

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
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Oral Histories of U.S. Diplomacy in Afghanistan, 2001-2024

AZAAD [pseudonym]

*Interviewed by: Robin Matthewman
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INTERVIEW

Q: It is February 28, 2024. I am Robin Matthewman and today I'm having my first interview for our Afghanistan Project with Azaad. Welcome Azaad.

AZAAD: Thank you.

Background

Q: Can you tell me about your family background and your childhood.

AZAAD: I was born in the southwest of Afghanistan in 1981. Unfortunately, I was not lucky when I was born because that year was a tough year for Afghanistan. Afghanistan was invaded by the Soviet Union and the Russian troops were in Afghanistan. The majority of Afghans fought, and all around Afghanistan the war was going on. Just two months after I was born my dad was killed. That was the first shock for my family, and it would not stop with that.

After one year, I lost my mom. Then when I was just two years old, we had to leave the country because the communist regime was after my uncle, who had taken responsibility for me and my older brother. I was two years old when we had to leave our country. My brother was five and I was two. We left Afghanistan to Iran with my uncle and his family.

Q: To Iran?

AZAAD: Yes, Iran. We went to Iran. Fortunately, we were safe in Iran, at least, but we had our challenges as an Afghan immigrant over there. We lived over there for more than 12 years. I grew up over there. I went to school, but unfortunately, we never could feel part of those communities. The problem was they never included Afghan immigrants as a part of their community. It was very difficult for us. I remember sometimes we had to hide our identity, and there were always challenges from the government.

We had a lot of restrictions. I remember that my uncle was not allowed to work because he was an immigrant. We were not allowed to leave the city when we wanted to go to

other cities in Iran to visit our relatives, our family, our friends. We had to ask permission from the police department to give us a letter to allow us to leave one city for a specific time period, go and come back. That was not a good time, but generally, we were safe, far away from war.

We stayed in Iran until the fall of the communist regime. A few years after the fall of the communist regime, we thought that our country now is free, and we can come back to our country and have our own life. So, we decided to come back to Afghanistan, but unfortunately, the war never stopped in Afghanistan.

Q: You were 14 when you went back?

AZAAD: Yes, I was.

Q: What year was that?

AZAAD: It was 1995.

Q: Did you go back to the southwestern part or did you go to Kabul?

AZAAD: We went to our own province. We stayed over there.. But unfortunately the war continued and we were affected. For several years the war continued.

Q: By this time, the Taliban had taken over.

AZAAD: The Taliban were in power.

Q: They were in power, and they did not have good relations with Iran.

AZAAD: No.

Q: The more religious conservatism of the Taliban, did that affect you?

AZAAD: Not only this part. All aspects of our life were affected by the Taliban rule. I was shocked—as a young person who lived in Iran and suddenly came back to Afghanistan. I was faced with a regime that interfered with all aspects of the life of the people.

Suddenly we saw that they removed the women completely from society. I couldn't see any women outside of their home. No women in the city. The schools were completely closed, especially for the women, completely closed. No woman was allowed to work. The men in the society were assaulted by the Taliban. We were not allowed to walk in the city without a turban. As a young person, I was not allowed to grow my hair. Myself, I was arrested by the Taliban once because I didn't have a turban. They cut my hair in public, in the city, and hit me in the face because I grew my hair. They never allowed shopkeepers to sell items to the women.

I remember in the last year of the Taliban rule, 2000, I had a small shop near my house. I remember. It was like yesterday. A woman came to my shop and asked for something, I was a little bit stressed. I told her, "Please leave my shop. If the Taliban come, they will assault you and me." I was in discussion with the old lady then suddenly the Taliban came into my shop. They locked my shop and took me to the car and took me to their check point, and showed me to the commander. "I arrested the person who was selling an item to a woman. He was talking to a woman and selling the item to the woman."

Q: Really strict. Is that mainly what you were doing—from the time that you came back at 16 years old until after the U.S. came into Afghanistan—you were running a little shop?

AZAAD: Yes, a small shop in the city. I couldn't continue my education and there was no other job to do. There was no system, there were no offices. There was no organization to work with. So, I decided to open a small shop in the town to keep myself busy with something positive.

Q: Had you met your wife yet?

AZAAD: That was the time I met her. That is also a long history, another interesting story.

In Afghanistan, we have a cultural practice that when the boys and girls are very young babies, they decide who should marry whom, and I also was a victim of that harmful traditional practice. I had to go through an arranged marriage from a very young age. But when I became a young man, I decided to break this rule and I was the first rule breaker. I had to fight with my tribe, with my family, with my relatives, to break that rule. After two years, I succeeded, and I was married. It was for love.

Q: Ah, now we know that you're a very good negotiator. Which tribe are you from?

AZAAD: I belong to a Pashtun tribe, I can name it, another Pashtun tribe who forget to speak Pashtun. We have the opportunity to be connected with both main tribes, Pashtun and Tajik, because our tribe is Pashtun, so we connected to the Pashtuns. But our language is Dari. We can easily connect with the Tajik tribe, so we have a good relationship with both tribes. The level of acceptance from both tribes for us is much higher than that.

Q: Where were you on September 11, 2001?

AZAAD: My god, I'll never forget that day. It was a big shock. At that time, I remember there was no electricity in most of Afghanistan, including in my province. There was no TV because it was a big crime to watch TV. We had access to a radio at that time. I remember we were listening to VOA and BBC, our main sources of information. The first time I heard the news from VOA, "The United States is under attack," wow, who

could believe this huge attack happened to the United States. A lot of innocent people were killed and that was shocking.

From that aspect, we were all sad because we could understand the pain of the families who lost their loved ones, because every day we witnessed this in Afghanistan. All Afghans, a lot of them, had lost a family member and we could feel their pain.

But from other aspects, we said that now the world is aware of all the danger from the Taliban to the world and this is the time they are going to take action and we believed this is the time to end terrorism in Afghanistan. We could see the signs that something is going to happen.

Q: Something is going to happen. Why don't you now summarize for me what happened with you after the U.S. and the coalition came into Afghanistan. How did you end up becoming a lawyer, a human rights activist and a U.S. government employee?

AZAAD: When the U.S. forces entered Afghanistan, a lot of things changed. I remember it was early 2002, when the first group of the U.S. Army came to our area. We were following the news from the media that one by one the cities were falling down to the Northern Alliance and to the American forces, starting with Mazar-Sharif, from the northern provinces, then Herat. The Northern Alliance entered my province and the Taliban had to escape because they knew that there was no place to hide. The Taliban had to leave. Fortunately, without any fighting, my province fell to the new government. It was very peaceful.

I remember when a group of the U.S. Army first entered the city, they were walking and the people warmly welcomed them. I'll never forget that time. All the people were around them and they were smiling, welcoming them. Some of the local people who knew English were trying to speak with them, say hello, welcome, thank you. The thank you was a word I heard a lot from the people. They were thanking them for removing the Taliban from Afghanistan.

A lot of things changed. For the first time, several international NGOs and humanitarian organizations entered my province. They were looking for people who could read and write and speak English. That was the best time for me to start to change, to start a new way. I joined MSF - the Médecins Sans Frontières - from France. They were the group Doctors Without Borders. They came with emergency help to the hospital.

Q: You had learned to read and write. Did you speak any English?

AZAAD: A little bit, but not much. But I was good at reading and writing because I was a student at school. I remember at that time, there were a few people who had graduated from high school. The level of education was very low. The people who were educated were in demand. They were looking for educated people to hire, people who had the capacity to write and read, to fill out forms and do normal jobs as an employee. That was a great start for me, at that time.

Beside that employment and working with the MSF, I started my work activities as a civil society activist. During the Taliban regime we had created an undercover team, like a civil society organization by a group of the youth in my province. And every month, once or twice, we would sit together and read books, talk about the news to keep our mind fresh and to do something positive. We were waiting for a change in the future when it happened.

When the new regime came, we could register our organization as the first civil society organization in our province.

Q: What was the goal of this civil society organization?

AZAAD: The first main goal was a voice for public awareness. We knew that this regime, this new government, would start a new era in Afghanistan, which we never experienced before: democracy. The people didn't have any idea of what democracy meant, and we tried to introduce this concept: what is democracy, how can they raise their voice, how can they feel themselves part of the system. All the history of Afghanistan, I can say, were dictatorships: kingdoms, dictatorships. It caused the mentality of the people that they believed the people cannot be part of the system. It was very difficult for us, at the first level, to tell people that this is a wrong thought. They have to change their ideology. They can be part of a democratic society.

After that, as a second goal, we sought to advocate for human rights. We realized that the understanding of the people of human rights was completely wrong. They thought that human rights is a western value and it is a contradiction with the cultural and religious values. They thought that human rights groups tried to remove the scarf from the head of the girls. They are trying to give more power to the women. They're trying to take religion from the people. So, it was difficult. We tried to introduce the value of human rights. We tried to explain that it is not about the western societies, it is not about Christian or Muslim. It is about a human being, and the rights that we have. Nobody gave us these rights. We have these rights because we are human beings.

The third goal, we tried to mobilize the political presence of the youths, especially. The best outcome was in the first election in the history of Afghanistan, the first free election was for the provincial council. Our civil society organization could have a nominee in the election. We had a candidate, and we did a wonderful campaign for him without thinking about his tribe, his ethnicity, his language or his religion, a Muslim, or non-Muslim. Just as an active person, a civil society activist, a dedicated teacher, we supported him, and we got the top number of the vote in our province. That was a wonderful experience.

Q: But you didn't go into politics yourself.

AZAAD: No, because I had to take care of my wife, my children, my family, my job. But part-time, I was a very active presence in the civil society activities.

Q: How long did you stay in your province?

AZAAD: Year by year, the presence of the international community increased in Afghanistan and that gave me the idea for growth. After two years working for the MSF, I had the chance to join another international organization, an Italian NGO named COOPI, or Cooperation International. I worked with them and after that, I joined another international NGO named BRAC.

In 2007, when the United Nations Mission to Afghanistan [UNAMA] opened an office in my province, that was a golden chance for me, with a few years' experience working with some international organizations and improving my English at that time. When I saw a position, human rights assistant at UNAMA, that was the window I was waiting for. Quickly I applied. In late 2007, in December, I had the opportunity to join UNAMA, my dream job, with the United Nations. I had the chance to work for four years in that provincial office in that position.

After that, because an incident happened to me, I had to leave my province. A very sad incident happened to me, and I didn't have any other choice. I had to leave. There was a plan to leave the country, but I decided to just leave the city and move to Kabul. At that time, my five-year-old boy was abducted.

Q: For ransom or as punishment?

AZAAD: For both, because they said for the punishment, if you want to see your son back you have to pay.

Q: 2006 is when the Taliban came back fighting?

AZAAD: 2005, they restarted their activity.

Q: And that was happening in the province where you were living as well?

AZAAD: 2005, the return of the Taliban, for me, was a very sad time. At that time, my uncle—who had the responsibility of me, who I lived with, who was my father after my father died—was appointed to a senior position in my province, and that was a great honor for our family, and all people welcomed this appointment. When the Taliban restarted their activities in 2005, because they didn't have a large presence and they didn't start fighting directly with the U.S. forces, they started with targeted killing. Unfortunately, my uncle was one of the victims who was assassinated by the Taliban. They shot and killed him. That was the year that the Taliban restarted their activities in Afghanistan. But the abduction of my son happened in 2011.

Q: Was it by the Taliban?

AZAAD: The kidnapper was part of the Taliban, but he was also a gang leader. He had his own kidnapping gang. They were involved with kidnapping people from different

provinces for ransom because they had to find resources for their activities. Abduction was one of the main resources for the Taliban.

Q: Were you able to get him back?

AZAAD: Fortunately, yes. The first direct intervention of the United States government, in my life, was in this incident. For more than a month the government tried to track the kidnappers, but they couldn't, because the government didn't have the equipment to track them. The kidnappers called and talked to us every day, because they knew that no one could track their numbers.

I remember at that time the special representative for the United Nations Secretary General, the head of UNAMA, officially brought a letter to the Chief of the U.S. Army in Afghanistan, and asked for support from the U.S. Army to intervene in this incident. They said, we are not allowed to interfere in criminal cases. We have our own mission, but in this specific case, we'll make an exception, and we will get involved. They tracked the kidnappers, and just after one day, the Afghan forces arrested the whole gang and released my five-year-old son safely.

Q: That's wonderful. How many children did you have at that time?

AZAAD: The fourth one had just been born. The child that was abducted was the third one, a few months after the fourth one came to our family. I have four boys.

Q: At this point, you decided rather than leave Afghanistan you would go to Kabul?

AZAAD: At that time, I was happy that all the kidnappers were arrested. They were in jail. Unfortunately, in the Pashtun community, I don't know if you heard about a cultural rule by the name of Pashtunwali. Pashtunwali is when something happens between two families, two persons or two tribes, the tribal elders from both sides sit and talk to solve the problem, and it is mandatory for both sides to accept the decision of the elders. It is a custom from years and decades ago. Nowadays, we have, for example, when there is a system, when there is a policeman, there is a prosecution, judges, jail, everything, still the people think that most of the problems will be solved through Pashtunwali.

The kidnappers all were from one tribe, and when they were arrested, a group of elders, from the kidnappers, reached out to my tribal elders and said, when there is a severe conflict, when a group of the elders and the religious scholars goes to the victim's family and asks them to forgive them, they have to forgive. They said, "Now your son is alive. You got him back and there is no problem. You have to forgive the kidnappers and release them back." I said, "I didn't arrest them and I don't have authority to release them back. This is the government, and you have to reach to the government." They said, "No. This is Pashtunwali. This is the rule and when we reach out to you, you have to release them, otherwise you will face consequences from the tribe." It was difficult for them to understand, this was not in my hands. The kidnappers had already passed their three

stages of trials and were convicted for a long term of imprisonment, and no one except the president could release them.

After the pressure and threats I received from the elders of the other tribe, they talked about the consequences—which unfortunately happens all around Afghanistan every day. I decided to leave my province, but not to leave Afghanistan because I had a lot of things to do. I believed at that time that still we can change. We have to be here. We have to try our best. We have to change society and we have to be part of this change. So, I decided to move to Kabul. It was not easy for them to track my whereabouts because my relatives told them that I had left Afghanistan and am out of Afghanistan.

At that time, my problem was solved thanks to my colleagues in UNAMA who helped me to transfer my position from the provincial office to the Central Region office in Kabul. That was another great opportunity for me to work with more expert people, with international officers. That opened many doors for me. After 12 or 13 years, I had the chance to continue my higher education. Right after reaching Kabul, I enrolled in the university.

Q: You went to school and you studied law.

AZAAD: Yes. When I was in high school, it was my dream to continue my education in the engineering section, because I was very good in mathematics. I love mathematics, and it was my plan to continue my studies as an engineer. But after working in the human rights section, I changed my mind. I decided to go for law because I believe the law is the part that changed a lot of things in Afghanistan. Afghanistan was in great need of modern laws in all aspects. I studied law and political science.

Q: Was it a four-year program, a Bachelor's?

AZAAD: Yes. It was a Bachelor's program, four years.

Q: Were you working during that time?

AZAAD: Yes. When I moved to Kabul, that was not an easy time for me because I realized that my English was not as good as it should be. I required stronger English, so I decided to go to university also for English.

I had to leave home, early morning, 5 a.m., to go to English classes. I took a one-year diploma in English. I had to leave home at 5 a.m. to reach the classes at 6 a.m. to 8 a.m., for two hours then go directly to the office, start working up to 4:30 p.m. in the office with UNAMA as a human rights assistant. After that, leaving the office, going back to university for my Bachelor program studies, starting from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m.

Q: Long days.

AZAAD: For that time, I remember, at least the first year, when I had to leave home, my wife and children were all asleep. And when I came back home, around 9:30 to 10 p.m., all the children were asleep. Just during the weekend, I had a chance to be with my children.

Q: After you finished your degree, did you continue?

AZAAD: Sure. I didn't stop. No one could stop me. I took a short break because of my children, because of my wife. When I finished my education, I had a one-year break, but I continued my self-study, thinking about the next stage. Then, I started another program, this time a Master's degree in criminal law and criminology. That was also another wonderful experience, working with the law school.

I remember that was the time when my office was involved in drafting some wonderful laws for Afghanistan. One was the Elimination of Violence Against Women law; UNAMA provided technical support. For the first time in the history of Afghanistan there was a specific law to protect women's rights. We had a lot of challenges for passing the law.

For the Master's degree, I decided to go deeper in the law by selecting criminal law. I did research on the phenomenon in Afghanistan, which is known as Bacha Bazi, or "dancing boys". I don't know if you heard about that, but unfortunately, there is a phenomenon in Afghanistan where some people use underage boys for sexual abuse, for dancing and for exploitation, a different kind of exploitation.

Q: That's a very tough thing to experience. This was happening even in Kabul?

AZAAD: In Kabul, it was not very public. Mainly it is in the southern part of Afghanistan where we have this issue. One thing that caused me to go for this research, because, when I was with UNAMA, I conducted research for UNAMA, in the southern region of Afghanistan. I had the chance to go over there to Kandahar, meet with the people from Kandahar, from Helmand, Uruzgan, and I could interview some victims. I could talk with some families who lost their children because of this issue. I could collect a lot of evidence. But unfortunately, because of the political pressure of the government, UNAMA couldn't publicize that report and the findings.

Q: I think there's a section on this in the novel, The Kite Runner. That's the only place I've seen it before.

AZAAD: Yes, a very, very short mention. When I joined the U.S. government, I had the chance to be part of another research for the U.S. government on this specific subject.

Work with the U.S. Government

Q: I think it's time now to discuss your work with the U.S. government. How did it come about that you started working with them? Was it with the embassy originally?

AZAAD: Yes. After three years working with the Central Region, I decided to take another position. I applied for a higher position with the HQ office of UNAMA. So, I moved over there and that was a wonderful experience, to work in the HQ office of UNAMA to cover all the provinces of Afghanistan, working with all the provinces. That helped me to have a better understanding of the human rights situation in Afghanistan.

However, once again I was faced with some kind of a security threat. The family members of the kidnappers realized where I was and that caused me to leave Afghanistan and go to Pakistan and stay over there with my family for four to five months.

When I came back, I thought that maybe this is the time to leave the country entirely because if something were to happen to my family, to my children, or to myself, I would not forgive myself. If something happened to me, who would protect my family? I had this pain living without a father, without a guardian. I never wanted my children to have that experience.

So, I decided to apply for a position with the U.S. government because I was aware that if I worked with the U.S. government, after two years, I would be eligible for a special immigrant visa, and I could take my family to the United States. It may take two years working and at least one to two years processing the case, for four years, working with the U.S. government. It would also be a great opportunity and honor to work with the U.S. mission in Afghanistan and to learn new things. After almost a decade working with the United Nations, I thought maybe this is the time to change, to learn new things.

The third cause that encouraged me to apply for a position with the U.S. Embassy was that I thought that I had some responsibility to do something for the U.S. government, because they helped me and this is the time to share my experience, my knowledge, and also learn from them.

I saw a notice of a position with the U.S. Embassy, a human rights assistant position. I thought this is the time. They are looking for me. I applied and it took me one year, the whole procedure: applying, being short-listed, passing the first interview, the second interview, and waiting for the security background check.

Q: And the medical, too.

AZAAD: Yes, medical and everything.

Q: I was in Baghdad, from 2013-2014, and we would start the process of hiring somebody, an Iraqi, and we often needed to wait until our tour was up and our successors had arrived.

AZAAD: It happened exactly the same way for me. When I had my interview, it was a wonderful interview, the human rights officer was in the interview and another person. He said, "He's my successor. I'm going to leave, but you will work with this gentleman."

So, when I joined the team, the person said, "You came at the exact time that I'm leaving and another person is coming."

Q: Who did you end up working with?

AZAAD: I worked with a wonderful person. He was a lovely person. From another aspect, for me as an Afghan who grew up in Iran, we were always taught that the best people are Muslims, and the Christians, and especially the Jewish people, are your enemies. Never think good about them. And this was injected in the mind of the new generation. When I came to Afghanistan, it was the same.

When I joined the U.S. Embassy, that was my first experience working with a Jewish officer. Oh my god, he was the loveliest person. The empathy that he had for the Afghan people, I couldn't believe.

Q: Was John Bass the ambassador?

AZAAD: Yes, John Bass was the ambassador. When I went to the U.S. Embassy for my first interview, when I entered the embassy building, I saw a big flag of the United States in the middle of the yard of the embassy. For a few minutes, I was watching the flag and was imagining one day I would stand under this flag inside the U.S. soil. That is one of the best memories I have. It took me one year after that interview to come to the U.S. Embassy as an employee.

Q: You were working on human rights again and you were able to help them understand the various aspects of what was going on?

AZAAD: What experience I had, especially the wide range of contacts I had, not only as a human rights activist with the U.N., but also as a civil society activist in Afghanistan, that was very useful for the U.S. Embassy. I could connect new faces to the U.S. Embassy and that was very helpful.

I learned some new things at the U.S. Embassy when I joined. The first area that I had to work, and I really loved the work, was on the religious freedom report. I started working closely with the religious minority, not only inside the Muslim community, the Shiite community, but also with the non-Muslims.

There was just one Jewish person in all of Afghanistan because the entire community, all of them, had left Afghanistan. He was there to guard the temple of the Jewish community in Afghanistan. I had the chance to work with him, with the Sikh and Hindu community in Afghanistan. I had the chance to work with people from the Ahmadia community. That was a wonderful experience for me, closely working with the National Security Council of the Afghanistan government to draft the national strategy to counter violent extremists. For me, it was a new experience.

At that time, I realized how important it is for the society and the political community in Afghanistan to deal with the core aspect that caused decades of war in Afghanistan--violent extremism. This was the issue that I was interested in and worked on a lot, and learned a lot, besides minority rights, persons with disability, women rights, peace and reconciliation.

Q: How many Muslim employees were in the embassy?

AZAAD: I heard that Afghanistan had the biggest U.S. embassy outside of the United States. It was the biggest embassy in the world with, I think, 2,800 direct and indirect Afghan employees. That was like a small town. A lot of employees in the embassy.

Q: What was happening on the security side? This was the period that President Trump, and his administration, was trying to negotiate the exit of the U.S. troops. The Taliban was still fighting, but they were trying to avoid fighting with U.S. troops.

AZAAD: I remember that that was the second shock to the Afghan people. The first was in 2014, when President Obama decided to reduce the number of American troops in Afghanistan. After that, the presence and the power of the Taliban increased and they captured a lot of districts, they were seen all around Afghanistan, this time reducing the number of troops in Afghanistan caused the Taliban to be more powerful. That was the first shock.

The second shock was the start of the negotiations, the Doha talks. There was a sense of mixed expectations among the Afghans. Some of them were hopeful that it would have a positive outcome. After more than four decades of war, this is the time to end the war. But half of Afghanistan, they expected something different with the U.S. leaving Afghanistan. They knew the U.S. was tired of fighting for a long time in Afghanistan. If they were to leave Afghanistan, many people feared Afghanistan would again experience internal war and it would go back to the terrorists. This was the mix of hope and concern.

Day by day we witnessed the Taliban were not willing to enter into the Afghan peace dialogue and they were not ready to talk to the Afghan government and Afghan people. That increased the concern. Most people were not happy with what was going on with the Doha process. We felt the people in the Afghan government were excluded from this process.

Q: By 2020, John Bass left. Then we had a new ambassador. We had the conclusion of the U.S. agreement with the Taliban. In mid-2020, there was hope for a Taliban dialogue with the Afghan people. What was the feeling in the political section? I should note that we had the COVID pandemic at the same time. What was going on for you in 2020 and were you starting to work on your Special Immigrant Visa or SIV in earnest at this point?

AZAAD: Yes. At that time, I applied for my SIV. One day after completing the second year, I applied. I already had my package ready, waiting for the exact time to apply.

At that time, I remember when we had something important happen in Afghanistan and a task force was formed. The political team—Afghan colleagues with the American officers—we had to stay in the embassy and track the feedback to see what the people are saying, what is the reaction, positive, negative, talk to the people. We had the task force when we had an election, especially the presidential election for Afghanistan, Parliament elections. And every hour we had to send a report to the leadership.

Q: This is the election between Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah?

AZAAD: Yes, Abdullah Abdullah.

Q: And like all of them, there was a dispute over who won. In this case, both sides declared victory.

AZAAD: Yes. We also had to track the reactions, when the agreement was signed in Doha. To be honest, at that time when the agreement was signed, there was hope. There was hope in Afghanistan. The people believed that there would be cause for positive changes. People also believed that war was not the best way. We knew that if the war continued, it would be forever and it would take lives from all parts of the country.

Also, the people believed that we have to give some sacrifice for peace. To expect to have the same system, same regime, same democratic system, but also have the Taliban stop the war would not be possible. We had to share. We had to make some sacrifices. They also would have to make some sacrifices and start a new era for Afghanistan. There was hope and the people expecting some positive things to happen. But unfortunately, no one expected what happened. Everything completely changed. It was somehow, when we talk with the people now, they say it was not like an agreement. It was more like surrendering the country.

They are not accusing just the U.S. government or international community. They are accusing, first, the Afghan leaders for the failure of using this great opportunity for two decades, having the strong support of the entire world. With all the conflict and dispute between the U.S. and Russia or China, they were in tune with Afghanistan. They were supporting the system in Afghanistan. But unfortunately, our leaders couldn't use this opportunity properly. They were involved in their own things and Afghanistan lost this opportunity.

COVID hits and Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) slow down

Q: What was it like during the Covid pandemic??

AZAAD: For this historical point, I have a sharp memory. Let me explain the background and then I will link it to the pandemic.

Before March, I decided after two years working with the political section to change to learn new things. I accepted a big risk and applied for a position with USAID as a project

manager specialist with the governance, human rights and rule of law team. I thought it was the best chance for me, so I applied. I got the position and I signed the contract on March 15th. I had a goodbye party with the political section, with the State Department, with my colleagues. On the 15th, I went to my new office on the upper stairs, in the same building, in the U.S. Embassy compound, with the USAID. On the 16th, I received my new laptop, my new phone, everything. On the 17th, we were locked down at home.

That was the negative part of the pandemic that affected me. For one year, I didn't have a chance to complete my training with USAID, or to start my new job with USAID. I was stuck at home.

We were paid. I was working with the other officers and was providing support for them. But I couldn't work as an independent project manager specialist on the project because I didn't pass the training. The pandemic for the U.S. Embassy started on March 17, 2020. I will never forget that day.

Q: Then you worked at home?

AZAAD: I was in Kabul and my home was not far from the Embassy, but it took around an hour driving. The distance was not too far. Because of the traffic, it took one hour. Otherwise, it was just a 10 minutes' drive.

Q: The following year, did you see a lot of death and illness?

AZAAD: Unfortunately, we had a lot of deaths, all around Afghanistan. Because for one thing the government didn't take serious actions to protect the people, and also because of the low level of the knowledge of the people for protecting themselves, using, for example, the mask, social distance. And these things caused a big number of deaths in Afghan society, especially in the rural areas.

In the cities, like Kabul, because it was so crowded, the pandemic was bad. You could see the crowd all around Kabul city. Sometimes when we needed something urgent and we had to drive, I saw the crowd in the city. It scared me, how people walked close to each other in this situation. I remember some people who were aware, if they had to go out, for example, to get something for their family, they would use two or three masks and they were using gloves. But most of the people, unfortunately, didn't use masks and gloves, and didn't take steps for social distancing. This caused a big number of deaths in Afghanistan.

Q: And your family was safe?

AZAAD: We also had, unfortunately, some losses. My grandma passed away at that time. For me, my grandma was, my mom and also my dad. Because after losing my parents, she also took care of me and my brother. She was with us always. She was the mother of my dad. Losing her in that situation also was a lot of pain.

My father-in-law also passed away at that time during the pandemic, and that was a very shocking moment for my wife because we were in Kabul at that time. My in-laws were back in the province. My father-in-law was sick. I called them and told them to send him to Kabul to take care of him because there were no good doctors and medication in the province. Immediately when I saw him, I brought him to the best hospital in Kabul. But unfortunately, it was too late, and after a few days we lost him. These two losses were the biggest losses we had during that time. Also, some other friends and relatives passed.

Q: Did it affect your work?

AZAAD: It affected everything, all aspects of our lives, our jobs, what we had to do, the projects, the programs on the ground. At that time, I was with USAID, and we had to monitor some very important humanitarian projects on the ground. Everything was stopped in a lot of cases, and this caused a backlog for SIV applications. The cases already in the queue and the new cases added to the big backlog, and it took longer.

For the first year, we could never go to the office. After one year, a little bit changed and the level of danger decreased and we could go in once a week.

Q: I think in December or January 2021, the vaccine arrived for the embassy. Were you able to get a vaccine for your family?

AZAAD: That was also a wonderful moment for us. That was some of the good and bad feeling senses both. Because when we could see that we have the chance to receive the vaccine, but our relatives, our friends, our loved ones, they were at risk and they could not receive the vaccine. That was not a good feeling. But we received the first dose and second dose of the vaccine. The U.S. Embassy did a great job. Later, they brought more vaccines and they allowed us to bring our families. The first level was for the employees. The second was for the wives and children and parents. And then they increased the number to five relatives. We could bring our relatives to receive the vaccine at that point.

Q: You started working once a week, coming into the office, and the projects were starting.

AZAAD: First, I had to pass the training. That took me a few months. After that, I started working on projects. But the implementation and the activity had slowed down. The workload was low. It was not like before, but I had a chance to start working on some projects and helping the officers in the office.

Q: I think it was in April of '21 that President Biden made the decision that they would continue with the withdrawal of troops.

AZAAD: Everything changed. But the security situation, unfortunately at that time in Afghanistan, got tense and it also affected our nation. And we continued the low level of presence in the office because there were high levels of security risks in Afghanistan, in Kabul.

Q: Did the SIVs get issued at some point?

AZAAD: Actually, I received the first approval, the chief of mission approval. After that, every few weeks I received an update, saying your case is on the next level. Finally in June, I had the visa interview at the U.S. Embassy for my family. That was the first time my wife and children had a chance to see my office and working environment. They came to the U.S. Embassy. They saw the U.S. Embassy. Unfortunately, I couldn't take them to my office, but at least they had a chance to see the yard, the building, the consulate.

Q: How many children did you have at this point?

AZAAD: Four. I have four boys. We missed a daughter in our family, but I say to my American friends when they ask the number of the children, I say, according to Afghanistan standard, we are a small family of six people. But according to the U.S. standards, we are a big family of six.

Evacuation from Kabul

Q: At what point did you start to get worried about staying in Afghanistan?

AZAAD: Up to the last week, we didn't expect the situation to get worse like it did. In June, I had my interview, and in July, I received my visa. But unfortunately, one of my children, my oldest son, had his medical refused and they asked for further examination. Later, I realized why. Because when they took the chest x-ray, we have to hold our breath to take the x-ray of the chest for the TB test. My oldest son is a person with disabilities. He's an autistic person.

I forgot to say one of the main things that encouraged me to join the U.S. mission and to move from Afghanistan to the United States, it was because of my oldest son. He's a person with disabilities. He's an autistic person. Unfortunately, autism is still unknown in Afghanistan. There is no special education for autistic people in Afghanistan, and in the society, the people, the community, they don't know how to behave with an autistic person. My son suffered a lot from the society, from the school, from the people. And this was the cause that I decided to move to the United States to build a better life for him, to help him to learn new things, to give him a chance to live without teasing, without harm.

Later I realized, because he couldn't understand about holding his breath and taking the x-ray, they said there is a suspicion of TB and we have to do in-depth tests for him. And we didn't receive the visa then. If we had received the visa for the whole family in June, everything was packed and ready to leave the country in June. We weren't expecting the fall of the government and the system, but we had a plan.

They said it would take two months. We had the interview in June, and we received the visa in July. They said, in late August, you can expect to receive the result of my son's

test, and if it was negative, he would receive the visa. But in early August, when the provinces started falling, it got us worried.

We had experience of the Taliban during their first ruling in Afghanistan and we were here when they took the city and occupied some places. It made us worried. I was thinking maybe they'll start killing everyone, all the people who work with the government, who work with the international community.

After the first province fell, on the same day, the second and third provinces fell. The next day, another province, the next day another province, and that was the time it made us worried. I started communicating with my officers and requested them to intervene in the process of the visa for my son to expedite the visa. If I received the visa for my son, immediately, I was going to leave the country.

Q: Who were you talking to?

AZAAD: She was my direct supervisor. She tried her best. I really appreciated all her efforts. She communicated with the ambassador, with the consular office, with the security section. But unfortunately, in the United States it is the system which decides, not the person. The system mostly never accepted exceptions. We had to go through the system. So, it didn't work and we had to wait.

It was around the 13th or 14th of August that we received a message from the medical section that fortunately, the test was negative, and they were going to send the results to the consular office to issue the visa and you will receive the visa in the last week of August. But unfortunately, on August 15, Kabul fell. We realized that everything was gone when we heard that President Ghani had left the country, and we realized that it was the end of the system.

I remember it was the 15th, when my son, from the window, saw a pickup car with the Taliban flag, in the street, in Kabul. He started screaming, "Dad! The Taliban are here! The Taliban are here!" My wife was shocked. When I came to the window and saw the Taliban car in the city, I realized we had lost everything. That was a very painful time for all Afghans, I remember. We couldn't believe, after two decades building our country, we had lost everything in less than a month.

Q: What did you do at this point?

AZAAD: When I saw the Taliban flag, immediately I started collecting my ID card, my office card and documents, my appreciation letter, my honor awards, almost everything that showed that I worked with the U.S. government and took them to the roof and set them on fire, destroyed them. I had to. I just kept my U.S. Embassy badge and our passports. I asked my wife to keep them somewhere safe.

Q: You had to, to be safe.

AZAAD: Exactly.

We didn't know what's going to happen. Just the imagination we had was from our previous experience living under the Taliban. They started searching the houses. Also, as a human rights officer, as a human rights activist with UNAMA, one of my main responsibilities was documenting human rights violations of the Taliban. I, myself, documented a case where the Taliban had stopped cars and searched the people, and executed a person who had a bank card. Just for the bank card, he was executed. I had the experience. I remember, they killed a 16-year-old boy who said, "I'm going to Kabul to enroll in the military academy." And this was the understanding I had of the Taliban. They wanted to search. No one could stop them. So, that was the first step we had to take.

Then I said to my children, explaining to them, if the Taliban enter, what to do. If they asked, especially the youngest, what your dad is doing, what is his job, you have to say, "My dad has a small shop in the town selling, for example, mobile phones." Just telling them how to act with the Taliban.

Q: Then what happened? What happened when the embassy moved to the airport?

AZAAD: We were in communication with our officers. Every minute we received emails and messages from our offices. I destroyed everything except my mobile and laptop because of the communication. I was thinking if they entered the building, because I'm upstairs, I would have a chance to throw them somewhere or do something. But every minute we were in contact with our offices and every minute they showed their commitment. They said, "We are in contact with the Taliban to not harm you. We will try our best to take you out. We are just waiting for the best moment, for the best time to take you out."

At that time, there was a crowd at the airport. Thousands of people were on the runway. It was impossible for the U.S. forces to start flying from the airport, to take out the friends and colleagues from the airport.

I remember when we were in the United States, a few months after our evacuation, we had a town hall with Ambassador John Bass. He had gone back to Afghanistan to take control of the operation process. I remember at that time Ambassador John Bass was not ready to leave Kabul. He said, "I will be here until I take all my friends and colleagues out. After that, I will leave Afghanistan." We all appreciated that.

I remember he said at that town hall that this was a difficult moment for us. We had to decide what to do with all the crowds inside the airport to allow us to start the evacuation process. And we took a very tough decision, a difficult decision to take all the people without documents, without anything, without background checks, take all the people out from the runway, from the airport. That allowed us to start the evacuation process and take our friends out.

For three days, we were waiting for the embassy. Their advice was to stay at home. Don't move. Don't go out. Wait for our signal. We will let you know when we are going to arrange buses and arrange security to take you to the airport. Because there were thousands of people outside at the airport, at the gate, waiting for the opportunity to enter the airport.

On the third day, something happened to us that made us more worried. The embassy advised us to stay at home. Don't go out. But on the third day, a group of the Taliban reached our building. They were looking for a politician. They entered the building and searched his apartment, but he was not there. And they left the building, and that was a dangerous sign for us. If they had known that a U.S. embassy employee was there, they would have come and taken me.

Another colleague of mine also was in the same building with me, so we both decided to leave. We wouldn't wait for the embassy. We couldn't wait. It might take weeks. And this time if they came back, maybe something would happen. So, we decided to leave ourselves.

We took two taxis and moved. Before, we both talked to our children, when you see the Taliban checkpoint, we told them don't be afraid, don't panic. We didn't want to attract attention if they stopped us and asked something. We told them what you have to say, where we are going, don't say we are going to the airport, say we are going to our relatives. We took taxis and moved to the airport.

It was August 18, three days after the fall of the city, when we reached near to the airport, around three kilometers, far from the gate, because of the crowd, the taxi stopped and the driver said he couldn't go ahead. "You have to walk."

Q: Three kilometers?

AZAAD: Yes. We got out of the taxi and started walking. We didn't take our luggage. We just had two backpacks and the clothes we were wearing. We started walking through the crowd and trying to find a way to go ahead.

Around 500 meters from the gate, there were some security guards, not from the Taliban. They were former Afghan security forces who were still working, cooperating with the American forces, to maintain the security of the outside of the gate. They stopped the people and checked their ID cards, and tried to allow the people who had some kind of proof for the evacuation. That was a good sign for me. From this part, the crowd decreased. At the checkpoint, there were T-walls and they didn't allow people to pass.

So, I showed my visa. The main concern for me was that on August 15, when the government fell, the U.S. Embassy had decided to destroy all documents, including the passports, visas, everything, including my son's passport. My oldest, autistic, son's passport was destroyed in the embassy. I was worried that if I made it to the airport without a passport, without a visa, maybe we would not be allowed to leave the country. I

told my wife if they didn't allow our son to leave, you can go with our three children. I will stay with my oldest son to see what will happen. My wife was worried, and she was shocked, how can I leave Afghanistan without you, without my oldest son. How can I leave you here in Afghanistan with the Taliban. But we didn't have any other choice. We had to.

When I showed my own passport and visa then they allowed me to pass the checkpoint and I thought the crowd had ended. But when I passed the T-wall, I saw more crowds over there.

Q: You passed with your family, too.

AZAAD: Yes, with my family. Fortunately, because of the crowd, they didn't ask for passports from everyone. My passport allowed me to take my family. Those 500 meters, from that T-wall, through the gate, was the longest journey in my life. It took me seven hours. When we looked back, we could see the Taliban, Taliban flags, Taliban forces. They were looking at the people. They were laughing. They looked on the crowd and on the people who were leaving as their enemies and those who had helped their enemies, who were running away. They were celebrating their victory and laughing at the people who were leaving the country.

In front of us, thousands of people and crowds were between us and the gate. We had to push our way through. The Afghan security forces, who tried to control the crowd, were shooting in the air.

My youngest son--he was just 11 years old--started crying. When I tried to make him calm, he told me, "Dad, let me cry. I'm afraid. I see guns shooting for the first time. Let me cry." I said, "It's okay, my son. Cry."

It took us seven hours to reach the gate. In front of the gate, there were some American officers and someone from the Navy. I found a chance to show my embassy badge and told them I'm an embassy employee. I'll never forget that moment when the American Navy saw my badge, he took a step ahead in the crowd and asked me the first question, "How many people are you?" I said, "Six." He called another soldier, "Take these six people in." We started crying, all of us. We couldn't believe that we made it. From leaving our apartment to entering the airport, it took us around 10 hours.

Q: And your friend who was in a different taxi, your colleague?

AZAAD: We had taken two taxis. In the crowd, we were separated. He entered first. After him, I entered into the airport. When he saw that I had made it, we hugged each other and started crying.

Q: Which gate was it? There were different gates.

AZAAD: It was not Abbey Gate where the explosion happened. It was the North Gate.

Q: You entered and then what happened?

AZAAD: When we passed every stage, we thought that this was the end of our problems. But we faced another challenge. When we faced the first checkpoint, we saw the crowd, which took us seven hours to enter the gate. When we entered the gate, at least we felt safe. We couldn't see the Taliban. We just saw the U.S. forces all around us, making us calm. Don't worry. You are safe here. You are with us. Don't worry. But there was a long queue with thousands of people in line.

Q: Was there food and water?

AZAAD: The U.S. soldiers immediately started distributing food and water to the people inside the gate. There were a lot of snacks for the children, which made my son happy. He stopped crying and started eating, but it made us so tired, waiting, waiting, waiting. It took us all night, for the whole entire night, we were in the queue from one registration to the second, from the second to the third, from third to the fourth and fifth. It took all night. We couldn't sleep all night.

Fortunately, it was not a cold time. It was warm. August has calmer weather and is hot and warm, and it would not harm the people at night. Otherwise, it may have caused death for a lot of people in the cold weather, who stayed in the lines all night.

Next day, finally in the afternoon, all registration, fingerprints, the check passed and ended for us, and we had to wait for a flight. We were on the ground, and we had a chance to sleep.

Q: You were inside the terminal.

AZAAD: Inside the airport, but on the open ground. On the open ground, we had a chance to sleep. There were a lot of bathrooms that we could use. I remember we had also the first experience eating the U.S. packed food.

Q: MREs [Meals Ready to Eat]?

AZAAD: Yes. They brought everything they had. That was the feeling, that the U.S. Army shared everything they had. They said, this is the food that we eat. We can share it with you. We don't have anything special. This is the food we are eating and you can eat it. And they had respect, for example, they didn't bring the pork for the Afghan people because they knew that they couldn't eat it. They brought beans, they brought chicken, they brought soup and water.

Q: At this point, were you with other embassy employees?

AZAAD: Yes. Both families were together. When we entered the airport, we were both together. All day and the second night, we were in the queue in the airport, but we could

hear the guns shooting and we thought maybe they might attack the airport. But it was mostly celebrating gunshots in the city. Every minute, we were thinking if they fire a rocket at the airport, the evacuation process would stop. If they changed their mind and decided to attack the airport, everything would be lost. We will be stuck forever here in Afghanistan.

Those two days in the airport were tough days for us, every minute. We could see that every minute there was a flight leaving the airport. They came to the airport, the people were put on the aircraft, and they left. That was an ongoing process, and we were waiting for the time to leave Kabul.

Finally, it was August 19, after midnight, almost August 20, at midnight, they asked us to stay in the long queue for the next flight. It was a C-17 military aircraft that later on, when I researched, I realized this is a flight which has the capacity for 55 passengers, but we were 550 people on that aircraft.

My family and my friend's family were the last families who were called for this flight. We had to sit on the door. And when the door started closing, it was like this [gestures folding up]. We had to sit here at the end of the door. When the door started closing, it went up. And they had to tape us down so as not to fall down on the other people. When the flight left Kabul, that was the moment we could feel that now we are safe.

Doha and Germany

Q: Did you go to Doha? Where did you go?

AZAAD: We went to Doha. Again, we thought everything was done. Now we are in a safe place. But as soon as we were dropped off from the airplane, we had to wait, another line, another registration, another process. And we couldn't sleep again. We had to wait in the corridor, one by one. Fortunately, they didn't ask for my son's passport, visa or anything. That was a good point. In the corridor, I was worried. They said, "Don't worry. We are taking out all the people here in the airport. Everyone, we will take them out. Don't worry. We are not going to ask for the passport or visa. We will take you out, but when we enter the U.S. it will be another process. We cannot say anything whether you will be allowed to take your passport or visa or not, we cannot say anything."

I was happy that finally we could leave Afghanistan, but still, we had concerns, maybe they won't allow my son to enter the U.S. I could not leave him alone in Doha, Germany or any other U.S. camp with his disabilities. Again, it was our decision that I would stay with him and the rest could go. My second son is a very intelligent, lovely boy. He said, "Don't worry, I will stay with my brother and you can go." At that time, he was 19. He said, "No, my mom needs you. My brothers need you. You have to be with them. I will stay with him and then you can go. No problem."

Q: In Doha, a lot of people ended up staying for a long time. Were you able to leave quickly?

AZAAD: We were lucky. One thing we could see was one of our former U.S. officers in Doha. She was helping the evacuation process. She had been the officer of my other colleague, not mine. She knew him. "Don't worry. We are here to help you. We will take you to the U.S. safely. Don't worry." And she helped them. After two days, we could leave Doha.

Again, it was a C-17 with more than 500 people, and this was a long trip to Germany. It took us, I think, more than five hours from Doha to Germany, but that was a good feeling. I was telling my children and my wife, you have a chance also to visit Europe. But we were in the camp. We didn't have the chance to see any places. We were in a big camp. We were a part of the first group which entered Germany. Very quickly, U.S. forces had prepared a camp.

Q: This was a military base.

AZAAD: Military base, yes. They fixed a camp for hundreds. They separated the families. The ladies and children should stay in the hanger, in the shelter, but the males should stay in the tents. The weather was much colder than in Kabul and Doha, especially at night. And I could see that every day hundreds more Afghans entered the camp. In just two days, the camp was full. I heard that we were 5,000 individuals in the camp.

There were three camps, Camp Number 1, 2, and 3 at that time, as I remember. Over there I saw three other colleagues from the U.S. embassy in the camp and that was a good moment. We met each other and we made a group. We decided to help the U.S. Army in the camp. So, we went to the commander of the camp and introduced ourselves, and said we are ready if you need any translation, any help with the management, the food distribution, we are ready to help, and that worked. We were warmly welcomed and during that time, we could help them.

We managed food distribution for the people. When there was an announcement, we tried to translate into Pashtun and Dari for the people. When there was a patient that needed to be taken care of, we were over there to translate for them with the doctors and nurses. That was a good time. We had something to do, something positive to do.

Q: How long were you there?

AZAAD: We were over there for five days. Again, we were lucky and they also appreciated the help we provided to the U.S. medical forces over there. As soon as the flights started from Germany to the United States, they put our names on the first list. For the first time during the evacuation, we had a chance to experience a commercial flight. This was a special flight. It was a charter flight, and my children even had a chance to sit in business class because it was empty. The flight attendant told the children, "If you want you can enjoy the business class." That was a wonderful experience.

My family and my friends were the first group of Afghans who had a chance to move from Germany to the United States.

Arriving at Dulles

Q: Did you land at Dulles Airport?

AZAAD: Yes, Dulles Airport.

Q: This was your first time going to the United States?

AZAAD: Exactly, yes. A new chapter, a new start. Everything new. I have a lot of things to talk about after landing at Dulles Airport.

Q: It is February 29, 2024 and this is my second interview with Azaad for our Afghanistan Project.

I wanted to ask you a couple of questions about the experiences you were describing last time and then we'll go ahead with what happened when you got to the United States. Can you describe the conditions inside Kabul Airport when you and your family were waiting?

AZAAD: We were at the airport for two days. The first thing, the crowd. It was super crowded. The U.S. forces tried to make it organized. They set up a temporary location to register. This registration took place, at least three times, in three stages. In the first stage, we had to wait for hours in the long queue. They took our names, age, occupation, the causes why we were there. Then we had to wait again for the buses to move us to another part of the airport, which was far from the entrance gate. They tried to take all the people as far as possible from the gate, because from one side, maybe something happened from the other side, people were coming in and they were trying to make space.

Q: You're not talking about the airline gate. You are talking about the gate through which people entered the military side of the airport?

AZAAD: Right. Onto the base. After that, when we moved from one location to the other location, again, we had to stay for several hours in the long queue, in the lines. This time we had to be fingerprinted, and again, another procedure for the registration, which took the entire night, the first night when we entered the airport. We couldn't sleep. The children and wife couldn't sleep.

Q: Who was doing this work? Was it the military?

AZAAD: Yes, the U.S. military. They were leading this process. They took care of the process, the U.S. Army.

Q: This is August 19?

AZAAD: Yes. On the evening of the 18th, we could enter the airport and it took us until noon, August 19. When we entered, we couldn't sit. We had to wait in the long queue. It took us to around noon.

Q: Was there any food, water, bathrooms?

AZAAD: The bathroom shortage was a big challenge, but they tried to bring moveable bathrooms over there and put them in some places. They provided water to the people and also packaged food. The U.S. Army shared what they had. It was an emergency and they didn't expect it would happen. They shared what they had, but it was at least something to survive on.

We were much safer inside than on the outside. But we were worried because we could hear the voices and the shooting, and we knew that the whole city was under control of the Taliban. It continued up to August 19, afternoon time. Then the procedures were completed, and we had to wait for the flight.

There were flights every hour, but the number of airplanes was limited because they didn't have access to all the airport runways. There was limited access to the airport and each hour, every few hours, an aircraft could land.

Q: Did you get to meet some of the people that were around you?

AZAAD: Yes. A lot of people, women, children were all around. When they finished the registration process, all of us there in the open ground were just waiting for our name to be called.

Q: What percentage would you say, what portion of them, were people like you that had some ties to the United States government?

AZAAD: I cannot say, but I knew the evacuation process for the U.S. embassy employees had not started when we entered through the gate. Later, when we left Kabul, after a few days, we got informed, because we were in contact with our friend and with our office, we got informed the evacuation process started for them. They provided shuttle buses, and they took the employees and their families from their home with the security guard, and transferred them to the airport.

Also, a lot of people belonged to the other European countries. Other allies' embassies were over there. I talked to some people, German troops, U.K., Canadian and French, they called their allies and friends and colleagues to help them reach the airport, and they facilitated their entry into the airport. There were also a lot of other families and people who belonged to, for example, NATO forces or other embassies or other international organizations, but for sure, a big group of the people also somehow linked with the U.S.

government, the USAID projects, U.S. government project with the security section, a lot of people.

Q: Were there people that had just gotten into the airport somehow?

AZAAD: Exactly. Because the proper evacuation process was not started, just the people trying to reach the airport through the gate. They were trying to find a way through the crowd to enter the gate.

Q: When you got to Germany, you were there for five days.

AZAAD: In Germany, yes, we were there for five days. They decided to prepare a space for the Afghan evacuees and immigrants in Germany, and we were the first group. When we entered the camp, we realized there was not anyone before us in this camp. They provided hot food and also water, and quickly they set up a big number of toilets for the people to use, bathrooms. The problem was there was no bathroom to wash our bodies, which we badly needed because we had spent two days in the Kabul Airport, two days in Doha, then to Germany. We got there on the fifth day we left our home.

Q: You didn't have a change of clothes and there were no showers.

AZAAD: Yes. The next day, we realized that the people of Germany were informed, especially the people around the U.S. camp, that a large number of the Afghan people were evacuated to this camp. They donated a lot of shoes and clothes to the people. They brought what they had. The next day we got informed that a lot of clothes and shoes, and these things are provided by the people of Germany who live in the town near to the U.S. military camp. And we helped the U.S. forces to distribute the clothes and shoes to the people.

One thing I forgot to mention. When we were in the airplane, the U.S forces asked everyone to leave their luggage and backpacks at the airport. They said, "We will take your backpacks and luggage later. Just leave them here because we want to load the airplane with as many people as possible." In a space of ten pieces of luggage, we can bring out two more people. So, we left everything we had. When we entered Germany, we had just the clothes we were wearing and they were not usable anymore after five days, especially during two days in the hot weather of Doha.

The clothes that were provided by the people, donated by the people of Germany, in the town, were very useful. But for the first three days we didn't have water to wash our bodies. On the third day, the U.S. forces set up a mobile bathroom. They provided it with hot water and bathroom showers for the people. But every day, access to the bathroom and to the toilets was difficult because the number of Afghans increased. Every day, hundreds of people entered the camp. I remember on the fourth and fifth days, we had to wait in the long queue at least an hour to take a shower or to go to the bathroom.

Q: Was everybody in that camp, the 5,000 people that ended up there, were they all going to the United States, going to Dulles Airport in Washington DC?

AZAAD: I think the 5,000 people in Germany, that first group of Afghans who entered Germany, all of them were going to the United States.

When the flight landed at Dulles Airport, we realized that everything really had changed. Because when we entered the Kabul Airport, we thought that everything ends, but no, another challenge started. When we left Kabul Airport, we thought it changed, and we are now free. But in Doha, we faced other challenges, in Germany, also. When we entered the U.S. and the flight landed in the Dulles Airport, we could feel that everything, the challenges, the difficulties remained behind.

It was very welcoming in the airport and the process for entry was so quick for us. We were the first flight that landed in Dulles Airport from Germany. We were taken by bus to a place, if I am right, it was Dulles Expo Center. It was a big hanger. And I never, ever will forget how I felt when we entered the gate of the Dulles Expo Center. I was the first one with my wife and children to enter the hall. I saw a group of people, men, women, young, old, they were over there, and as soon as we entered, they stood up and started clapping with smiles. Oh my god.

Q: So, there were people applauding as you came off the plane?

AZAAD: They were in the Expo Center and they started clapping with smiles, welcoming the people. We couldn't stop crying. That was a very warm welcome. The first word I heard from a young lady who came to greet us, said, "Welcome home." That was a touching word. At that time, it was our feeling that all the tiredness we passed during the last nine, ten days, almost 12 days, three days in Kabul Airport, at home before moving to the airport, in Doha, in Germany, everything gone with that warm welcome.

Q: What day did you arrive in D.C.?

AZAAD: It was exactly August 28, because every year we celebrate this day.

That was a very warm welcoming. We saw a lot of beds over there waiting for the people who were tired to take rest. Just quickly register and they said you can take a rest. Just take a rest. There was hot food, fresh food, fresh water, juice, everything. Then on the next day, they took us to other places, to the camps they prepared.

We were over there for a few hours. I saw a group from USAID. That was interesting for me. I reached out to them and said, "I am from USAID. I work for USAID." That was a great moment for me to see. Also, I realized a lot of people over there were volunteers. They voluntarily came to help with the process. When I asked them, they said, "We are volunteers just helping for the resettlement of the people."

We were over there for a few hours and that was the best time. We had a chance to take a rest, especially the children. When they saw clean beds with the nice pillow and with the blanket to take rest, they put themselves on the beds and took a long nap. For a few hours, they had a chance to take a rest.

Fort Lee, Virginia

Q: Where did you go from Dulles?

AZAAD: After that, they took us to a military camp, I think it was Fort Lee in Virginia. But it was a nice place. I realized that it was a hotel in the military university, I think, as I remember, or military camp, but it was a hotel. They provided us with a very nice suite with a TV, with hot water, and everything prepared over there.

I had my visa and the people who had their visa, they could leave directly from the airport and their families, friends, and anyone they had in the United States, they could take them from over there. My friend, my Afghan colleague who was with me, had the visa for the entire family, and they left Dulles Airport directly to the apartment, which one of our former colleagues who moved to the U.S. a few months before, helped him and rented an apartment for him in advance. He could leave directly from the airport to his apartment.

As I mentioned last time, my son didn't have any documents. Without a passport, without a visa, he entered the United States. They advised me to stay for a few days or a few weeks in the camp. They said, "We will process the documentation for him. Otherwise, you will face challenges in the future. It will be good to stay in the camp for a few days because you have all of your passports and visas except for one person in the family. We accepted that advice and we moved to Fort Lee and stayed over there for a few days.

Q: Did you have any family or friends to help you with an apartment?

AZAAD: Yes. Most of the former U.S. Embassy colleagues were in the U.S., some of them in Virginia and in the DMV area.

Q: They all had SIVs.

AZAAD: Yes, exactly. They had worked with the U.S. Embassy, and they had received their SIVs. I had worked with some of them. When I joined the embassy, they were already in the SIV process before the fall of Afghanistan.

Maryland

Q: Where did you go after Ft. Lee?

AZAAD: I had to stay in the camp for 22 days. Up to September 21, I was in the camp for processing the documents of my son. After that when he received his I-94 and

everything, then we were allowed to leave the camp. I had my apartment. The morning of September 21st, I left the camp. They took me to the apartment. That was another important moment for us.

A group of my colleagues and I from the U.S. Embassy had decided to move to the same location to be together. After leaving the camp, we moved to the same place in Silver Spring, Maryland.

It was a big apartment building. We were seven colleagues with our families, we each rented an apartment over there. That was a wonderful chance for our children to be together, especially our wives. The women were together. They had the chance to at least reduce the stress.

Q: So you're here and you don't have a job or money.

AZAAD: The first concern was about renting an apartment. So, my friend said, I will help you to rent an apartment. Don't worry. But I was worried about items in the apartment. How could I provide, for example, beds or furniture, kitchen stuff, these things? I was worried, what could I do.

We entered the apartment, it was an empty apartment. I was walking around, looking around. What do I have to do? Then suddenly someone knocked on the door and when I opened the door, I saw a group of people, women, men, children, they entered the apartment.

Q: Carrying furniture?

AZAAD: Yes. One of them brought kitchen stuff, another one with food items, another person came with big boxes. When I opened them, I saw beds and blankets and pillows. They started fixing everything. I thought this is the U.S. government, they are already aware that there are persons coming into this apartment and this is the job of the U.S. government, some agents working for this project.

I asked one of the people, "What is the name of the organization you are working for, providing these things for the people?" They said, "We brought these things from our home. We're not working for anyone. We are volunteers. We are your neighbors." Oh my god. We couldn't believe everyone, some of them from their own home, cooking-ware, their own glasses or their own spoons and forks, they brought, they shared with us.

To be honest, on that night, the first night in our apartment—the apartment that I had worried would be empty—the first night my four children and myself, my wife, we took rest on our own beds. We had our dinner in the kitchen. We had our sofa to take a rest, to sit on. I couldn't believe it. I knew about the kindness of the people, the level of acceptance, but we didn't expect this level. That was amazing. That was a wonderful experience. To be honest, my wife couldn't stop crying that night. She said, "I was worried. We were moving to another country. We don't know anyone over here. We don't

have anything." We didn't have a chance to take our money from the bank. We didn't take our backpacks, our luggage, just the clothes we were wearing when we came to this country. What do we have to do? How can we live here? I didn't expect that the first night I would have a chance to sleep on my own bed. That was a wonderful start for the new life in the new country.

Q: Were some of these people Afghans who had been here a while? We have a big Afghan community in the D.C. area.

AZAAD: Yes, later on some Afghans also reached out to us. But the first step was the American neighbors around the area, who reached out to us. Later on, some Afghan families visited us. They brought something for the children. They provided advice on how we can live our lives, how we can manage our lives, how we can settle our lives, help us to find the nearest supermarket around, help us to know how we can take a bus, help us to take the Metro subway, showed us downtown. Where is the shop nearest you. Before you have your own car, the nearest, cheapest shop you can walk to and buy something, which was very helpful. Especially my colleagues, the few families who were in the same building, their presence was very important and very helpful for us, super helpful.

When I was in the camp, before coming to my apartment, my friend sent me a link and told me, open the link and start to practice. When I opened the link, it took me to the Department of Motor Vehicles website and it said, "Start practicing." As soon as you reach here and you receive your social security number, you have to go and pass the driving test. Because in the U.S. without a car, without a driver's license, it is like being in Afghanistan without shoes.

On the third day, after we moved to the apartment, myself and one of my sons, we both passed the DMV knowledge test and we had our permits, which allowed us to start practicing. We had our driving licenses in Afghanistan, but we had to familiarize ourselves with driving in the U.S.

Q: Were you able to get your money from your bank in Afghanistan, or was that shut down?

AZAAD: It was not accessible for a long time. But they set up a system to allow us to have access to our debit card we had from the bank. That helped me for a long time to pay for the rent of the apartment with the money in that bank account I had in Afghanistan.

Q: So, you still had money that you had saved previously?

AZAAD: Yes. That helped me for at least a year in the apartment to pay the rent.

Q: What was your status? Were you able to work immediately?

AZAAD: Yes, because we had our visa. The visa itself is like a permanent residence document. Fortunately, in less than a month, we received our green cards, very quickly. But some other colleagues and friends whose cases were under process or they didn't apply, that was different for them, because first they entered the U.S. as parolees under the parole. But very quickly, they received their work permit, which allowed them to work.

Q: How did you get a car? Did you have enough money to buy a car?

AZAAD: My former American officer visited our family during the first week that we moved to the apartment. He came to our apartment. When he saw everything was settled in the home, he said, "My mom has a small charity in our town and I talked about you and your family and the time we had in Afghanistan, working with you. She did a fundraising for you and your family in the town, and we had a chance to collect \$8,000 U.S. dollars for you and your family." And he brought that money to me. The next day, I could buy a car. That was a wonderful experience. In the first month with the help of American friends and colleagues, I had a chance to have my first American car.

Q: Then you started working?

AZAAD: Not immediately. Still, we had a lot of things to do. When we came, the first priority for me was school for the children. It took time. Before enrolling them in school we had to go through medical examinations, vaccinations, accommodations. We had a lot of appointments for the checkups. That car made my job much easier. I had to familiarize myself with the city, with the driving system, with everything.

After some time, when the children were enrolled in and started their school, most of the medical appointments, everything was done, which took a few months for me, then I could start looking for work. I didn't know where to start. I started applying everywhere, searching the Internet and applying, putting applications everywhere.

One of my American friends visited my family and he said, "Don't wait for the best job. You can try, you can apply, but start with whatever you can." I said, "How?" He said, "There are a lot of opportunities to work. Don't wait." Then he introduced me to the food delivery application, DoorDash. Very simple, he said, you can download the application and apply for that and start food delivery. You will have some income. You will have a chance to see more places. You will have a chance to learn new things. I did that. I downloaded the application and applied. After two or three days, I received the approval and I started. That was wonderful.

The best part of the food delivery, I could take my wife with me. We went together to see around, to see the city, to see the downtown, to see the people. It was a good start. Besides that, I was searching for a better job, applying all around.

Also, I was thinking, because some of my friends advised me when someone entered the U.S., try to learn something. Try for education or some expertise. That will help you to

have better opportunities. That was the best advice I heard. I had my Master's degree, but the Master's degree was in Afghan law, which is not of much use in the United States. So I was thinking, I have to do another degree.

There was a wonderful opportunity when I participated in the job fair. I was introduced to the job fair by the resettlement agency who took care of our resettlement case. They introduced us and advised participation in the job fair. Over there I saw a university, which announced a special scholarship for the Afghans who had entered the United States after August 2021. They said the scholarship will be from 25 persons up to 75 persons. We will decide about that. I quickly applied for that and filled the application. When I submitted my resume and essays, and documents, I was accepted for a scholarship.

Q: For what kind of studies?

AZAAD: For an MBA. I decided to go for the MBA because I knew that this was the best job market in the U.S. for the future. I started the second Master's degree, this time an MBA at Bay Atlantic University, located close to the White House, in the center of D.C.

Besides that, I had also applied to work for Lyft, because for Uber I had to wait for one year. Uber required one year of driving experience in the U.S. But for the Lyft, I had a chance to apply. I started rideshare work. That was much better than food delivery, because we had direct interaction with the people.

What I did, I used that opportunity to introduce my country, because at that time, everyone was talking about Afghanistan. I had a request of one of my American colleagues in the State Department. I said, "I remember that when we were in Kabul there was a book about Afghanistan heritage that was published by the State Department. Look in the Afghanistan desk. If there is a copy of that book, please bring it to me." And he found it for me. That was a wonderful, high quality, colorful book about Afghanistan heritage. I took that book, put it in my car with a few other books about Afghanistan, and then put a sign on the backside of my chair telling the passengers, "Welcome to know more about my country." It was the flag of Afghanistan. That was wonderful because every passenger, when they sat and saw the sign and saw the book, led to a discussion about my country. Also, I played Afghan music. Wonderful experience.

Q: I want to back up. You went to the resettlement agency. Which one was it?

AZAAD: It was Lutheran Social Services.

Q: What did they do?

AZAAD: Our caseworker was a lovely and kind Afghan lady who had moved to the United States a few years before. She was helping us first with enrollment with the children in school, applying for the benefits for the families, and helping us with some of

the furniture that we needed. I think they had a church, the people donated some items to them and then they distributed them to families. Also, they helped me with finding a job, technical support for learning how I can work on my resume and change it according to U.S. standards. And when there were job fairs or events they let me know to participate. At that time, we didn't have a car, they helped us to go to our medical appointment, school appointments. They worked with us closely.

I realized day by day that their workload was increasing. In the first week, it was wonderful. Every day we were contacted, every week, twice or three times a week they visited our family. Later on, after the first and second month, it was difficult to find them. We tried several times to call them, but they didn't respond. They were super busy. Fortunately, because I could speak English, I could solve most of my family's problems. I could take care of most things. I realized that maybe in other Afghan families, there was no English speaker to take care of the family. They were in more need than we were, and we realized that.

Q: What kind of benefits were needed?

AZAAD: Healthcare, food stamps, cash assistance. There was money for rent, but we didn't receive that money because the Resettlement Agency directly paid that money for the rent of the apartment. They paid the rent and it covered a few months. That was good.

Q: So, within the first couple of weeks, you had healthcare, you had doctors and you had some money for food, and rent was taken care of for a few months?

AZAAD: Yes.

Q: I heard stories in late 2021 and early 2022 about the struggles for some Afghans to get caseworkers. They were struggling to get into the line. I also heard—in a webinar for volunteers that Lutheran Social Services organized—that the number of people that came in August 2021 is the number of people that came from all countries in the world for the whole year, the year before. It was quite an overwhelming thing, but joyous that people could help.

Is there anything else you think is important to discuss about your resettlement?

AZAAD: There were agencies over here that received household items, furniture and then distributed to the needy people. We were connected to one organization. It was named Wider Circle in Silver Springs. Their help was very important. They helped with items that we were in need of, for example, for a few months we didn't have a tea table and we didn't have closets. They helped us with items that we needed.

After that, we noted down the links, all the email addresses, all the physical addresses of these organizations, the people helping the immigrants. When other Afghan families came, our colleagues, our friends, they came out from the camp and we were in contact with them, we could provide all that contact information with them. We helped them. We

could see that the resettlement agencies were overloaded. They couldn't help as much as the people needed. So, we tried to help them.

Q: How many families were you able to help?

AZAAD: Five of them came to the same residential area. We were in the same building. Three others were in other places, but we were in contact. At least eight families of our colleagues from the U.S. Embassy.

Q: So, you helped another eight families get oriented. How long did it take them? Did it take them a lot longer to get here?

AZAAD: They spent more time in the camps. In my case, we spent just 20 days because I had my visa, my wife and three children, but it was a matter of one son. Still the visa for him had been issued in the system. But for the other families it took a longer time. We were in contact with them. We knew that they were in Pennsylvania in a military camp or in Fort Lee, or in other camps, and we were ready for them.

One by one, when they came, their apartments were ready. We already informed the Wider Circle that on this day a family will come. We set an appointment for them. We rented a U-Haul. Sometimes, I drove the U-Haul for them to pick up their furniture from the Wider Circle. We also informed the other American families, who told us that they were ready to support the Afghan families. They said when any Afghan family comes to the area, let us know. We want to meet them. We want to help them. When the other Afghan families left the camps and came to their apartment, we tried our best for them to have the same wonderful experience that we had. We were with them, and we tried to at least make the best first days in the new apartment for them.

Q: For your wife and your kids, was all the culture shock good or were there days when they didn't like it here?

AZAAD: For the children, the change was wonderful. We had planned to move to the United States. A few years before this move, mentally they were prepared for this move. They focused on their English. During their last three years in Afghanistan, they worked on their English. Children are super great at learning English. They were much better than their dad.

My wife, unfortunately, faced more cultural barriers. She couldn't go to school in Afghanistan at all. When we decided, we were going to move to the U.S. in the near future, she started learning English at home with me.

For the children, it was a great move because they mentally were prepared and they had a knowledge about the U.S. They had studied about the U.S. They tried to watch as much as possible the series and the movies from the U.S., especially my second son. He said, "The best thing that helped me to learn better English and accent, especially, was the series named "Friends."

Q: Oh, goodness.

AZAAD: He watched the whole series of "Friends."

Q: That sounds familiar. My kids, when they lived abroad with me, also watched that program a lot. And your wife, is she doing okay now?

AZAAD: When we came to the U.S., she had a chance to walk around, to go outside, to see the other ladies working. She could see that there was no difference between men and women. There is no gender concern here. Everyone can work. She said one thing to me. She said, "I think we women in Afghanistan, we are alive, but we don't have a life. We are just alive. Why a woman cannot drive in Afghanistan, why a woman cannot work in parts of Afghanistan, why my family thought that because I am a girl I can't go to school. Why?"

She realized that in the first weeks and she decided, I also advised her, you can build your life. You can improve your life. You can use this opportunity to enjoy your life. She quickly started English courses. As a first step, she took two classes, two days per week, one class, two days per week. The second step, she said, "As soon as I learn more English, I will go for my driving license. Then I will try to get a job." The children were great. They could quickly start their school. They didn't have any problem with the language, with English.

Q: Were they in a school with kids from all around the world? That is often common in schools in this area.

AZAAD: Yes. That was very interesting for them because they could see people from different ethnicities, from different parts of the world, different religions, girls and boys friendly together. They were in school and enjoying it, they were super excited about the new change. Especially because their English was very good, they didn't have any challenges, any problems at the school. Quickly, they fit into school, and they settled.

I remember one day, I was practicing with my wife with her homework. My youngest son—he was at that time 11 years old—came and told me, "You know, dad, I think it would be better to stop teaching her English." I said, "Why?" He said, "Because you are destroying mom's English with your accent. Let me teach her." I said, "Yes, that's good." That worked. I said, "My plan worked. It's good."

Q: Wonderful. In April of 2022, you got accepted for a position in the Department of State.

AZAAD: Exactly. I applied for the position with the Doha office, with the U.S. Mission to Afghanistan in Doha. Fortunately, they sent me a job offer and I was waiting for clearance, which took me six to seven months. But I was hopeful. I was sure that I would get this job. Until that time, I continued driving for the Lyft. In September 2022, I also

started driving for Uber, because I had completed the one-year experience driving in the U.S., which is mandatory for applying for Uber. I could shift based on the demands from Lyft, to Uber, or to DoorDash.

Q: Did you finish your MBA?

AZAAD: I'm in the last stage doing my final project right now. Hopefully at the end of this semester, I will finish it.

I started my job as a human rights political specialist with the U.S. Mission to Afghanistan. We are working remotely here from the U.S. monitoring, observing the human rights and political situation in Afghanistan.

Q: How do you do that from here?

AZAAD: We are still in contact with our folks, with our contacts. It is not easy, but it is not impossible. A lot of our contacts left Afghanistan. They're all around the world. But a lot of them are still in Afghanistan and we try to build contacts. We try to monitor the situation, especially in the field that I'm working in, the human rights and rule of law section, to monitor the situation and try our best to be part of any positive progress and positive changes in the life of the Afghan people.

Q: Have you all been able to find a place for worship?

AZAAD: Yes.

Virginia

Q: Are you still in Maryland?

AZAAD: We moved last year in April. After a few months working in my new job, I had a chance to apply for a loan. I bought my own home.

Q: Wow!

AZAAD: I didn't have to stay dependent on government assistance for a long time. As soon as I started a job, I stopped receiving aid because I had income. When I received the contract from the State Department, I applied for a home loan. Now, I have my own home in Virginia.

When we moved to Virginia my wife asked me, "Please look around to see if there is a mosque because I want to go to a mosque for prayer." When I looked, I found that there was a mosque close to my home, a few hundred meters away. Interestingly, there is a mosque and a church side by side. This is not something usual for us. I can see that on Sunday when there is a crowd in the church, people from the mosque help them to manage the parking, help the people. And on Fridays, when there is a crowd at the

mosque, or for example there is a special event at the mosque, the people from the church help them. Oh my god. This was one of the best experiences we had here.

It was another wonderful experience she had in the United States, to be honest. For the first time, she could go to the mosque and pray in the mosque in the United States. She didn't go to the mosque in Afghanistan.

Now, she goes to the mosque. She can go to the Friday prayer here in the United States.

Q: You had hard challenges to overcome, certainly, from the time you were born. But you have emphasized how lucky you were in a variety of ways coming to the United States . Are you aware of Afghans who have come to the United States since 2021 who have had a much harder time? Who perhaps don't feel as fortunate to be here?

AZAAD: Yes. Just today, I got information from one of my friends, one of our U.S. Embassy colleagues, who was with us in Silver Springs in the same building, because of the difficult time and experiences he had here in the United States, he decided to move back to Afghanistan. It means he couldn't accept the challenges here. I don't know why.

Q: I know it's hard and very overwhelming. First there is the culture shock and the language difficulties. Then, it's not that easy to find the right kind of job. It's not that easy to afford, especially in the Washington area because of the high cost of living.

AZAAD: Yes. Always I'm trying to help—as my American friends helped me—when I see some Afghan friends who are struggling with this challenge, finding a job or complaining about the situation here. It was interesting that one of my American friends told me, "Remember here in the U.S, all jobs are respected. It is not so important what job you have, but it is important that you have a job. I know it is not the same in Afghanistan, and if you want to be successful here, you have to change your mentality. Help other new people from Afghanistan to look at jobs differently."

Maybe for a person from Afghanistan who previously worked with an organization, a national organization or a high level in government, they feel shame to start driving, or for example, work in a restaurant. I learned that in the United States, no job is shameful. There is no problem if a person, for example, loses his job or her job in a big organization and goes and works for some time in a restaurant. No one will look at them shamefully. They appreciate that person.

For several months I was thinking, I'm an educated person with a Master's degree, ten years working experience with the U.N., four years with the U.S. government. It is a big shame for me to work in a restaurant or in the supermarket, or drive for food delivery. But when I changed my mindset, life was much easier for me. My American friends said, you can start, and you can afford the life, then look for better opportunities. And that is always my advice to my friends.

Q: Most of your friends are doing okay?

AZAAD: Yes. Most of them are doing great. Sometimes we hear that some of my friends are struggling with finding a job or affording the expenses of life here. But fortunately, most of them, especially the USAID colleagues and the State Department colleagues, received strong support from USAID and from the State Department for finding jobs. They supported us.

Q: These are on a personal level, the friends that you are guiding right? Or are you doing it as part of your official job?

AZAAD: No, these are my personal friends.

Q: I think that someday you will write a book and I hope you'll talk more about some of the things we didn't have time to delve into, like the love story between you and your wife that you alluded to when you talked about fighting against the arranged marriage.

AZAAD: For sure, I have a lot of things to write. I say to my children, when you start your job and I retire from everything, then I will start writing. I have a lot of things to share, to say.

Q: Very good. I'm going to say thank you very much for this wonderful opportunity to understand the experience that you went through.

AZAAD: Thank you for giving me this opportunity to share my experience with you.

End of Interview