



# Seeking Home in a Strange Land:

True Stories of the Changing Meaning of  
Home

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# Portrait of Jawad

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*I'm looking and I'm trying to get a home full of peace. There is no good reason why I should have to wait for that.... Instead I have things to worry about, things to fix. Homes mean peace.*

**T**he nightmare in Iraq that followed the U.S. invasion in 2003 underlined the importance of developing local leadership for the other U.S.-occupied country, Afghanistan. Considerable efforts were made to identify “the best and the brightest” Afghans committed to the ideal of a revitalized and democratic Afghanistan as the most effective bulwark against the resurgence of the Taliban and other regressive fundamentalist forces.

One of those Afghans so identified was Jawad, now thirty-three, who was previously a practicing radiologist. Fluent in five languages including English, he was invited to participate in training programs sponsored by international NGOs and the U.S. beginning in 2005. I met him through a friend connected with IRIS (Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services), a program of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut affiliated with the Immigration and Refugee Program of Church World Service. In the interview that follows, we gain some insight into the unique contribution he was able to make between then and when he came to the United States in the summer of 2014.

He and his immediate family were admitted permanently to the United States via an S.I.V., a Special Immigrant Visa, created by the U.S. Congress in recognition that citizens of Iraq and Afghanistan put their lives in danger when they assist the U.S. government as translators, advisors, and program administrators, and may need to be given refuge in the United States. A small number

of S.I.V.s have been authorized, in the low thousands so far under stringent requirements that include having “provided faithful and valuable service to the United States Government...; [and] must have experienced or be experiencing an ongoing serious threat as a consequence of the employment....”

Although he is not yet a U.S. citizen nor is he a veteran of the U.S. military, the review of his career that follows suggests that he is a civilian veteran who has risked his life to serve his own country and the United States as well. A review of his experiences since arriving on American territory indicates that he is also a veteran like so many in the past, whose contributions have been slighted and whose current situation is precarious to a shocking degree. I interviewed him in April 2016 not far from where he lives with his wife and four children in New Haven, Connecticut.

JCvP: Are your parents still in Afghanistan?

Jawad: When Taliban took power, my father moved to Ukraine. My father was ex-military, from the Soviet era, so when the government fell to the Taliban, he had to leave the country. It was a hard journey for him, too, because he traveled by road, the long way around, through Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Russia to get to Ukraine. My mother is an uneducated woman, she always stayed at home, back in Afghanistan. She’s never been to Ukraine. My father left her, me, and five brothers and four sisters for my mother to take care of. We’ve been through a lot of hard times, because our father was not there. Over time he grew his business, so we have a comfortable life now, and two of my brothers are there.

JCvP: What made it necessary for you to leave your country?

Jawad: It became too dangerous for me to remain, due to the services I provided to the Coalition partners—mostly the U.S. government.

JCvP: Can you describe those services?

Jawad: I was first hired by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in Kabul, the capital, as an Election Program Officer. My job was to identify polling sites and educate people to run them: civic educators, voter registration officers, and

polling staff. I coordinated and organized deployment and retrieval of sensitive and non-sensitive voter registration materials at a time when voting could be risky. And I updated UNDP officials and Afghani government officials about how things were going with electoral activities in the field. I did that from 2006 to 2010.

JCvP: What did you do next?

Jawad: I was a Senior Program Officer with the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) for one year (2011). It was a kind of market research job, promoting democracy to the Afghan people. I organized and conducted one-on-one interviews and focus groups, leading discussions on topics related to Afghan politics throughout the 34 provinces, contributed technical and cultural input and expertise into all program delivery and reports, and helped implement NDI's regional programs (workshops, conferences, and consultations) are conducted according to NDI guidelines for the Provincial Council Program. I also managed the NDI's regional office.

JCvP: What did you take on in 2012?

Jawad: I went with the Relyant International Corporation, a contractor for the U.S. government, because of my marketing experience, leading the company's Radio in a Box (RIAB) program. RAIB is a portable broadcasting kit with parts including a laptop, a mixer, a CD/cassette player, a digital audio recorder, microphones, and broadcasting equipment to send a signal to the local area. They had RIAB radio stations at FOBs (forward operating bases) and COPs (combat outposts) broadcasting to the surrounding neighborhoods. The government would put out different radio messages each day. Mostly they just played music.

JCvP: How did you get such a key position?

Jawad: My boss knew I had experience with media and asked me what I thought about their programming. I told him, "These are mostly music stations. We need to hire religious leaders to teach the people the real lessons of the Holy Qur'an."

I asked my boss, "Do you know who we're fighting? Do you know who the Taliban are?"

He said, “Yes, they are the forces fighting against the government.”

I said, “That’s not enough. Taliban are religious forces. Our country is a religious country. When someone puts on a suicide vest, did someone make them do it? No, they can’t. They do it because they are taught what will happen to them after they sacrifice themselves. But that isn’t Islam. We need to educate people about the true Islam, the true Holy Qur’an. They need to know that if they use a suicide vest to kill innocent people, they kill themselves, too, and both are reasons to go to Hell.”

The majority of Afghan people are uneducated. They can’t read what the Holy Qur’an says. They rely on their religious leaders to say it how they will understand it. The Taliban misinterpret it for their own reasons. I knew of two Mufti, Malawi, well educated in religious matters of the Holy Qur’an and other Islamic books. I hired them and they put in very good words in support of the Afghan security forces, and they preached to the locals not to support the Taliban because they’re not fighting for Islam; they’re fighting to get power, that’s it. They started those broadcasts, and we got really good feedback from the people. We also hired two female deejays. They were producing programs at home and sending discs to play on the radio.

JCvP: What happened?

Jawad: We expanded the program rapidly until the Taliban figured out why people were no longer supporting them.

JCvP: What do you mean?

Jawad: When the Taliban realized what this project was doing, and why the people weren’t supporting them anymore, they wanted to know who was running the project, and they found out it was me—I’m the guy who found the broadcasters, I’m the guy who changed the programming message to “Don’t go to the Taliban for your religion, if you do, you will go to Hell.” We broadcasted a LOT of programs. Unfortunately, one of the Malawi was targeted by a suicide bomber who detonated just five meters away from him; he was injured but he survived. The Taliban was blaming him for saying the truth!

JCvP: Did you cut back the program?

Jawad: Not then, but when Obama announced that U.S. forces would be withdrawn, then they started closing all of the FOBs and COPs, all the bases, and all the radio stations. The government was not strong enough to defend them. The Taliban started advancing from their safe havens in Pakistan. Things were getting worse every day.

JCvP: What was it that finally made you decide to leave?

Jawad: I started getting death threats by text. I showed my boss, Sgt. Young. He saw by the texts that they knew who I was, what I was doing, they knew my family, where we lived. They knew where my father lives in Ukraine. They knew my mobile number! Sgt. Young said, "Just give me thirty minutes."

He went to his office. After thirty minutes he came back and said, "You really are in danger, they really have good information, everything they need to know about you. So you should leave here immediately,

JCvP: Did you?

Jawad: At that time I was working in Khost Province [in South-eastern Af., one of the country's 34 provinces (wilayat); many refugees assisted by IRIS come from there]. So I moved to Kabul and continued to run the radio projects remotely from my home there. In my home I had Internet, I had phone, so I only left my apartment once a month to attend special meetings.

One time I visited my family and I was walking to our house with my uncle. Three guys in a white Corolla pulled up and shot at me. They missed me but they killed him and drove away. We can say for sure it was the Taliban, because the Taliban were targeting everyone who was supporting U.S. government forces. Right after that I applied for the Special Immigration Visa to the United States. I waited for one and a half years. Then I made it to the United States.

The Taliban were blaming us for working with the government, especially Afghan nationals who were supporting the U.S. forces, because they knew that the U.S. knew nothing about the Taliban unless we told them—we were the eyes and ears of the U.S.

JCvP: Were you worried about your family?

Jawad: My family was in danger also. After my uncle was murdered, our family home was attacked with grenades, but no one was injured.

The problem is, I'm still worried about the family I had to leave behind. I can't bring them here now. The Special Immigrant Visa is just for the person who was working with the U.S. and his direct dependents, meaning just wife and children. But in our country, it's not like here, like one father and mother have one home. Our extended family shared one really big house, and I was sharing it with my four sisters, four brothers, and their families. Once I got to the United States my father told me that someone had put hand grenades on our house, I think in the beginning of 2015. It exploded at midnight and broke out the windows of our car, but no one was hurt because our house is so big it didn't reach to the living areas.

JCvP: How did you feel when you learned of President Obama's announcement that U.S. forces would be withdrawn from your country? Were you surprised?

Jawad: I was not happy with that decision. I was surprised—because we lost many things. We lost all of our developments. He could have decided to reduce the troops, but don't shut down the FOBs and COPs. A lot of Afghan people were employed there, supporting their families that way. Suddenly they had no work, everyone is jobless, but the Taliban is hiring. It was easy for them to hire everyone, because when a guy doesn't have a job, he will work for someone willing to pay him, even if it isn't much. So the closings brought back the Taliban and made them stronger. They've captured many places. They filled the vacuum.

Obama's announcement boosted the morale of the Taliban; they could tell their fighters, "You fought for the right reason, and in the end we achieved our goal of driving out the invaders." They were always announcing, "We will fight until the U.S. leaves Afghanistan." So when they heard the announcement, the commanders could say, "The Superpower is leaving, and all because of your fighting, so increase it." "OK! We will increase it."



And all those people who were backing the government were so scared, so they went back to the Taliban side, to give them support, money, accommodations.

JCvP: What do you expect to happen in your country?

Jawad: The day when I left my country was the worst day of my life. I thought I would help establish a good government, rebuild the country, have a safe and peaceful country by defeating the Taliban. But when I had to leave I was not optimistic despite all the money and forces the U.S. government has put into projects to make that happen. But there was no motivation behind the projects, so the money went into a few pockets. The Taliban get stronger day by day because of the weakness of the government, the bad government, the corruption. Even when I was preparing to come here, a judge had to sign my paper, and he was delaying and delaying. I had to pay a mediator who paid the judge just to get him to sign what he was supposed to. The government is corrupted from the bottom to the top. At the moment we have a guy at the top who is not corrupt, but under him...

Now we are losing the gains of the past thirteen years. The war is increasing. On the day the United States stops supporting the government it will collapse immediately because the U.S. pays for all armed forces salaries, civil government, the logistics, everything, and the Taliban will take over.

JCvP: What was it like under the Taliban. I know they had a very extreme version of Sharia law

Jawad: Under the Taliban there was 90% no corruption. If they found someone corrupt, they would cut off the hand, even two. Put a bag of money on the street, no one would dare touch it. One reason for this is, there was not enough money for corruption, just stolen government resources. But the U.S. flood of money after the Taliban now finances a mountain of corruption. On paper, schools get funded and built, but go there, no school. Contractors get roads to be built, but they just build one section, keep the rest of the money. Civilians feel distant from the government because of the corruption and civilians are suffering. Too much money for a small country to absorb. I knew an official, before the U.S. invasion he didn't even have shoes on his feet. Now he's a millionaire.

Because of past history, the Taliban expected the U.S. to withdraw, like the British and the Russians. They just waited, saying, when they withdraw then we will start fighting. Obama's decision to withdraw was good from the U.S. point of view, but announcing it in advance boosted Taliban morale. In 2015 a whole province was taken over by them; they held the provincial capital for almost two weeks. So, no, I'm not optimistic.

JCvP: What about the situation of women and girls?

Jawad: After the invasion of U.S. and Coalition forces threw out the Taliban, it was very new for girls to go to school. I'm very happy about that because the culture will change soon, as girls and women get education and power. Things are better, but not good enough. For example, my wife is twenty-eight years old. She's never been to school. Her whole generation stayed at home. And still in some rural areas women and girls don't have access to school because there's no school for girls, no teachers for the girls, and in some parts the Taliban is controlling, women don't have access even to their basic rights.

JCvP: The situation seems difficult.

Jawad: The situation is very complex if you look around at the other parties to these struggles. There is the Haqqani Network [a nationalist guerilla movement sponsored in large part by the Pakistani ISI intelligence service (and originally by the U.S. CIA) based in Pakistan and fighting alongside the Taliban against Western influence in Afghanistan]. Also Jamayat-E-Islami, the main Islamic political party. Every day these and other factions kill people allied with U.S. and Coalition forces, Afghan forces, too. There are many other small bands also fighting.

The Taliban have had strong support from Pakistan. Iran is also trying to intervene, Russia, China, because opposing us is a way to oppose the U.S.

JCvP: What can be done to end the fighting without surrendering to the Taliban?

Jawad: My solution for the Afghan war is for the U.S. and NATO to put pressure on Pakistan. The Taliban is not that strong.

They have safe havens in Pakistan, they receive training and weapons and money from Pakistani forces, logistics, intelligence. Just as the government would collapse without U.S. aid, the Taliban could be defeated if they lost the support of Pakistan.

JCvP: But the U.S. is supporting Pakistan. [The United States today provides extensive economic, scientific, and military assistance to Pakistan... The United States is the second-largest supplier of military equipment to Pakistan after China, and is Pakistan's most generous donor of foreign aid.—Wikipedia]

Jawad: Pakistan is the key to defeating the Taliban and the Haqqani Network. If you look up FOB Salerno, I was there, near the Pakistani border, 2013, when Haqqani made a bomb attack on the base. First a big suicide truck bomb, then suicide vests, many Americans and Afghans killed there. Pakistan's ISI (like the CIA) should be held responsible.

JCvP: I'm glad you're not in such danger. But what have you missed since you left your country? Your family, of course. What else?

Jawad: I miss all the good days we had, my family and my friends. I left my family in danger. My mother told me, "You just leave us, don't worry," because she was worried about **me** after the death threats and the shooting. She knew I was worried about her; she said, "I've had many years of my life, so now you need to survive." This was the saddest moment of my life. To leave my family of origin alone, unprotected, no back-up plan, nothing. And still to this day they live in danger.

JCvP: Are you in a position to send them money? How has life been since you came to the United States with your wife and children?

Jawad: When I got here, I found out I'm like a disabled person—because my education is not valid here. My driver's license is not valid here. My experience in Afghanistan managing important programs, my security clearance for the U.S. Embassy, implementing the election system—none of it counts.

They were paying me four thousand dollars, net salary, tax-free. When I got here I started from zero. I tried hard to get a good office job, but I couldn't, because I didn't have American credentials even when my abilities and experience matched their needs. There are jobs with the U.S. government as interpreters for Afghanis, but I'm not a U.S. citizen and those jobs are for the citizens. Once I tried to enroll in the U.S. Army, but I couldn't pass the ASVAB [Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery] test because of language. [Passing it is a requirement for enlisting in the U.S. armed forces.]

JCvP: Have you found a good job?

Jawad: No, I'm just surviving, I've got four kids and my wife, I was earning good money, and now I find I can't earn a dollar—you can imagine how that feels. I work now as a security guard, any shift day or night. Back in Afghanistan, I had a thousand opportunities. Everyone was recruiting me, asking for my C.V., my résumé. I was part of many roundtable discussions on national TV and radio about peace and many other things, to put some drops of water on this big fire. I worked as a national advisor, UN-NDP, NDI as a manager of a whole region. I've been to so many places here looking for work. I've sent my C.V. online to hundreds of different places, to the international NGOs I worked with back home, but still nothing has happened to help me.

JCvP: I understand there's an organization that tries to help Afghanis who worked with the U.S. government and put themselves in danger by doing that.

[No One Left Behind. *The mission of No One Left Behind is to help Afghan and Iraqi combat interpreters with Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) resettle safely in the United States. We bridge the gap that exists between current State Department and NGO refugee relief programs, and provide assistance with housing, employment, and cultural adaptation. We treat our clients as the heroic veterans they are.*

Jawad: I know of that organization. I contacted them in mid-2015. They told me that they are not working at Connecticut. They working in different states but not working here. So they told

me that they will not be able to help me. I sent them my résumé for their review and comments, but they didn't get back to me.

JCvP: But you finally found work?

Jawad: Yes, I got a security guard job, but it was an on-call job, sometimes they have good hours for me, sometimes they don't—I can't plan. For example, the last month I worked for them, they had no work at all for me, but just recently I got a job for forty hours a week.

JCvP: So life has been very hard, but at least you're not in danger. Your wife and children are safe.

Jawad: There are good things I like here. My kids are going to school, learning English—I'm optimistic about their future. My son's best friend is Chinese. I'm not worried that I or my kids could be executed, like others being executed by Taliban, ISIS, Haqqani, back in our country. So these are the good things I like here.

JCvP: What a choice! One place you have all these opportunities, but you or your family might be assassinated. Then over here, you find no opportunities, but your family is safe—at least from the Taliban.

Jawad: [laughs] That's why I told you I was just looking for someone to ask me the questions, and I share everything I have in my heart.

[Pause]

You know, I miss my family... my father, mother, sisters, brothers—and if they were with me these things would not happen.

JCvP: True. They can't come here?

Jawad: They can't come now. I'm not a citizen yet; I cannot bring them. Besides, I use food stamps for my family to eat. Without money and good sponsorship, you cannot bring your family here. And that's the worst thing for refugees.

JCvP: Yes, but it seems to me you too are a kind of veteran, as No One Left Behind says. For your service to our government, you've been shot at and almost assassinated, you've been bombed, your family has been put at risk. You've given great

service, especially in taking on the Taliban on their home court, religion.

Jawad: It would be fair to provide the refugee with some opportunities, not just get to America and good luck. If the issue is trust, well, you know, we sacrificed a lot there. We were trusted when we were exposed to bullets and bombs, working directly with the U.S. Embassy, high clearance; they should still trust me. If they trust me, they should give me citizenship; then I could solve these problems easily. OK, if they're not giving me citizenship, then remove the citizenship requirement for me from the job requirements. At least they could help us find a good job.

Refugees here, they don't have an easy life. There are maybe fifty Afghani families around here, I know twenty or twenty-five of them, but none of them have an easy life. The men all have entry-level jobs, like mine: security, washing cars, working in hotels and restaurants and fast food, in the laundry, in the store as a cashier. The benefits we get are for a disabled person—food stamps and so on—for people who are unable to work. If they stopped the food stamps, none of us would survive. But for people who want to work and can work, and you're putting them in a disabled situation—that's not easy.

I can say for sure that the people in charge of settling refugees have never been refugees themselves. They think that giving a U.S. visa is the best thing. But you're bringing them to a strange place with really tough competition, making their life really hard right when they have to do the most adjustmen. A quick example: Afghanis are used to driving without traffic lights, because there are none in most places. I'm used to that. But here—traffic lights! I'm glad I never got a ticket so far. So many other things like that we're not familiar with, we have to adjust to.

Another example: I've got four kids just learning to speak English. My wife has never been to school and doesn't speak any English. I have to interpret for her when she goes out, when she goes to the doctor. But we have no money for doctors anyway.

Between working outside and translating at home and taking care of everyone, I have no time—no time to relax. In Afghanistan I was working outside, but my brothers were at home

taking care of things. I didn't need to worry about my kids, my wife. But here, no, I have to take care of everything.

If they can't give citizenship, then bring the extended family over so there are people to take care of everyone.

Those making the policies for how to handle the refugees don't understand the problems, don't have the information. They should really review the policies. But I don't know how they would ever hear my voice. They should interview the refugees and make the changes that would let us work to have a better life.

JCVp: Have you experienced prejudice because of your background or your religion?

Jawad: Some, but not a big problem. Terrorism comes from Wahabism, not Islam. I studied Islam. In general all of the religions agree. They disagree on only minor things. They all say, Don't kill anyone. Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, all say the same thing about that. Don't steal anyone's property and so on. This is the common way of all religion. So what's the difference that makes you kill someone in the name of religion? Do you know the problem? All of the religions are polluted by the religious leaders.

There is only one Islam, only one Holy Qur'an, only one God. All of these factions—Sunni, Shia, Wahabi, many different ones, this is all political, manipulating Islam, abusing it, taking money from it, taking advantage of it, not working for it, Islam is a religion of peace. The very first page of the Holy Qur'an says, God is not only the Muslim's god, [He quotes in Arabic, then English]: *God is God for all human beings, all nature!* If God were only for Muslims, God would have created only Muslims. But that's not true. There can be no good reason you would kill someone because you believe in God and you kill him for the sake of God, no, you should not kill him! for religious reasons.

These conflicts are political. ISIS—they are ninety-nine percent against Islam. If you are being in jihad, jihad goes by special rules: not to kill the prisoner, not to kill women or children, or someone who is unarmed. No! There can be no suicide bombing in jihad.

No, you do not make God happy by killing his humans. It is said, “If you kill one innocent person, it is as if you killed the whole world.” There are some things God will not forgive. One of those things is killing innocent people. The Holy Qur’an says, on Judgment Day someone may ask God for forgiveness for killing another, and God will say no, it is not mine to forgive you. If your victim forgives you, then I will forgive you; otherwise you go straight to Hell. God created us for living together, not killing each other.

JCvP: After all you’ve been through, and as we sit here together today, has your idea of what defines “home” changed? To be at home?

Jawad: Do you mean the differences between homes here and there?

JCvP: Just the idea of where your home is—what makes a place home.

Jawad: Yes. A home should be—full of peace. Unfortunately—I don’t have that yet. Physically I’m feeling peaceful, but mentally no. I’m looking and I’m trying to get a home full of peace. There is no good reason why I should have to wait for that—with security, financially, too. Instead I have things to worry about, things to fix. Homes mean peace.





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