

In early August 2021, the Taliban began a new campaign of direct assaults on major cities in Afghanistan. These assaults were rapid, well organized, and spread across many geographic areas. But the people of Afghanistan still held hope and believed that the security conditions would once again improve and that both the National Unity Government and the Taliban would engage in peace talks led by the United States and regional partners. Like many other Afghans, I also remained optimistic that soon the security conditions would normalize since we had seen security conditions worsen and improve many times before over the past twenty years of conflict. For the past 10 years, I had regularly collected and received security, political, and social updates as part of my work supporting several U.S. government funded projects in the country. So, in my mind and based on my experiences, I initially found it difficult to accept that anything drastic and horrible could happen in Afghanistan.

But as the days passed in early August, I quickly realized that what we were witnessing was like nothing we had seen or experienced in Afghanistan. The Taliban's assault was direct, quick, targeted, and more importantly successful. Within a few days, the Taliban had captured dozens of provincial capitals across the country, including major regional cities like Kandahar in the south, Herat in the west, Mazar-e- Sharif in the north and Nangarhar in the east. These cities had been important arteries in the security and political structure that kept Afghanistan stable.

Experiencing worsening conditions, people across the country began to worry and grow concerned. This was especially true among the millions who had worked directly and indirectly supporting American and international projects in Afghanistan. For the past 20 years, the Taliban had opposed these projects, the United States government and the international presence, and more importantly Afghans who worked supporting these projects and foreigners. So naturally, I was among those who for the first time had mounting concerns and fear for my family's safety. At the time, I was working as a legal representative for a Department of Defense (DOD) funded project, assisting to obtain work permits, managing visa and licensing renewal for exports for a DOD contractor. As part of my job, I was regularly in contact and present at the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Finance, and the Department of Passport. I knew that if worse came to worst, my family and I were very exposed and were known in the community as someone who worked and supported U.S government projects.

As the Taliban's territorial gains continued to significantly grow in August, fear and worry began to change to despair and desperation. I began to explore alternative solutions to help keep myself and family safe from any unpleasant events. Before, during regime changes in Afghanistan, the people frequently suffered injustices, personal attacks, prosecution, and prolonged civil wars. I had also read about the end of the Vietnam War and what followed the U.S. military withdraw. I was aware of what happened to those left behind who had previously supported the United States.

The thought of abandoning my country, my family, and my life in Afghanistan did not often cross my mind. I had a strong unbroken tie with the land; the land that gives me identity, and that taught me to respect and love humanity. For 20 years, my dream, like that of so many other Afghans, was not to depart, but to instead become positive agents of social change in the

country. We wanted to help improve the country for our people, children, and future generations. So, we had dreamed, worked hard, and sacrificed so much for a peaceful and stable Afghanistan.

But for me and for most of the people of Afghanistan, our dreams and lives were shattered once the Taliban marched into Kabul unopposed. The Afghan President had fled the country signaling a new era of uncertainty and insecurity in Afghanistan. The Taliban's campaign had been a success and they were now officially in charge of the country and its people. The first night after the Taliban took control of the city of Kabul, my family and I spent the night at the house of a friend since we were all fearful of what would come next. The entire night, I could not sleep, as I laid there in bed thinking not only of my own future, but the future of all Afghans who had known and experienced war and conflict for the last 40 years. It was this night and at that moment that I decide that my family and I were going to leave Afghanistan.

Soon after, I realized that the U.S. military had also begun a complete evacuation, and they were in the process of evacuating vulnerable Afghans who had previously supported American forces and projects in Afghanistan. Because of my previous work supporting these projects, I was a Special Immigration Visa (SIV) application holder. I quickly contacted my employer – a DOD contractor - for support to be evacuated alongside my immediate family. After completing initial paperwork, I began the long and dangerous journey to Kabul international airport. Because of the insecurity and massive crowds trying to enter the airport to be evacuated, it took me several days before I could successfully enter the airport. My family and I and thousands of others like us had spent many tired days and sleepless nights around the airport, with many people dying in the process. During one of these days, a suicide bombing killed more than 180 people, including American soldiers, and left hundreds of others injured no more than 300 feet from the gate where my family and I were waiting. Even now, the psychological impact of this attack haunts me, my wife, and children. My family and I successfully managed to enter the airport around 10pm on August 28. And at around 5am the next morning, we left the country for Qatar. Even though I was thankful we were saved and had escaped unharmed, I was still afraid and concerned, this time by uncertainty. When we got on the plane and left Afghanistan, we had also left everything we had and known behind.

Our first stop after leaving Afghanistan was Qatar, where we stayed for four days in a military base. Afterwards, we were flown to another American military base in Germany, where we had a longer stay of 45 days. Finally, on October 14, we were transported to Fort Pickett, an Army National Guard facility in Virginia. There we stayed for a further four months. During my stay at Fort Pickett, an Afghan friend introduced me to Mr. Aaron Estabrook, who was a City Commissioner and currently the Executive Director at the Manhattan Housing Authority. I approached and spoke to him to ask for assistance. Mr. Aaron supported me with the relocation process and helped expedite our relocation application so that we could leave the military base. Then finally on January 7, 2022, my family and I left Fort Pickett for Manhattan, Kansas.

When we arrived, I was encouraged by the warm welcome we received and by the dignity and respect we were received with by him and his friends at the Manhattan Airport at 11pm at night. Mr. Aaron has established a volunteer organization Manhattan Afghan Resettlement Team (MART) in the city to help people like me start a new life here the United States. Currently, I am

aware of around a dozen Afghan families who are being directly assisted by the charity organization.

Although I have started a new life here in the United States and am extremely thankful for having overcome so many challenges to get here, I will forever miss the people and everything we left behind in Afghanistan. This includes dear family members, friends, community, and the land where I grew up. Everyone that I left behind and the larger Afghan population now face a severe and unprecedented humanitarian crisis. As my family and I struggled to adjust to our new lives and surroundings, we will try to bring awareness to the current suffering of Afghans and try to help those left behind as best as we can!