. The guy in the immigration service told him that it is okay for you to come here, but you cannot go out of the country without a passport. And then I was a little bit more relaxed because I saw that he was a nice guy. He didn't ask me a lot of questions. He just saw my passport and green card and said, "Okay, you're good."

I was scared inside Afghanistan when I had another flight from Kabul to Herat. I was scared about what would happen with that flight. The next day I flew from Kabul to Herat, and it was the same situation. Since this was a domestic flight, they just asked for my national ID, not any other document. So, that was a smooth time and there was not a problem. Because of my neighborhood in Afghanistan, where everybody knows each other, I hid myself from a lot of people, even from my close relatives. None of my relatives knew I was there. Only later did they find out that I had been there.

*Q: That was not an easy trip.*

LALI: That was not an easy trip. It was very stressful, but at the end I had the chance to see my parents.

*Q: Good. Thank you.*

*End of Interview*