

Hussain Muhammad

Former Translator for U.S. Army in Afghanistan

Interviewed by Simone Wallk in Washington, D.C., 06/13/19

Transcribed by Regina Lankenau, 05/21/20

(00:00:00) **Simone:** So this is Simone Wallk interviewing Hussain Muhammad on June 13th, 2019 and the interview is taking place at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Washington, D.C. So Hussain, can you tell me a little bit about where you're from?

(00:00:21) **Hussain:** Sure, absolutely...so my name is Hussain Muhammad and I'm originally from Afghanistan. I immigrated to the U.S. under a special immigrant visa in 2014; I was working for the U.S. military as a translator and cultural advisor. I started working in 2005, basically when I was 17 years old and then, I worked for about 10 years, and I had the privilege to work alongside many U.S. military units who were deployed to Afghanistan over the course of 10 years. So yes, at that time when I started, I didn't know--such a program that would help translators to obtain a visa and come to the U.S. didn't exist--and I didn't know that, because--I'm sorry, the program didn't exist, the program was not, there was no such program. Yeah, and then because of the security threats and security concerns, such a program (called a Special Immigrant Visa) was created specifically for translators and, to apply, those translators who felt like they were in danger just because of what they were doing there. So I applied for that program and I came here in the U.S. in 2014.

(00:02:14) **Simone:** Can you remember the day that you came to the U.S. or the day that you left home? What were you feeling then, what were you wearing? Who were you with? What were those two days like?

(00:02:26) **Hussain:** Of course I don't remember like every detail, but for some reason I feel like it was not too long ago. Even though it has been about, almost like 5 years now. But I feel like it was a couple weeks ago, or a month ago. But I do remember when I first got here, in my experience, it's not easy--at least it was not easy for me to say goodbye to relatives, especially like my family who accompanied us all the way to the airport and then saying goodbye--it's tough. It's really, I would say, difficult. My sisters and my mother...Of course this is not the first time I'm away from my family, like before that I was seventeen when I started working and at that time I was working and living on base so I used to go home every couple months to see them, on vacation. But this time was different. When I was coming to the U.S. we knew that I was not going to be able to, you know, come back. At least, for a year. So we all knew that it wouldn't be just like I was going back to work, so it was tough, but we had to come and it was an opportunity for me. And certainly because of what I did, because of my affiliation with the U.S. military, I was not safe there. But when coming to the U.S. the first time, when we were met at

the airport and we were welcomed, everything--of course, I had done some research, how life would look here--but of course as soon as I got here I noticed many things new, and many new things, and I think it was really like amazing, and that we were welcomed at the airport, then we went to our new apartment...I felt tired, so we couldn't call our family right away, but we called them like a day after. The first couple of weeks it was not too overwhelming, but I would say, just a bit overwhelming. Because we were still trying to acclimate and become familiar with the area and the community. Actually whenever, the first city that we went to, every time we go back there, I think back to the first day when I came to the U.S.--it reminds me all the memory and everything, it quickly takes me back to 2014, when we first came to the U.S.

(00:06:31) **Simone:** What were some of the things that you noticed when you came that were different or surprising?

(00:06:35) **Hussain:** Um, of course, the food. Culture. Since I had lived with U.S. personnel in Afghanistan, it was not a culture shock for me, since I had become pretty familiar with the culture, the way people live here. The things that were new, was that I was no longer living in a B-Hut, in a fire-base; of course, in Afghanistan we have a lot of mountains...a couple of days later, I think I asked one of the people, my friend who we were living with, if there were any mountains nearby. Yeah, so we were only living like 3 miles, 10 minutes, 12 minutes drive from a big marketplace. So a lot of, I would say, like new things and, of course, I would say like we always appreciated that they were driving us around and helping us, for instance, with appointments like doctor appointments and registration class, registration and all that. But after that, we felt like, okay, we're now more familiar with the area, we can navigate easily. So a lot of, I would say, new things and it is really different. For my wife it was, like a, she felt a little like, you know, culture shock and it was very overwhelming for her because this was her first time being away from her family. But for me, I, of course, I had googled how the place would look like, how Stafford--that's where we first went to, we used to live back in 2014--but I had of course searched things on the internet, how the community, how the neighborhood would look like. And, of course, I tried to learn and find out as much as I could. But when I got here I noticed many things that I could never have thought of. All good things, I would say.

(00:09:25) **Simone:** (laughs) Like the food?

(00:09:26) **Hussain:** The food, yes. Of course, we all think like, hospitality there's some similarities, and especially like the food brings people together. And our friends that we were living with, every once in a while, we were cooking for them and they liked our cooking and we liked theirs, so that brought us like really close and we were all kind of learning from each other. Trying different kinds of foods that we are eating in Afghanistan and they were taking us to different places and so far I have liked everything. So yeah.

(00:10:24) **Simone:** Was there anything that was different specifically because you were coming from a Muslim society and going into the U.S., which is not only a (INDECIPHERABLE) but a heavily Christian place?

(00:10:35) **Hussain:** For me, not really I would say. But one thing I really appreciated is that, as soon as we got here, my U.S. sponsor, they told us how far the mosque, where the mosque was, and if we wanted to go there. Normally, Muslims, they get together if they can on Fridays for the prayer, but yeah, and they told us where the mosque is and they could have taken us to the mosque. But in terms of differences, I did not feel like, that I was, of course, I was still away from family, from my country, you know, thousands of miles away, but in terms of religion, since I had to spend a lot of time with the U.S. and people from, of course, people in the military they were African-Americans, they were from German, European backgrounds, people from different places, so I felt quite comfortable. Just like my religion, I know of course, I have a lot of respect for every religion and my U.S. sponsor, they had the same understanding. They all respected our privacy, you know, they respected our need whenever we wanted, they asked us a couple of times if we wanted to go to the mosque, and we did that. We, I think, a couple of weeks later, when we first got here, we went to the mosque, we met other people there and we felt even more comfortable. Especially my wife. So we saw everyone there and we could have always went there. But I think our integration, overall, was very smooth. Of course, it was difficult, especially for the first couple of weeks for my wife, and in general, if you don't speak the language, and if you're not very familiar with the culture, I would say--regardless of whether you're a Muslim, and if you're a Christian--if you're a foreigner and you don't speak the language and if this is your first time that you've been around the people, you have not been around the people, Americans, before, I would say, it is still overwhelming. But you get used to it. And I think we were really in some really good hands. So they did everything they could to help us have a smooth resettlement. To resettle smoothly.

(00:14:18) **Simone:** And when you were in Afghanistan before coming to the U.S., what was your religious life like there?

(00:14:25) **Hussain:** I think I would describe myself as moderately religious. One thing, of course, we were all, in Afghanistan, even when I was not living and working on the base, I was just like other, regular people. I still practiced when I could and, of course, do what's right, and so there were times I had, of course, like you are encouraged to go and do the prayer all together, especially on Fridays. But I would say, maybe because I describe myself like moderately religious, so I always felt comfortable being around people of other religions. And, even there, so that is one thing that really helped me to have, to resettle smoothly, to have a very easy integration here. But before even there I don't think that I'm much different now in terms of

practicing my religion than I was in Afghanistan. You know, the mosque is there, I know where the mosque is, and every, almost like, you have the freedom to go there any time you want; for prayer, or they may have other programs that they put out. But here, of course, in the U.S. you're busy like almost always, with you're working, you have family obligations, but the mosque is always there. And you're always welcome to go there. I personally feel really comfortable living here and, in terms of being a Muslim living in a mostly Christian populated country, I've never felt, honestly, to this day, I haven't noticed anything strange. We go to the mosque when we can. Pretty much, I myself, I have not noticed anything significant, I would say. With my wife, the same. She is, we are going to the mosque whenever there's a religious holiday and it's not only for the prayer, but it's also for, the mosque, this one mosque that she's going to is like a gathering place. We go, we meet all our friends, you pray there, and you meet your friends and so it's kind of, also like a get-together, and asking how your other friends and acquaintances are doing.

(00:18:14) **Simone:** And is the community at the mosque made up of mostly Afghani immigrants, or people from everywhere, U.S.-born--what is the demographic there?

(00:18:25) **Hussain:** Mostly, I would say, mostly Afghans. But a good number of them are Afghans who have been living in the U.S. for quite some time now and their children are born here in the U.S. But one reason that they're coming there is because they're bringing their children so they can learn Dari. Some Afghan children who are born here, because some of them, they no longer speak their primary language, their native language. So they bring their children and you see, and of course, there are American citizens, and they come and they study, there are instructors who teach them how to speak Farsi, how to read and write in Farsi, or in Dari. Sometimes, if there is a memorial ceremony, they put out a publication and we go there. So it's not only to go to the mosque for prayer. But the mosque that we usually go to is an Afghan mosque, so most of the time we see Afghans.

(00:20:05) **Simone:** And so, you think that religion plays basically the same role in your life here that it played when you were in Afghanistan?

(00:20:13) **Hussain:** Pretty much yes. Yes. I mean, like I said, I, of course, just like other religions--and I have respect for all other religions--and I personally have not noticed anything significant. Any big change from the time that I have come to the U.S. For instance, if I would say, "oh just because I moved to the U.S. I can no longer go for prayers," or if I can't go to the mosque or if I've changed, I have not noticed that in me, in myself. So it's pretty much the same. But of course, for instance, we just had Ramadan a couple of days ago and--the holy month where Muslims fast before, and don't eat before the sun goes down--those days of course we would have to coordinate with other friends so that at the end we celebrate it, it's called Eid, and we all make big meals and we get together. We still do that. Actually because this year Eid was,

the end of Ramadan, was on Tuesday, so I think sometimes people are working on Tuesday and their kids are going to school, so but that doesn't mean that we just let it go without celebrating. Of course, you have fasted the whole month. I wouldn't let it go without any celebration in food. So we get together during the weekend, you know, Saturday and Sunday, just like we did this year. This past weekend, we all got together, we all did a potluck and shared food together and the kids were able to play, we went to a public park. So people still celebrate and of course they sometimes, you may not be able to do it right on the day of, like, let's say, how do I describe, like if Eid is on Tuesday, you may not be able to do it right on that Tuesday, but you may be able to coordinate with friends and do it a day later. Especially during the weekend has been very convenient for everyone. So we do that, and sometimes I see people dress traditionally, and wear traditional Afghan male dresses, and you can see that they are happy here too so they celebrate.

(00:23:20) **Simone:** What have the hardest things about being in the U.S. been?

(00:23:23) **Hussain:** Being away from family. So, the fact that we are safe, I no longer live in danger and I live in safety, but at the same time, unfortunately, just because of what I did in the past, sometimes that, people affiliate me to my family, they relate it to my family and say that, okay, and because of that, I not only miss my family, I'm also, I'm worried, I'm concerned about them. But that's, I would say, the one hard thing, is that I often think about them and, of course, it's not only my family, there are many people--relatives, and friends, and many other ordinary people--that I always, especially like when I watch the news, and all I do is just pray and hope that everything is going to be okay and that everyone will be doing okay. So that's one hard thing that sometimes I think about: family, friends, and relatives.

(00:24:55) **Simone:** Yeah, that must be difficult to deal with, when you're not even there to, you know, see how they're doing and everything.

(00:25:01) **Hussain:** Yeah, yes.

(00:25:02) **Simone:** What pushed you to want to work for the U.S. when you were only 17?

(00:25:09) **Hussain:** Honestly, back then, I didn't even know that such a job existed. I was not sure. I didn't know. But I was really young, I was 12, I think I was 12 and 13, they were teaching us English in school. And then after that, I started taking English classes and I think I learned pretty quickly. Of course, I was not really fluent when I started working for the U.S. But somehow I learned it quickly and I always wanted to talk to a foreigner who spoke English--for some reason, I don't know why, but I always liked to find a foreigner and practice my English and talk to him or her in English. But after 2001, and after the U.S.'s presence in Afghanistan, then I was, at that time I was really young, so of course, I was studying and I was really young,

otherwise I would have started working in 2001. Like in 2001, and 2 when the U.S. came to Afghanistan. And actually, in 2004, I was looking to, I was applying and my cousin was in communication with a U.S. personnel there so I tried, but because I was too young they did not hire me. But yeah, again I never knew that such a position, such a job-title like translator or an interpreter or cultural advisor even existed, but when I learned about it, when I heard that some of my other friends were already working for the U.S. and they're a translator, they're a cultural advisor, I got really encouraged. I said to myself that, I never thought about this, but such a position *does* exist. And of course at first I really liked the job and I wanted to improve my skills, my language skills and since I always liked to find a foreigner so that I could talk to and practice my English I was like, there can't be a better opportunity than this. So that's when I started working and I was offered this position and I applied of course. I had to obtain my parents' consent and say that, "ok here you go, they're okay with me"--since I was 17--"working for you." I started working at that time, I was getting paid, and, at the same time I was, in a way, I was also serving my country. Of course I was not in uniform, I didn't enlist, but I *was* wearing uniform and in a way, I *was* serving my country, Afghanistan, almost like a regular soldier. Of course most of my assignments were in the field. Almost all--from 2005 all the way to 2014--I was assigned to infantry units and we were in the field. So, just like other soldiers, we were going out and we were helping with the security; we also did some reconstruction like projects, we built schools and hospitals. So when I was thinking about it, that was that *was* like a service, and it was always giving me a really good feeling that, not only I have my favorite job, I'm doing what I always wanted to do, but also I am helping with serving the country. I'm also helping the U.S. military personnel to build a very good relationship, partnership, with the Afghan security forces and at the same time, I was also helping this one person who was working for the USAID (U.S. international development agency) and we were helping, doing projects, constructing roads. At the same time, we were helping people, listening to people's needs. So every time that I was thinking about that, I always felt really good. I always felt grateful for having my favorite job, favorite thing that I always wanted to do, and at the same time helping people with building schools, doing projects, and helping with security. And that's the reason why I stayed for a very long time, I think.

(00:31:17) **Simone:** Because you loved it? You felt proud?

(00:31:19) **Hussain:** Yes. Exactly.

(00:31:22) **Simone:** And were there moments where it was unsafe, or you regretted being associated with the U.S. because it was risky for you?

(00:31:29) **Hussain:** Definitely. One reason, because I was hired so young, of course, when I got hired as a translator for the U.S. military I was not looking 17--I was really looking like I was 15

and 16. There were times when, some of the soldiers, when we were going out, whenever we were having friendly discussions, chats, they would ask me like, "hey man, could you tell me, just like seriously, how old are you?" And I was like, "okay, I thought we were already done, with the interview, or the hiring process. They had already asked me that question a couple of times," I was just like, I would like to know. But yeah I was looking really young, and the reason that they *did* hire me even though I was looking really young is because the translators were in demand; they needed people like me to help with providing translation services, cultural orientations. And this area, my first assignment in southern Afghanistan was not really safe--it was not safe at all. But I was with them, and whenever I was with them, whenever I was with the U.S. personnel, even though we were in the field, even though we were at risk of getting shot at and receiving (INDECIPHERABLE) or artillery, but we were working as a team. We were always looking after each other's back. So we had each other's back. And that, I've realized that, and whenever I was with the team I felt safe, even though we were going out in the field, even though we were going out on missions and operations. But the hard part is whenever I was going on vacation, because it's really difficult there to differentiate who is your enemy. Especially the Taliban fighters there. The only difference is, to tell if someone is a Tali or not, is if they're carrying a weapon or not. If you're not carrying a weapon, you just look like an ordinary person--for instance, like going for shopping or just walking around. But the only difference is that if you see someone who is carrying a weapon, you can say, "okay well he's a Taliban for sure" and that was a real concern to me. Every four months, I would say, every 3-4 months I was going on vacation and I was always afraid, of someone coming in front of me and telling me that "I think I know you." That is something that I never wanted to happen; I just wanted to remain very low profile. I didn't want anyone to come forward and say, "I think that I have seen you somewhere" or "Where are you going?" And because of some very different issues, the area that I was stationed at, are people from other tribes--there are different Afghan tribes--and officially, we look different. Someone can tell you that you are not from this area, what are you doing here? Give me a good reason why you are here. And that's the time that you would really, I would really struggle to say what I'm doing there. You don't look like you're from here, you don't speak the native language here, or the local language here. Of course I was, let me correct myself, I *was* able to speak partially in Dari, but people can tell from your accent that you're not a native resident. So that's something that I was always afraid. Because when you're out, when you're going on a mission, on operation, people can tell you, people can see you with a U.S. personnel, in uniform, people can see you helping with translation, providing cultural orientation in meetings and (INDECIPHERABLE), but when you're just by yourself there's nobody to protect you, there's nobody to look out for you. So that was when I was not really feeling safe. In the security it was not really bad up until 2009 and 10; that's when things started getting really bad. So I would always be really careful when I was travelling by myself and I would only prefer to travel with relatives and someone that I would trust, and I would call them so that they can come and pick me up. Because you just don't know what's going to happen. Because the roads there are

really dangerous, the village, the place where I was living at, I had to travel for five-six hours to get home. And of course, all the roads are dirt roads, like mountains, and Afghanistan, there are a lot of mountains in Afghanistan, and you just don't know who is watching you and up until 2009-2010, I *was* afraid, I was always thinking just to make sure that I am really being careful when travelling, but after that, after some unfortunate incidents with translators--some translators were unfortunately taken hostages while they were travelling, and some, if they were, because we *all* believed, if you were kidnapped, there is not a lot of chances that you're going to get released. Because quite frankly, they always hated us, just because what we were doing. And in some people's eyes, we were, they said we were traitors. That's why they did not liked us. In fact, they were really, even other villagers, local residents, were told to tell the enemy, the insurgents there, that if they see anyone who works for the government--especially who works for foreigners--to tell them, you know, they may receive rewards for their information. So hearing all that, and--one of the people that, we were working for the same base and he was taken hostage and unfortunately *he* got killed, they killed him--so all that, when I was travelling, I was thinking constantly of such questions like that, like what's going to happen. I was always afraid, that I hoped someone was not following me, because you know there are a lot of like remote areas. Even though if you get in trouble, let's like you are stopped at an illegal checkpoint, of course, you can report that to the unit that you're working for, but it's going to take quite some time for them to get there and help you. Even though, if they come to help you, it would be too late. So that's one thing that, whenever I was with the team, I always felt safe, I always felt proud. I always felt strong. But whenever I was going on vacation I was feeling totally like the opposite, I was feeling really alone, like not really strong. I was feeling like, okay, for some reason, and this is, I think there might be a lot of people who have the same feelings that I have, that for some reason I always felt like there is someone somewhere who probably is watching me, or someone who is following me. But the worst thing that I never wanted, again, to happen when I was just by myself travelling is someone coming forward and saying "I think I have seen you somewhere" or "I think that I know you" and I would say that, okay, you are right, but I am not going to admit that, I would say I don't know what you are talking about. The place that that person would name that, I think I have seen you there, I would say that I don't know what you're talking about. That's pretty much all you can do--to deny what they're trying to say, to deny that they know you and that you have been to where he is saying; which, the fact is that you *have* been there and it is likely that he *has* seen you there, that's why he is saying that, otherwise he would not say that.

(00:42:07) **Simone:** And at some point that just became too much and you decided you wanted to leave?

(00:42:14) **Hussain:** Yes, exactly. Because, up until 2009-10, I thought, I was not thinking about leaving the country *all* the time, but we all--after some sad incidents that happened--we all, me as

a translator and my other friend, that we were working on the same base sometimes we were sitting together in the cafeteria and talking during our free times, we were saying that we don't have a future in Afghanistan and what if the U.S. leaves? What's so interesting is that we *never* thought, at least me, I never thought about the consequences. I never thought about the, what would happen once I quit, once I am no longer working for the U.S. Because when first the U.S. came to Afghanistan, we were *all* thinking like, this is it, you know, the war has ended. We're no longer going to see Taliban insurgents. It's the end of the war. Which, unfortunately, it's not true and things have gotten worse. So that's what I personally didn't think about that; I didn't think about the consequences; I didn't think about the end. So us, things started getting worse, after some incidents happened and we realized that we had no future there. We all realized that we were very disliked among the people and, of course, the people who are living under the influence of the insurgents--people who are living in remote places, like in the country like (INDECIPHERABLE) and not necessarily in cities, plus people who do not have access to schools, like education and all that, people in general who are living under the influence, under the threat of the insurgents--like they always thought that we were no different than the foreigners because we were there to harm them. We were there to, to do bad things--which is not true. Which is not true at all. So that's when we, I personally, there were instances that I somehow indirectly received threats just because what I was doing and after that I became determined that, okay, I'm not going to stay here. And then I started working pretty much on that, on the application, on my application and I applied for the program in the unit I was working with, the people that I was helping, and they helped me with my application. And as much as I was trying to get out of the country, they were doing the same. They were also trying to, that I would leave at the same time as they were set to leave--which didn't happen--of course they did their best. But yeah, I'm very happy and I'm really grateful that I managed to leave and I really hope that people who are still out there just like myself are able to leave, because they have no future there. And just because of them, nowadays, even their families, they might be living, they might not be feeling safe just because they have someone in the family who worked for the U.S. or who worked for NATO, or foreign forces.

(00:46:46) **Simone:** Was there a time when your unit had left and you were there waiting for the visa?

(00:46:51) **Hussain:** Well, not just one unit or two units--I would say, like, a couple of units. Because I applied for the program in 2009, and I managed to leave the country in 2014. So every unit that was coming in, because whenever, the old unit was handing over the responsibility, the security responsibility, the hand-over process, they would tell me that like, okay, this is the last unit that you're working with. And I'm not saying that, that they were trying to keep me there. No. They were really trying to help me. It's just the process that doesn't work so quickly for some people, no, no one knows why some things take longer, or there might be a reason, but they were

really helping me, every unit that was coming in, because they were telling me, pretty much, "we'll do everything we can to make sure that you leave with us. We don't leave you behind." You know, there will always be someone that will do the job but you have done your part. You have done your part. I think you definitely deserve to leave and it's been a while. But that was not happening. And at the same time, later on, we heard that we were needed there; I heard that, it's not that they didn't want us to leave, it's not that they didn't want to help us; they wanted to help us, they wanted us to leave, but at the same time they needed us. They wanted someone who had been in the field, you know, for quite some time, who had the experience and who were pretty familiar with the environment, with the people, with the culture, so that incoming units--units who were deploying to Afghanistan from the U.S.--were being provided with someone who was being pretty familiar, who is trained, who is not new. So that their mission is done successfully, so that was a priority of course, you know, family comes first and, but at the same time, mission was a priority and they were making sure though some people that *were* leaving were all making sure that before a translator or before a cultural advisor that leaves, a replacement is trained well, a replacement is educated well like about the system, about the process and everything. So that, just like I felt like I was always, somehow, maybe I am a really fortunate person that all this worked, so the units that were assigned to me, they were all really good people. I imagine those people were thinking the same way, they just wanted to have someone, I would say, trustworthy, experienced, to work with so that they could get the job done appropriately. So mission and what we were supposed to do there were a priority, so yeah, at the same time we were all trying to help each other. In my case, they were trying to help me secure a visa but at the same time we were also making sure that we were getting done what we were supposed to.

(00:50:47) **Simone:** Was your family supportive of you leaving, and were they supportive of you joining in the first place for this job?

(00:50:54) **Hussain:** Yes, but they were really, really afraid. They were concerned and they told me, that "Are you sure you want to do this?" And I would say that, "yes." This is what I always wanted to do; I didn't know that translators--because I was so young and I didn't know that such a job, or such a position existed--and I told them that, this is something that I love. This is something that I really want to do. So they were encouraging me, they were supportive, but at the same time they were really concerned and they were really afraid that, okay, what if *this* happens? And we were trying to keep away all the negativity and say that, okay, let's not just think about that. Let's think about all the good sides of it. So they were very, especially my mother, she was always supporting me, and one thing that I personally felt pretty, one reason that I felt pretty confident and proud about, is that I had my family's support and my mother's thought. And that was always giving me a good feeling like, okay, I have my family's back; I mean, like *they* have *my* back, they're supporting me, like I have my family's support and I am

doing the right thing and what I'm doing now is, in fact, helping other people in general. And that kind of helped me to remain in the position or to keep doing what I was doing.

(00:52:58) **Simone:** And then when you felt, it's getting unsafe, they were also supportive and they understood that you needed to leave?

(00:53:05) **Hussain:** Uh, yes. Exactly. But, well, after things--unfortunately, I lost my cousin, who was *also* working for the U.S. and yes, unfortunately he got killed in 2008--and right after he lost his life--he has like two kids--and right after that happened, that's when my mother, she started telling me to quit what I was doing; it's not that she was really insisting but she was really asking me to quit. And I was telling her, that, it was very unfortunate what happened to him, but this is something, I can't really discontinue what I'm doing just because an unfortunate incident happened to him; it's really sad that he lost his life, but it's like, you know, that you're doing one thing and for many different reasons. I had my own reasons, and many good reasons. I was, my earning, my income was supporting my family. In terms of, income in general, what I was getting paid, that was a good money and I was like, okay, I have *all* these reasons to do what I'm doing. I have a good job, I am getting paid, I am, in a way, helping people, I am helping with security; I'm just like, I'm just like other service members, you know. I'm helping the country, I'm helping the people. But the other thing at the end was that, of course, at the same time, things were getting really unsafe there--things were getting really worse. But at the same time, what would you do if, just because things are getting worse and the security is going bad and is deteriorating every day, and what you're going to do if you just resign or quit? Like just sit at home? Do you think people know you, there are people who know you, and sitting at home or doing something different is also not safe. You have people already know you. You have been in the job. You have been doing it for so many years. People already know, people already know what you're doing. So quitting now, just because--well, I would also say that there were many people who, just like myself, who received indirect threats to discontinue what I was doing immediately--and then at the same time I was thinking that okay, because they had stole, they wouldn't keep their words. There were many people who, at least some that I know who quit what they were doing, and even after that they were harmed. So they were not keeping their word. They would just threaten you, send threatening calls, and ask you to quit working for the foreigners--or for the U.S. military in this case. But if people would do that, even after people had quit, they would come after them, they would still come and harm them. So with me, I was like okay, first of all, if I quit, if I resign, I won't be safe. It's good that I'm still working, all I had to do was to not go on vacation all the time if things were not going well. But in the wintertime, just because the weather is so cold there, and because it snows a lot in some areas in Afghanistan, so because of the weather, because of how cold it gets there, it's quiet pretty much, than the summertime when the insurgents, when everyone has this freedom of movement and they can go pretty much anywhere they want, they can live on the mountain, they can live out.

But in the wintertime they cannot do that--it get's really cold there. So I stopped going on vacation every 2-3 months. I was like, okay, you know what, if it's getting unsafe, if things are not really well outside our base, I would just stay in the base. But my concern was, because the troops who keep leaving the U.S. had already begun withdrawing, decreasing the number of its troops in Afghanistan, that was the part that I was also really concerned about. And we would keep talking about the, in units that we were working for, there were discussions, like rumors that that would be the last unit; there wouldn't be a new unit coming in anymore, that would be the last team that would leave the base. So that was the part I was concerned about. And the other thing is that, in the process, when I applied for the program, as far as you're employed and you have people support you, you are in a direct communication, you're actually living on base, you can--the people you are working with--they can help you faster and better than you not working for them, being at home, or being far away. So personally for me, I tried to remain employed until the day that I came to the U.S. First, that was, I was safe, I was living on base and I still had a job and at the same time there were still people who were helping me just to make sure my visa application was moving forward, yes, in the process. So when you asked, like, in terms of security, when things got worse if I was thinking about quitting, but when I thought about all those good reasons, I was like, there is, it's much better if I remain on the job.

(01:00:02) **Simone:** Well thank you for your service, and thank you for going through those risks, because it sounds like it could be--it's a very long period of time to feel afraid and feel like you can't go home.

(01:00:13) **Hussain:** Thank you. I mean, it was, for me, I grew, you know, personally and professionally it was such an opportunity that I made a lot of people, that I had the privilege to work with a lot of people, different units and high-ranking military commanders and Afghan officials--it was such a privilege and opportunity. And one thing I always appreciate, I always appreciate the trust and the confidence that they had put on me with allowing me to speak on their behalf. For allowing me to translate for them. That always, I always appreciated that, because basically, between the U.S. and the Afghan--not just the officials but also the local people, like ordinary people--you communicate through your translator, you basically listen to what your translator tells you, and you tell your translators what you want to tell other people. So it takes, I think, like a lot of courage and trust to have someone doing that for you, and listening to him or her, and that this is what they are saying, this is what they are responding, you know.

(01:01:56) **Simone:** Right, because you have no idea, if it's being done accurately.

(01:01:58) **Hussain:** Because you don't speak the language. Right, so that, I really appreciated that and I really, I tried my best to work and to fulfill my responsibilities as best as I could and I always tried to make sure that I tried to keep that confidence and that trust very well. Just like

they were helping me, and I was trying to help them as much as I could. But yeah, it was, I remember like the first unit that I was assigned to, was a unit that was out in the field and I think I started from the very bottom. I moved all the way up. And then as I spent more time and gained more experience then they assigned me with different units and I had the privilege to work with the high-ranking officers and gain experience and get to know people, learn more, and from them, from their experience, and share stories--I mean, it was amazing. And we all always, I think like, felt very comfortable and safe and we all working together and I think we all--like every unit I worked with--we all had great relationship, partnership, and just like friends, co-workers. Of course, we were, I was Afghan, I am Afghan, and they were Americans, but somehow we were very well-connected.

(01:03:58) **Simone:** And how do you feel about the political situation in Afghanistan now? Given what happened, do you still feel as proud about what you did, or, you know?

(01:04:08) **Hussain:** Uh, yeah, yeah. You know, two things that we never, I, at least like me, I never preferred to talk about--like religion and politics. Those two, I really personally try to stay away from, you know. We have our clear directions, you know what you're supposed to do, and you know your responsibilities, and everybody, that was pretty clear for everyone--not just, like, me. And we tried not to talk about politics; no religion, no politics. Of course, we always talk about sports--our favorite teams--like basketball, like soccer and all that. That was fun. But now I think, again, it's really complicated and things, as I think more about it, it's getting more complicated every day. But the only thing is that I feel really sorry about the ordinary people because it's always the people who suffer, from insecurity, from threats, and because if there is no safety, if there's no security, if there's no peace, then there is no job--a lot of people are unemployed. And people are, when just like me, people who are travelling are always scared that something is going to happen to them. Every time that I see the news, and I just like think about the ordinary people. Because with the Afghan government, unfortunately, I think, of course, back when I was there, when I was working, I think the government, our former president, was doing his time, you know. There were some, you know, peace and security, but nowadays we don't have that anymore. Things have gotten like really worse. And I don't know, for some reason I think, every day it gets even more complicated, for some reason, every day it gets even *more* unsafe. But the only thing is, just because my family, they are among those ordinary people, so I often think about like civilians; I always think about villagers, like friends, that they are the ones who are unprotected, who are just pretty much defenseless, if for God's sake, if something bad--I hope not--happens to them, there's no one. Because they are kind of like a mine, you know. At the same, they are under the influence of the insurgents, they are under threat; on the other hand, you have government forces and who are trying to push away insurgents from and gain control. So while both sides, you know, are fighting with each other, it's just like the people in between. So that's very concerning for me. And I, we have lost, family members--of course, my cousin, he

was like my best friend, so I know it feels, how it feels when you lose a friend and a family member. So that's why like I often think about ordinary people and friends, relatives, who are *among* those ordinary people so, yeah.

(01:08:16) **Simone:** And today, do you feel, in terms of your national identity, that you're an American, that you're an Afghan, that you're both?

(01:08:25) **Hussain:** Um, not really. I, yeah, I just, I actually haven't thought a lot about it. But, of course, I know and I can, every day, when I come to work and I commute that I live in the U.S. and I have a lot of friends that I talk to, which is of course, all of this is giving me a good feeling, but I haven't really thought about, that being sort of away, I feel like, okay, I'm the only Afghan or I don't have friends here, or I'm a foreigner, or anything like that--I haven't really thought about that. But it's still, it's because, personally, like for me, it's because I think when I started doing, working as a translator of course, the people I worked with, the base that I lived on, they were all like Americans. If they were not, you know, they were not all military people, there were civilian contractors, but they were all Americans. Among them, there were African-Americans, of course, there were Americans from European backgrounds, different people. So that made me kind of, that time helped me kind of not thinking about it. I really feel like everything is so normal. But of course when I started, I was thinking like, oh my God, with the whole team, like 30 people, I'm the only Afghan. But that went away like really quickly. So, but here we have friends, we have people we know, we talk to them and, both Afghans and Americans, every once in a while, we get together. For instance, we invite them for Eid; they invite us for, you know, Christmas and Thanksgiving. We all get together. And my, with me, they know that that was like, I don't mind celebrating anything--as far as there is a party, you know, I will be there. Just call me. Like I don't mind celebrating anything, you know. And they know that, and they feel the same way. Like when they come to our place, we invited them like during the weekend for Ramadan, we just liked shared our meals together and they invite us to their place; they come to our place. So, yeah, and to be honest, like family, being away from family, thinking about missing family is the only--and thinking about the people, relatives, friends--those are the only things that sometimes, especially like when I watch the news, is concerning me. But aside from that, I feel like, I don't know, I feel so normal. Not just me, my family, my wife. We both feel very normal.

(01:12:15) **Simone:** Is there anything else that you wanna add, maybe something I didn't ask about that you feel is important to share?

(01:12:24) **Hussain:** No, no not really. I appreciate, you know, thank you for your time and for listening to my story. Yeah, I think we, I'm sure, just like myself, there are people who manage to leave danger and who could come here are very appreciative, are very thankful because such a

program exists. And that we have a lot of opportunities, you know, here; you can work, you can study, your kids grow, they go to schools. I'm just, I'm really grateful. Because, when I started working as a translator back in 2005, I didn't know such a program existed. And later on, they said ok, "there's a program, do you want to apply for it?" And of course. So, again, I'm very thankful for where I am now and I'm sure other people feel the same way who were working for the U.S. government in Afghanistan and I'm sure they're very thankful and grateful for the opportunities that they have here for themselves, for their children, and I hope who are still out there in danger, they're able to leave and they're able to get to safety and I hope they're doing safe.

(01:14:14) **Simone:** Well, thank you so much for sharing and being open and giving me your time. I really appreciate it.

(01:14:18) **Hussain:** Sure, thank you very much.