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Afghanistan translator now living among his heroes

Pamela Varkony

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Several weeks ago, my phone rang late enough in the evening that it startled me. The caller ID said only "Texas." The voice at the other end was almost unintelligible because of a bad connection and a strong accent. Thinking it was a wrong number or prank call, I was about to hang up when I realized the person was saying "Palmula": "Palmula, it is Mohammad, your friend from [Afghanistan](#)." "Why does the caller ID say Texas?" I asked. "I am here, Palmula, I am here."

I flashed back to the last time we saw each other. Passengers were packed shoulder to shoulder as a dusty, beat-up van slowly made its way through the chaos that is traffic in Kabul. More luxurious transportation was available in the vehicle pool but choosing to ride in them made you a target. After three weeks of experiencing Afghan spring, the damp chill and axle-deep mud were barely noticed as our party traveled to one of the few U.S.-run medical facilities in Kabul at the time. The year was 2007.

The group of Americans, whose mission was to assess [Afghanistan's](#) health care capabilities, consisted of doctors and public health experts from the Center for Disaster and Humanitarian Assistance Medicine, along with several Army officers; me, in the capacity of journalist; and Mohammad, our intrepid translator, who had been with us nearly every day of the three-week assignment.

Working together in close proximity, under stressful, potentially dangerous conditions, causes human bonds to form quickly, none more so than with your translator who literally holds your life in his hands.

Mohammad, then in his early 20s, had intelligent eyes surrounded by a gentle smile. Unlike other translators who had accompanied us, Mohammad engendered trust. During downtime he would speak of America the way Americans like to envision ourselves: that shining beacon of freedom and liberty where dreams of the huddled masses come true. You could tell he really believed in "us," even though he had been on numerous combat missions, some where we weren't always the good guys; he regarded the soldiers as heroes.

While touring the U.S. hospital, Mohammad was asked to translate for the facility's director who was about to tell an Afghan father that his only son would forever be a quadriplegic after being caught in crossfire and accidentally shot by U.S. Marines. Mohammad asked to not have to deliver such news, but he did his duty,

explaining to the outraged family that "the United States would do everything it could to ensure the victim's recovery and future." We returned to the base in silence.

The next day I invited Mohammad to tea. It was not surprising to hear that when he wasn't working as a accidentally shot by U.S. Marines. Mohammad asked to not have to deliver such news, but he did his duty,

explaining to the outraged family that "the United States would do everything it could to ensure the victim's recovery and future." We returned to the base in silence. The next day I invited Mohammad to tea. It was not surprising to hear that when he wasn't working as a translator for the [U.S. military](#), he was a freelance reporter for several Afghan media outlets. He held a pharmacology degree from a university in [Pakistan](#) but didn't like being a pharmacist. After weeks of visiting Afghan hospitals and clinics, I understood that feeling. He had a girlfriend whom he hoped to marry. Most of all he wanted to come to America.

For a few years we kept in touch, and then the emails stopped. I feared the worse. Often viewed as traitors or collaborators, those who work with Americans become targets once their usefulness is over or their employers go home. Even while U.S. troops represented an overwhelming force in Iraq, 300 translators were killed from 2003-09.

Assistance finally became available through a translator and interpreter program, which created a special class of visa. Since 2007, more than 1,200 Iraqi and Afghan translators and their dependents have been granted special visas for entrance into the United States — only a fraction of the visas requested.

Mohammad married his sweetheart. They and their new baby have been relocated to a midsize town in Texas where they have made few friends and there is no mosque. Their eight months of resettlement benefits have expired, and Mohammad is working rotating shifts at a 24-hour convenience store. He longs to move to the multicultural polyglot of the East Coast where he believes he can find a better job and more welcoming surroundings. But even the dust and disrespect of his current experience have not dimmed his enthusiasm.

"I know I am one of the lucky ones," he tells me. "My wife is now safe, and my baby will grow up to live her dreams."

You fit in well my friend, here in the land of heroes.

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