

## Morgan Lewis Helps Former Afghan Official, Family Flee To US

By Alison Knezevich

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Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP associate Micah Jones, left, reunited with former Afghan government official Hamid Yousafi in Houston recently after two years of work to help Yousafi and his family flee the Taliban. The pair worked together when Jones was deployed to Afghanistan with the U.S. Army in 2015. (Courtesy of Morgan Lewis & Bockius)

As chaos engulfed Afghanistan amid the withdrawal of U.S. forces in the summer of 2021, Hamid Yousafi typed out a private LinkedIn message to Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP associate Micah Jones.

Yousafi, a deputy minister in the Afghan government, was looking for help to escape the Taliban takeover. He and Jones had met six years earlier, when Yousafi was working as an assistant to a senior Afghan government official and Jones was serving in the U.S. Army as an aide to a brigadier general.

Jones wrote back within minutes to offer assistance, Yousafi told Law360. But the exchange was only the beginning of nearly two years of work by Jones and the firm to help Yousafi and his family reach safety.

This July, Yousafi, 38, along with his wife and five children, arrived in the United States after Morgan Lewis attorneys helped them complete their visa applications. They have settled in Houston, where thousands of other Afghan refugees also have landed.

Getting to the United States was "a process of hope and hopelessness," Yousafi said, filled with frustrations and setbacks, but he credits the firm's persistence and support on his family's immigration case.

"I don't think that anyone else could have been so ... committed to a client," Yousafi said.

Throughout the process, Yousafi was living in hiding from the Taliban, the firm said. Applying for a visa is already complicated, Jones said, but "the additional factors of somebody actively hunting your client made it extremely challenging."

"I, still to this day, am amazed that Hamid was able to keep his phone charged, because as a senior government official, Hamid and his family were on a Taliban hit list," Jones said, adding that Yousafi's home was ransacked three times.

When he first reached out for help, Yousafi did not know that Jones, who attended law school after leaving the military, was a practicing attorney. But both say they forged a sense of connection when they worked together on efforts to fight corruption in the Afghan government.

"He was serving for his country, I was serving for my country, which builds a platform of mutual respect," Yousafi said.

After hearing from Yousafi on LinkedIn in 2021, Jones, a Boston-based litigation associate focused on securities and intellectual property matters, reached out to his military contacts to see if anyone could help the family evacuate Afghanistan. When those efforts were unsuccessful, he turned to Morgan Lewis partner Asa J. "Geordie" Herald, who at the time was the chair of the firm's Veteran Lawyer Network.

"I felt that as a fellow veteran ... that I could reach out to him," Jones said. "And that's when Geordie was really able to tap into the firm's Rolodex and elevate it to another level."



Morgan Lewis & Bockius partner Asa "Geordie" Herald, standing with Hamid Yousafi outside the White House in Washington, D.C. (Courtesy of Morgan Lewis & Bockius)

For Yousafi and his family, this was "a life or death situation" due to Yousafi's position in the Afghan government, Herald told Law360.

Morgan Lewis attorneys put out the word to firm colleagues and their wider networks that Yousafi needed help, "reaching out to anybody and everybody," said Herald, a co-managing partner of Morgan Lewis' Washington, D.C., office.

They received "some incredible support," Herald said, including a letter from two members of Congress intended to give the family "free passage if they needed to approach U.S. or Western troops."

But the firm was unable to help the family get on a flight.

"It was utter chaos," Herald said. "There were attacks going on. There were problems with infrastructure."

The attorneys then turned their efforts to helping the family through the Special Immigrant Visa program, which is meant to help resettle Afghans who have supported the United States' interests.

The program, however, has been riddled with delays, with a recently released report by the State Department's Office of Inspector General finding that efforts to streamline the process have "not eliminated the significant and growing Afghan SIV applicant backlog."

In addition to helping Yousafi with legal paperwork, the lawyers also spent a lot of time "navigating the bureaucracy," Jones said.

"A lot of what Geordie and I did when we were not doing the actual legal work for Hamid was just to engage with these different folks" at government agencies, "and see just where Hamid was in the process," he said. "Because overall, it was a very opaque environment."

This April, the family was finally able to leave Afghanistan for a U.S.-run refugee camp outside Doha, Qatar, where they underwent final visa interviews. Months later, the family flew to the United States.

In leaving home, "you lose everything you had established in the last 30 years," Yousafi said. "The home, the reputation ... the social life, the networks you have built, you lose everything."

Now he is navigating the logistics of starting a new life in Houston, from getting a driver's license to enrolling his children in school. His parents and brother also relocated to the area.

"For the time being, we are doing very well," he said. "The people are very friendly, very welcoming."

He described recently seeing one of his daughters off to her first day of sixth grade.

"I could see ... how happy she was, and how happy she came back from the school," he said. "It was an amazing feeling. I thought everything [was] worth waiting for, because she could not go to school back in the country."

For Jones, who flew to Houston this summer to see Yousafi, his deployment to Afghanistan left him with a deep sense of respect for the United States' Afghan allies, he said.

They "put everything on the line, and risked their own lives to help," as well as those of their families, he said. "There really are no words to describe reuniting with Hamid and his family."

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