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Oral Histories of U.S. Diplomacy in Afghanistan, 2001–2021

AMBASSADOR GRETA HOLTZ

Interviewed by: Robin Matthewman
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INTERVIEW

Q: Good afternoon. It is October 17, 2022. I'm Robin Matthewman with ADST and today I am interviewing Ambassador Greta Holtz for our Afghanistan project. Welcome, Greta. I wonder if you could give us an overview of your career prior to arriving in Qatar and starting to work on Afghanistan as chargé there.

HOLTZ: Absolutely. I spent the first twelve to thirteen years after the A-100 orientation class in the Middle East as a consular officer. I started in Jeddah, then I went to Sana'a, Yemen, Tunis, Damascus. I went back to Washington and did a couple of tours domestically, and then went back out overseas. I studied Arabic before I went on my first couple of assignments. Then before I went back out, I studied Turkish and went to Adana, Turkey, as the principal officer there. I came back to Washington. I went to the National War College for one year. From there, I was the OSCE [Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe] coordinator in EUR-RPM [Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs-Office of European Security and Political Affairs]. I went from there to run the Middle East Partnership Initiative in NEA [Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs], the democracy promotion office around 2007–2008. I ran the MEPI, Middle East Partnership Initiative. I did it for one year, and I moved after one year to CDA [Career Development and Assignments] and became a career development officer in the senior assignments office of the Human Resources Bureau. From there, I went to Baghdad, Iraq, and ran the Provincial Reconstruction program for one year. I finished that in 2010, and went to the NEA front office as the deputy assistant secretary for public diplomacy and strategic communications. From there I went to Oman as ambassador.

After that, I came here to the College of International Security Affairs at the National Defense University as vice chancellor. I stayed in that job for one year, and then went to serve as the foreign policy advisor for U.S. Special Operations Command down in Tampa at MacDill Air Base. From there, I went to the SCA [Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs] front office as the PDAS [principal deputy assistant secretary] and stayed one year. After that I was asked to go to Qatar and be the chargé. I retired in Qatar, but then was recalled to active duty the same day. I never left Qatar. It was just one minute you're one thing and the next minute you're the next thing. Did that for a year, and retired. Then I was asked to volunteer to come back to lead Operation Allies Refuge, part of the

drawdown and evacuation from Qatar in August of 2021. And now, I'm the chancellor of the College of International Security Affairs at National Defense University.

Q: In talking about your involvement with Afghanistan, should we start with Tampa?

HOLTZ: Yes. So as foreign policy advisor, I went to Kabul a few times with General Tony Thomas, who was the SOCOM [Special Operations Command] commanding general at the time. Our focus was mostly on the military side. And Special Operations Command there—as they call it in the military, the battlespace owner—their mission is to man, train, and equip. In that role, we worked very closely with the task force commanders and the embassy on ensuring that the special operations piece of that war was appropriately manned, trained, and equipped. We had engagements with the minister of defense, the national security adviser of Afghanistan, the ISAF [International Security Assistance Force] commander, whoever was ambassador at the time. I think we had a chargé at the time. John Bass was there one of the years that I was at SOCOM, and then Hugo Llorens was there the second time. That was my first actual visit to engage with Afghanistan. The second time came when I was PDAS in South and Central Asia. Again there for one year, that was during the height of the negotiations between the Special Representative Khalilzad and the Taliban. And SCAs role was really the bilateral relationship, not the negotiations. During my year in SCA, we oversaw the drawdown of the embassy to a smaller staff and oversaw the reduction of the budget, the program funds that the administration wanted us to oversee.

Q: You were there till the summer of 2020.

HOLTZ: I was there from 2019 until February of 2020.

Q: Mostly you worked with John Bass in the embassy, is that right?

HOLTZ: We worked with John Bass, we did support Khalilzad and Molly Phee and that team, but we were not the lead. We were mostly in support of the bilateral relationship and not the specific negotiations.

Q: Is there anything that you think is relevant as far as what was going on in the department or in the discussions as the negotiations were going on or during that stage? Was everyone focused on preparing the embassy for eventual troop withdrawal?

HOLTZ: We were preparing the embassy under instruction from Secretary Pompeo and Under Secretary for Management Bulatao, to oversee the reduction in funds spent in Afghanistan and the concurrent reduction in staff. They did a similar exercise for Iraq. And they did a similar exercise for Afghanistan. Our part was the Afghanistan part. This was way before there was any actual date or agreement to have the troop drawdown.

Q: And then you went out to Doha as chargé because it was a difficult time to get confirmations going. Is that right?

HOLTZ: Qatar had been left without an ambassador since January 2017, when the last Senate confirmed an ambassador resigned. She didn't retire, but she resigned, and the incoming administration didn't fill it. They had a series of people serve as chargé. And

they had a couple of people that they were looking at to nominate, but they never actually did until November of 2021. Right before the U.S. elections. They finally actually nominated someone, but then it was too late. The elections were happening and Trump did not win. There are many theories as to why they did not have a Senate confirmed ambassador in Qatar. They asked me to go out because the Qataris wanted someone with the title ambassador. I'd been an ambassador before, and they wanted someone who could stay a little bit longer than some of the previous chargés had stayed.

Q: Okay. And what year did you get to Doha?

HOLTZ: I got to Doha in June of 2020 and I stayed till June of 2021.

Q: Okay, let's start there. You already had experience working with envoy Khalizad? Was he still coming and going?

HOLTZ: Absolutely. Again, as the bilateral chargé, we were a platform for the talks, but we were not part of the talks. We supported Ambassador Khalilzad and his team in any number of ways. This was the height of Covid. All international flights had stopped. They gave me a special exemption to go out to Qatar, as the State Department allowed more people to travel. He and his team started coming out. There was a lot of support on their logistics. And then they would leave, of course. The Qataris knew that I and my embassy were not involved in the talks. But it's all a part of what Qatar was doing to be the essential middleman and help broker these deals. We didn't get involved in any of the negotiations or any of the policy that was underpinning the negotiations. But we were aware of what was going on.

Q: And how was it logistically, how did it work with the talks? It wasn't something like with the Iran hostage crisis where we were talking through the Algerians, right?

HOLTZ: I don't know what was happening before I got there, frankly. But yeah, I think at that point we were talking directly. And sometime during my year in Qatar is when the Afghan government started having direct talks or they had their representatives doing the talks. Up until then, it was just the Americans and the Taliban, with the Qataris being the essential middlemen. Qataris were, as far as I understand, not supposed to get involved in the actual talks. They were just the host, the convening place, hosting the talks, but not involved directly. Whether or not that actually happened, there's some theories out there. When I got there, we did the opening ceremony for the Afghan government and civil society reps to do their first direct talks with the Taliban, with the U.S. encouraging but not in the room. We were on the margins, but they were talking directly to each other.

Q: Okay. And those talks were happening while the U.S. was still negotiating its agreement with the Taliban, or this is after that?

HOLTZ: I don't know. I think this was once the direct talks started. I don't know if we were doing side negotiations, or not. I don't know. The embassy was a support platform. That's a good question for Molly Phee.

Q: Okay. Very good. Could you describe the embassy and Doha? How many people did you have and also what our military presence was?

HOLTZ: The embassy is about thirty people, thirty direct hire officer types with maybe twenty more support staff, headed by an SEO-DAT level six colonel level, a smallish team of military at the embassy. I want to say there were like eight of them. At Al Udeid air base at any time there were about ten thousand to twenty thousand mostly airmen, but the special operations Command for Central Command was headquartered there. And then we had a couple thousand U.S. Army at a second military base [both bases are owned by the Qataris]. The second was Camp As Sayliyah, which was closing down and wrapping up its mission during my year there. That was an Army supply and logistics base that they were closing because we just weren't doing the missions anymore in Afghanistan and Iraq, so they didn't need a big logistics space. They move some of the remnants of that over to Al Udeid, the big giant airbase. But luckily, in hindsight, they still had a tiny footprint, U.S. Army footprint and Campus As Sayliyah so that when we did the evacuation that became very important to our evacuation efforts.

Q: Okay. In May 2021, we started preparing for further withdrawals in Afghanistan. And did that impact you in Qatar?

HOLTZ: No, not really, frankly. I left Qatar in June, like the first week of June 2021. My DCM [deputy chief of mission] became the chargé and then he left in August and was reassigned. They brought another chargé out, John Desrocher, sometime in June or July. John Desrocher arrived not long after I left and he stayed three or four months. No, it didn't really affect the embassy because any equipment and personnel that would have come out of Afghanistan, as part of the drawdown would have been done through Al Udeid Air Base and not really affecting the embassy, the embassies rule at that point might have been again, this is after I left flight clearances for the planes that come in and out cargo or personnel at Al Udeid.

Q: So John Desrocher was the chief of mission on the ground when there was a decision to start bringing Afghans out of Afghanistan from the airport in Kabul to bring them out.

HOLTZ: Even before that. Over the summer, the department decided to work with Qatar, on having Qatar be a processing place, using the U.S. base that was closing to process SIVs, the Special Immigrant Visas. John and his team were working hard with the Qataris on what that would look like. What would it take? How many people would resend to work on SIVs in an orderly fashion. No one foresaw what would happen once Ashraf Ghani left and the Taliban took over, the thousands that would come out. But, over the summer, John Desrocher and the Qataris were working on sort of a metered plan for Afghans to come to Qatar as we processed their SIVs. They would do their medical exams there. They have to have X ray machines and documents and prove all this stuff that goes into the SIV [Special Immigrant Visas] processing.

But, they weren't able to start any of this because on August 15 Kabul fell to the Taliban, John Desrocher was chargé, he and the embassy team immediately set up a working group or a task force out at Al Udeid Air Base to handle the thousands of people who were starting to come out. On August 16, 17, and 18, the department put out a request for volunteers to go help embassy Doha with receiving all these evacuees. And I raised my hand and I said, let me do it. I know all the Qataris; I know everybody at our embassy; when I was in the SCA front office I did all the paperwork work to get Ross Wilson

assigned as chargé. I knew that whole embassy and as PDAS I had done all their assignments. I just knew all the players at Embassy Kabul, Embassy Doha, and the entire Qatari government. I raised my hand and I said, "Put me in, I've got it." I wrote up a little mission statement for my role. The idea was not to interfere with John Desrocher being chargé for the bilateral relationship. But taking all of that evacuation and chaos off his embassy's hands and running that from the base. So that's what I did.

Q: How quickly were you able to arrive?

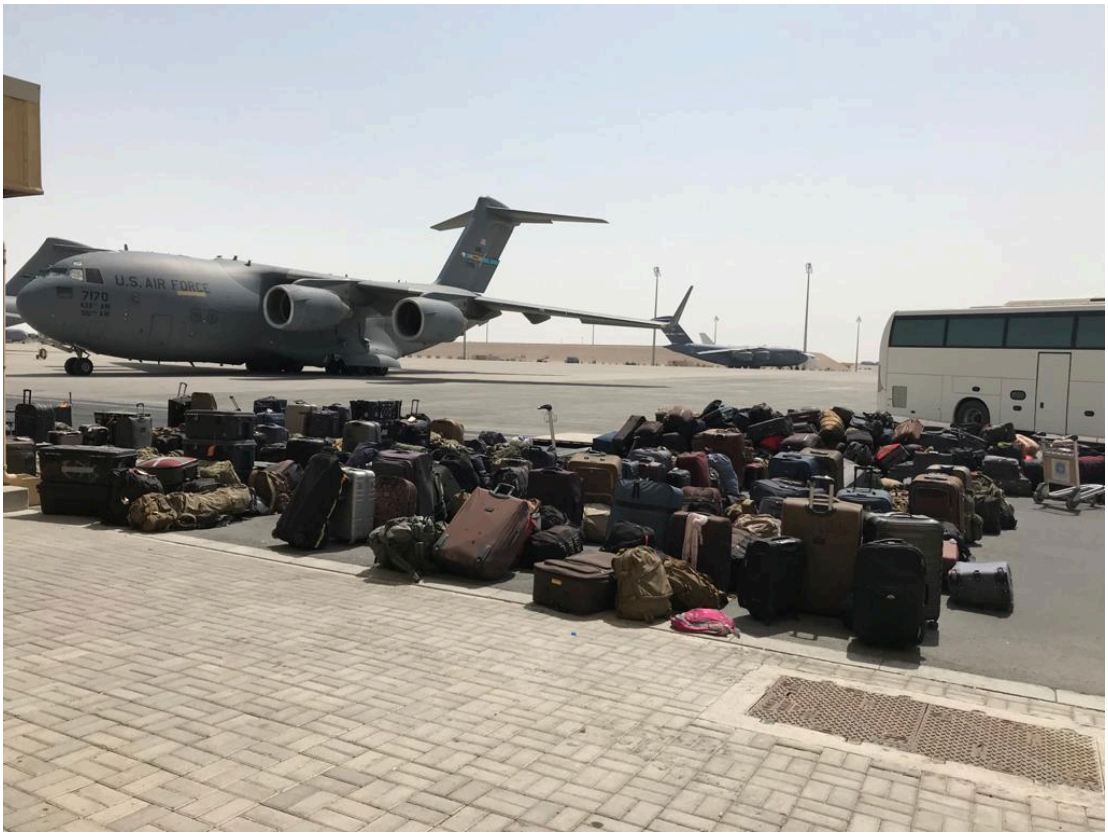
HOLTZ: When I called and raised my hand, they said, if you can get out there within twenty-four hours, we'll put you in. I was fully retired by then so I no longer had a diplomatic passport. I literally had to get rehired as a Retired Annuitant, get a Covid test to be able to get on Qatar Airways. I was up in Michigan where we have a summer home up. I had to get myself to DC, get the Covid test, get my tickets and get myself to Qatar within twenty-four hours. And I did.

Q: Wow. That's a lot.

HOLTZ: Insane. Signing a million documents kind of over the phone with some nice lady in South Carolina at that HR hub in South Carolina. She waived as much as she could waive. I gave her an oral statement. I couldn't sign anything. I was in the tiny airport in Northern Michigan, which had terrible WiFi. And then I was on airplanes, tiny airplanes, which didn't have WiFi. I couldn't send any signed documents to this nice lady. So I just orally told her I was giving my proxy to my daughter-in-law in Boston, who could sign off on my behalf. She took it, the nice lady in South Carolina, and we fixed it up later. But they couldn't issue me airline tickets, or TDY [temporary duty] orders, until I was reemployed as an REA. Somehow, in twenty-one, or two hours, we made all that happen. And then I arrived in Qatar on the twenty-first of August. To absolute chaos.

Q: So, please describe the chaos.

HOLTZ: John Desrocher met me at the airport. And he briefed me on the way to the hotel that all the TDYers were staying at, which is across from the embassy. It's about a forty-five minute drive from the airbase where the Afghans and everybody else we're coming. He filled me in on how the embassy had set up their task force, their working group. They were doing three shifts a day. At the two different bases. There's the airbase where the flights came in, and then there was the army base, where they housed people because the army base had been left as a warm base in preparation for doing the SIVs. They had a lot of air conditioned CHUs or containerized housing units, what do you call them? Shipping containers.



Luggage from one of the flights

Q: Shipping containers. People called them hooches, right?

HOLTZ: Right. They have a lot of those left there because they thought they would have this orderly metered flow of Afghans that would go to that army base and do their SIV processing. Thank God, because there was absolutely no housing at camp at Al Udeid Air Base for any Afghans. When I arrived, Kabul had fallen like five or six days prior. I got to Al Udeid Air Base. I had been there a million times as chargé and as POLAD [foreign policy advisor] for SOCOM [Special Operations Command] and as an NEA ambassador, I'd gone through there.

When I arrived this time, I looked at the flightline. And saw what looked like piles of rags or just piles of what literally look like used clothing and rags. Those were human beings! Those were Afghans who had no place to sleep, or get out of the sun. They just collapsed on the edge of the flight line. But you couldn't tell as you're driving that they were people. They just look like piles. And they were literally just exhausted and bedraggled; it was hundred and twenty-five degrees. The flightline had a lot of C-130s and C-120s, these giant troop carrier and cargo carrier planes parked there with refugees and evacuees sleeping under the wings. You're not allowed to get near those planes in a normal situation right, security would never allow a civilian uncleared person to get near those beautiful U.S. Air Force planes. But they were. They were sleeping out there. There was luggage piled everywhere. There were people. It was like "The Walking Dead," the show. The Afghans were shell shocked. They were sleep deprived. They had just come

out of, as we now know, the very chaotic situation at Karzai airport in Kabul. And then more came, they kept coming and kept coming in, just thousands a day. The pace picked up in my first twenty-four hours. They were getting like two thousand a day. And in my first twenty-four hours, they went to like five thousand more every day for three days. And we had no place to house them. This is where the Qataris really stepped up and helped us with everything. Everything.

Q: Do you mean they helped with housing, transporting them over to the other base, and getting clothing and food?

HOLTZ: Yes. We were taking as many as we could to the other base but then that base got filled. It was a logistical challenge to get them cleared on a bus, arrange for the bus, the bus had to have a Qatari military escort to get from one base to the other base. It's like a half an hour drive. And then the army base, which as I mentioned was supposed to be used for the Special Immigrant Visas, was getting full. And the Afghans were getting into fights. And it was not a great security situation. Yet, more people were arriving every day from Kabul.

Unbeknownst to me—I learned it I think in my first two or three days—the Qataris had set up their own task force, that Qatari interagency, I had already been working very closely with the Qatari deputy foreign minister on getting people out of Afghanistan. What I didn't know but I learned maybe two or three days in was they had assigned a Qatari two star general to be their military task force leader to help with issues between the two bases and all of the sort of housing and logistics and all that kind of thing. But nobody on our side knew that. And they had not met with the American military leadership at either base, to introduce themselves and to say, we're here to help. A lovely Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs guy came to me and he said, "You've got a two star general, that's your counterpart on the military side. And so he wants to know, what do you need? What do you guys need?"

So this was twenty-hour-a-day shifts for me and my little leadership team, and some of the military. I cobbled together a meeting, thanks to this ministry of foreign affairs guy who introduced me to the Qatari two star and I dragooned a U.S. colonel from each of the two bases to tell the Qataris what they needed. Because I didn't know exactly what they needed as far as supplies. The Qatari two star pulled together a couple of other Qatari one star military officers, he brought the chief liaison officer from the Qatari charitable organization for donations from the Qatari National Hospital, Hamad Hospital. He brought somebody from a Qatari charity that is like their version of AID [United States Agency for International Development], I can't think of the name, development and assistance, something. It's literally their version of AID. So they were all in the room.

And I had my two colonels that I had dragooned literally because I couldn't get any of the general officers on the U.S. side to come. And so these wonderful guys, I think there were two from each base, they just listed the things that they needed. And it was everything from medicine, food, water, tents, housing units, portable toilets, portable showers, garbage removal, it was full on. We didn't have the capacity, or the ability to supply any of these things. The Qataris made lists. And within four hours of that meeting—where we are just jotting stuff down on yellow legal pads—one of the Qatari

generals with whom I had worked very closely as chargé, he sent me a film clip of truck after truck arriving with clothing, clothing was another thing, donated clothing, pallets of water, pallets of food, medical supplies. Then they started setting up these giant tents at the airbase [not the army base]. This was because our military felt that the best thing to do once those army base containerized housing units had filled up, was to just keep people at the airbase there, even though they were miserable. And they knew that, day after day, their friends and family and other evacuees were coming to the airbase and leaving quickly. But there was no space for them to go to the military base, where they would be in air conditioned units.

The Qataris set up four or five giant tents that they normally use for big wedding parties. They graded the land so that it was flat, they laid out, carpet after carpet, they air conditioned them, they put up porta potties and portable shower units. And we were able to house right there on the flightline at Al Udeid thousands and thousands of people. We got through it that way, really. The Qataris were the key to this whole thing.

I had no instructions. I had no marching orders from anybody except a friend who was at the White House in a senior position. And I called her. I said, Barbara, "What are my instructions?" She said, "Just don't break Qatar. I know the Qataris well. Breaking them would mean like allowing a humanitarian disaster at one of their air bases a year before they host the World Cup where all eyes are upon them." I knew that I needed to get those people, whoever arrived, get them out as quickly as possible on their way to Germany or the U.S. or wherever they were going. The Qataris gave us eight thousand free flights on Qatar air during August and September, the beginning of the height of their tourist season. They offered the use of an entire private hospital. We had a lot of medical issues, a lot of pregnant women, and many births. And as we learned later, many diseases. Nobody was checked for Covid or typhoid or whatever disease. There was nothing like that. They offered a hospital. They offered all these flights. The mayor had his people offer a cruise ship, did we need a cruise ship to house the people with security, with food? It would slowly make its way to some port in the U.S. where they could then be distributed to the U.S. military bases that they eventually were distributed to.

Q: Did you decide to take them up on that offer?

HOLTZ: We look into the legalities of it because the Afghans were still coming in by the thousands. We just didn't have time. I offered it to the Pentagon; they didn't have anybody to staff it. They were so stretched on doing the airlift, that they just didn't have time. We just said thank you very much, but we literally did not have the capacity to explore that offer. I tried to see if I could get our military to slow down the number of incoming Afghans because our military was not equipped to house, feed or take care of their medical needs. But I was told, no. That it's better to have them come to Qatar, than be blown up at the airport at Kabul. I stood down on that and just figured out how to handle whoever came into Qatar was going to have food, shelter, water, some kind of showering, and then get them out, just get them out. So we became like an airline processing hub. There were many, many, many, many issues that we problem solved, day and night, involved in this.

Q: So, once these accommodation issues in Qatar started to sort themselves out, how would the departures work? A plane would come in, people would be there, and then what would happen in order to help get them moving out?

HOLTZ: The embassy had established a really good system with these shifts. They would meet the plane, they had yellow legal pads, nobody had laptops. They didn't have a control or command center, they cobbled one out of the USO [United Service Organizations] office that was a very scruffy back portion of the air force personnel waiting room area. Where the air force personnel that came in and out of Al Udeid for the past twenty years, that's where they would go to show their papers, I guess. In the back of that was a USO office that was not being used. The embassy set up its very rudimentary control room there. And they would send officers, volunteers from the embassy and USG volunteers coming in from elsewhere after NEA put out the call for help from across the world, really.

These folks would meet the plane, they just made lines, and they would ask the people coming off the planes their names, or if they had a piece of identification, they would look at that and would write it down. We didn't have translators. This was all with sign language. We had a couple of translators, but they were mostly at the army base. We didn't have many translators, and we didn't have any to greet these flights. So these valiant FSOs [Foreign Service officers] and we had people from across the interagency volunteering to be on this task force. They'd meet the plane, they cobbled together a list of who got off that plane. And then they would try to arrange for a bus to take them to one of either the other the army base before it got filled, or one of the different housing units at the airbase at Al Udeid. Before the Qataris put up the tents, our air force emptied a couple of warehouses and a baggage screening kind of area, not a full terminal. And they just put people in there on cots. And there was no air conditioning. Again, it was hundred and twenty-three degrees. They were able to get a lot of cots, folding field cots. They had those. They gave them food, but they were overwhelmed. And I don't know what we would have done if the Qataris had not helped. That's why these people were sleeping on the tarmac until the Qataris stepped in.

We emptied our hangar to help house people, but there were Qatari hangars with their very special secret agent, spy planes, they didn't want us to see them. They didn't want to move them out of the hangar, but they did. Because they knew that if people were seen as dying on the tarmac in Qatar because of heat, and lack of food and lack of medicine, that would "break" Qatar. So they moved, they cleared out these very secure highly sensitive planes from some hangars, and we put people in there. Our teams met the plane. And we try to just fill a hangar, fill a warehouse. Again, no air conditioning and really awful conditions. I mean, you can imagine the porta potties were overwhelmed. It was gross, it was really horrible.

I would say that probably half of these people had IDs, but you couldn't know if it was their ID. And the other half had no ID. So if the guy told you his name was John Smith, you would just write down John Smith. We had a lot of families who got separated at the airport in Kabul. So children, parents, babies, unaccompanied minors of all sorts. We tried as best we could to help them find where their families were. But in the beginning, we didn't even have a good way. We didn't have little armbands. Like where you could

put a color coded wrist thing that would say to which tent, or which warehouse, or which hangar you were sent. We just came up with names on the fly for these units.

The U.S. Air Force had numbers for each of these buildings. So one of the warehouses is like building 205. We don't know that stuff, the Afghans certainly did not know. We just came up with names. Colloquially we'd call the war reserve materiel warehouse, we called it the WRM. There were six thousand people in one warehouse, no air conditioning, they were circulating air, but it was the same hot air. That's really bad when you're in the middle of Covid. And God knows what other diseases were floating around. When the Qataris were able to put what we called wedding tents, because that's their intended purpose, we were able to spread people out more. When the TDY task force people came in, that relieved the embassy Task Force people so they could go back to the embassy and do their normal day jobs. They certainly helped out. And we had key ones that were extra good at leadership, and problem solving, so we asked the embassy to allow us to keep them on as shift leaders. So we went down to two shifts day and night. And we did use a couple of the embassy RSOs [regional security officers], the TDY RSO from the embassy, he was there just to do the World Cup, and he was excellent, and with full leadership skills. And there were a couple of TDY DS agents. You could rely on them 100 percent to solve any problem that came up during a shift.

The processing, from my point of view, was to get them in and get them out. We were in charge of getting them out. We had to screen them against the initial counterterrorism database, the NCTC [National Counterterrorism Center] screening. So NCTC sent, I don't know, six or seven TDYers with a lead agent, we had DHS [Department of Homeland Security], we had TSA [Transportation Security Administration], we had the whole panoply of DHS entities out there doing this screening process, in order for us to be able to put them on a plane that would eventually land in the U.S. It was complicated, because half the people had no ID whatsoever. They could have been al Qaeda or Taliban. Who knows whether the name they gave us had anything to do with their actual name. Most of these guys had never been fingerprinted for any reason or retina scanned. So it was a matter of this very dedicated and talented team of DHS professionals from across all the elements of DHS doing the interviews, inputting the data. If there were documents, they would document check, but again, no translators, and doing their best to run these names, which could have been fake through the NCTC. They call it the baking process, like you put the data and it goes through all the different databases that our government has, at the end. If you're clear, they give you a green, like green to go. So those people could get on the planes. This team figured out a way to speed that process up while maintaining the integrity of the screening process.

Again, we were faced with a no food, no water, no housing type of crisis. Even when we got the extra tents and the food and pallets of water from the Qataris, it was still hundred thirty degrees out there. And people were starting to go into seizures from dehydration and the heat. The water wasn't cold. I mean it sat outside in a hundred thirty degrees. So that's helping you cool off like it may hydrate you. But if you're drinking hot hundred thirty degree water, it affects your body's ability to cool down so we were in a mess. These guys sped up the screening process. They pulled out anybody who got to red who was a hit, they pulled them and their families out and kept them in a separate area at Al

Udeid until they could either be cleared green to go, or determined they were actually red bad guys of some sort. Different parts of our government put different information into that NCTC process database. Some of it is crime, some of its terrorism. So there was a mix and a range of red hit guys that we eventually sent to Kosovo to be kept there at a different U.S. Army base.

So these teams—the embassy team, and then they transition to the TDY team—every day, there were thousands of needs and unforeseen things that they had to solve with the amazing lower level enlisted and lower level officers of our U.S. military and interagency, across the board. Grandmas who had broken legs and their bones hadn't been set, and they had to be strapped to their wheelchair. And how do you get them on the bus? Because there's no lift. Just thousands of problems all day long. These guys, and they kept a WhatsApp thread—we had no real comm but everybody had their iPhone, some had their laptops—and they did this entire evacuation via WhatsApp. So I would go back to the hotel for like four hours of sleep. And I'd watch the WhatsApp group to see what was going on. And there were tens of thousands of WhatsApp messages between these amazing volunteers. "I've got a family that's separated, they have a three year old girl they can't find, does anybody have a three year old girl that looks like this?" Just all night and all day problem solving via WhatsApp. They were really heroic.

Pat Haslach. So I recruited Pat [a retired U.S. ambassador living in Doha with her spouse who was the British ambassador to Qatar], to help me do family reunification and work with the non Afghan, non American third country nationals and partners, because there were quite a number who came through Qatar who were not Afghan and not American. And they needed reunification with their family members, or where did they go, and there were problem cases along the security lines throughout. She took that whole line of effort and ran with it.

We eventually had about five to six hundred unaccompanied minors. Some were actually orphans from an orphanage. A lot were street children, who just got on the plane with severe problems related to being a street child in Afghanistan. Bad things happen to them, bad things had been done to them. They were anywhere from eight years old, couldn't really tell how old they were, but they were big, they were all boys, big guys, physically big. And we didn't know how to handle them and how to sort them and all these unaccompanied minors. We brought in somebody who'd had refugee and unaccompanied minor experience, Deanna Abdeen, came from I think she was in Brazil. We had people from the PRM Bureau come and help us. We had the refugee coordinator from Embassy Amman and another one come. They helped us. And then we brought UNICEF [United Nations Children's Fund] in, and we brought the International Organization of Migration [IOM].

This is all happening as the planes were arriving. We had twenty thousand people arrive in three days. Twenty thousand. And as we're trying to figure out how to house and feed and clothe and medicate them, we had to sort out the unaccompanied minors. The Qataris took all the unaccompanied minors and took them off the air base, if they could find them, because some had family members that were just in a different part of those two air bases. But some were actually, like I said, street kids or actual orphans. They took them to some villas that Qatar had built to house guests for the World Cup. They removed them

over there. And Qatar wanted to keep some of them. And they wanted to make sure that we just didn't send these kids just to bad places in the States. And we had security problems. These street boys, like I said, were in most cases very damaged and abused children who started doing damaging and abusing things to the other children who were housed at these lovely villas, where there really was not a lot of supervision. They crawled over the walls and tried to escape into the neighborhoods of Qatar. When we started the vaccination process, everybody had to get Covid vaccinated and measles, maybe chickenpox. To a street kid from Kabul a needle is a bad thing, right? Like God knows what they were subjected to. So they were terrified. They threw themselves in the swimming pool even though they didn't know how to swim. They threw themselves out of building windows to escape the U.S. military trying to vaccinate them.

So just every day, there was some horrific problem we had to solve, through teamwork of all the U.S. government entities and the Qataris. "We got a baby," somebody came in at one point and said, "We got an eight week old baby for you." "What do you mean by an eight week old baby for me?" And they said, "It just came off the plane. And we're gonna bring it to you." They brought the baby, a sweet little thing, an eight-week old girl who we sent to the Qatari villa, because the Qataris would care for her through the Qatari Charity society in Qatar. They don't really have orphans in Qatar but they have a number of charity organizations and NGOs [nongovernmental organizations]. They gave their baby full time nannies, full time care. Parents were never found. And they wanted to keep that baby because she was beautiful, and did not appear to have suffered. In the middle of this chaos where people were dropping like flies on the tarmac, here was a baby just smiling up at the world, like nothing bad was happening. So everybody fell in love with that baby.

Anyway, eventually, we worked with the Qataris to sort out how to handle IOM, UNICEF, and U.S. processing of unaccompanied minors through the refugee process. We put it into proper order and proper channels. Those street boys became such a problem that after having tried to keep them, the Qataris were like, Please take them, we can't handle them. Some of them came to us with bullets that have been taken out of their skulls. They were just a range of problems from sexual abuse to drug abuse. They were very damaged. They all went to the foster care system in Chicago, Illinois.

I know this is sort of a stream of consciousness, as I try to point out what we handled. About a week later, we had twenty thousand people. The garbage on the air base started piling up. It was everywhere. And you can imagine the other things that come with garbage. I mean, they were shoving it into U.S. mailboxes, there were mountains of garbage. I called the wing commander. I'm like, "Hey, why do we have all this garbage?" The answer was, "Well, all our drivers who normally do the garbage rounds have a steady population of, let's say, ten thousand to twenty thousand. Americans who know how to use garbage cans. Now we've got twenty thousand refugees and evacuees. And all the drivers were driving these incoming evacuees between the two bases, and two different parts of the airbase into their housing units, whether it was the warehouse or the hangar, or one of the tents. They only had sixteen drivers, and we had so many people coming and going, because as many as were coming in, we were trying to send out. I said, "you

mean you don't have drivers that can drive the buses to take the evacuees and also drive the garbage trucks?" "Nope, we can't."

I called up the Qataris. I said, "We need a garbage truck. We need help with the garbage." They're like, "What do you need? I don't know. But probably just sent me twenty guys who could drive garbage around. There's a big garbage dump place at the airbase." And so he said, "Sure, I'll send you twenty drivers." Qataris have money and they have the capacity to do very small government. And a very well funded government. So I said, "Yeah, give me twenty, just have them make the rounds." I called the wing commander. He's like, "No, no, I think we got it under control. We don't need it." I said, "Are you sure? Because I don't want to turn it off when I don't know how you have it under control now when you didn't have it under control yesterday, it's the same amount of refugees coming in." He said, "Turn it off. We got it." But he didn't have it. So to call the Qataris back and say, "No, we actually need your drivers." Then they said, "Look, shall we just take it off base and put it in a different garbage dump somewhere in Doha?" I'm like, "Yeah, I don't really care where it goes." But the garbage dump in the air bases filled up, just get it out of here, well, we can't have piles of steaming garbage where we have human beings trying to survive. So Qataris solved that problem.

I mean, it was just endless. The military, I love our military. We've worked with them for years. But they all of a sudden decided that you're not going to use Al Udeid anymore. They're going to send all the refugees to Camp As Sayliyah Army Base. I had to sort that out because I'm like, "They are full at Camp As Sayliyah." And the air force commander in charge of the wing said, "Well, we can't, this is an airbase, we can't have them here." "What, you do have them here? And there's no room over there." And so they just started taking away the porta potties and trying to turn Al Udeid back into a normal U.S. Air Force Base. But we still had thousands of refugees. So I had to go above them and sort that out and say, "No, you can't. You can't yet turn it into a normal U.S. air base when you still have like fifteen thousand people here." Right.

So then we have the folks who had been taken to the army base. As I mentioned earlier, they're in contact with all their Afghan friends and half their families may have come up before or after them. They knew that the people who arrived at Al Udeid Air Base, were in and out within twenty-four or forty-eight maybe seventy-two hours. We got them out of there. The guys at Camp Sayliyah because they had the air conditioned housing units were there for like two weeks. And they didn't understand. And they started to get into fights. They started to create security problems for our U.S. military officers who ran that base. The U.S. military does not have policing authority on a Qatari airbase; the Qataris kind of do but they didn't want to get involved with that.

We had to sort out the million issues that had to do with Qatar helping us maintain a decent security situation on the army base. That included a lot of calls for me to the amazing one star Qatari army general who's in charge of working with all foreign entities like embassies and this evacuation, to provide spotters for the guard towers. I'd asked the army colonel in charge of the U.S. Army portion of the Qatari army base what he needed for security. He said he needed spotters up in the guard towers. There's nobody up there. So I called the Qatari one star, and he said he would send them right away. And then he called and said, "Okay, they're there. They say they're there." I called the army guy who

said, “No, they’re not there.” So I called the Qatari guy back. And oh, they lied to him. They weren’t actually there. They didn’t want to go, it’s hot up there. Not to denigrate our Qatari partners, but they just, they weren’t used to doing this. Nobody had ever done this kind of thing. So then he’d have to really read them the riot act, and he’d sent me a picture. But he would personally go up into the guard tower with a guard, here is our tower.

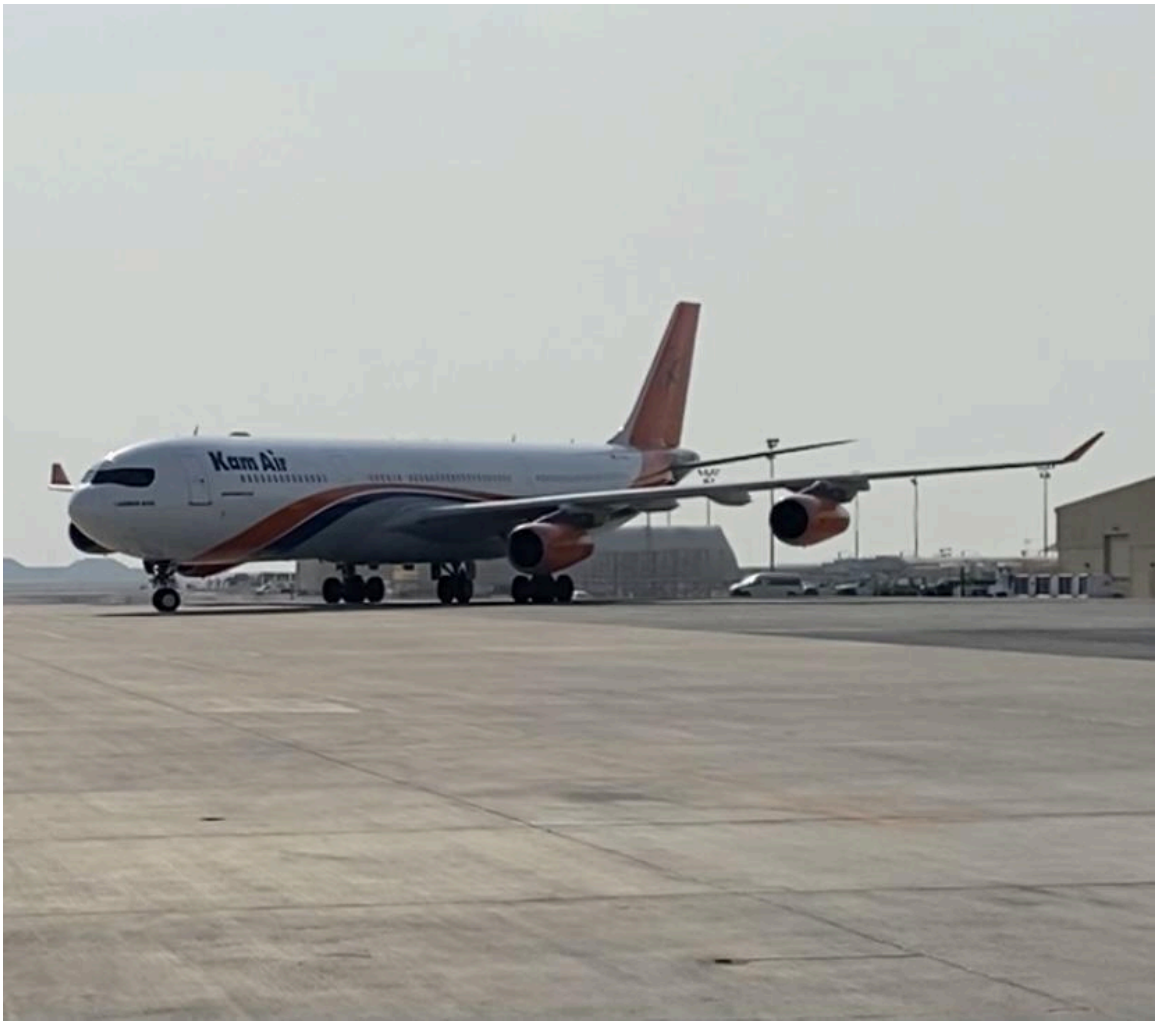
For me, it was twenty hours a day sorting things like that out and the rules of engagement on that. At some point, the Qataris originally said we only want one thing from you, Ambassador Holtz. Whoever you bring in to Qatar, you must take out. They must leave. We’re not having refugees and evacuees and random people in our country. In and out. So that to me was in line with my “don’t break Qatar instruction.” If that is what the Qataris want and they let every single person in. They did not require documentation.

We didn’t have documentation. We created these pieces of paper. So we’d have a picture taken of the evacuee if they had no documentation. And we’d write down whatever name they gave us and put it with their picture. Then they took that piece of paper with them and the Qataris stamped it as a sort of entry point into Qatar, because when you enter Al Udeid Air Base, if you go to the other airbase, you’ve now crossed a border. Like at any airport in the U.S., you’d go through customs and immigration. So we created these temporary passports, literally a piece of paper with a photo that was taken right then and there at the flightline. And that works for a while. Until the Qataris became uncomfortable with that. At the beginning, anybody who entered Al Udeid, who just lived on the flight line, because they hadn’t really entered through immigration, through the air terminal, they just got off the airplane on the flight line, and went to a hangar, or a tent, or a repurposed baggage handling area. The Qataris didn’t make them do any of that stuff. But they decided they needed to do that, because they didn’t know who was coming in and out of their country, really, nor did we, except for the ones who had actual paperwork. Then we had to take people off the plane, and then walk them through the terminal, the air terminal, which was normally for U.S. service personnel, and customs and immigration would stamp this little piece of paper that we gave them. They go out the backside of the little passenger terminal and on to their housing unit. That slowed things down. And we did that twenty four hours a day because flights were coming in and going out on a twenty-four hour basis.

Q: How many planes do you think that was on a twenty-four hour basis?

HOLTZ: Well, it depends. There were days when we had five, I am trying to think. There were three days when we received a total of twenty thousand people. And we were only able to send out probably four planes with four hundred people per plane. How much is that? Like twelve hundred people would go out. This is why we were getting backed up. And then on August 30, when incoming flights stopped, because we were done, then it was just all outbound, except for the explosion of charter flights that were being arranged by private American citizens with an Afghan airline called Kam Air where they were sending long lists of names of people that they, the private Americans said, we’re entitled to come to the U.S. because either they were SIV applicants, or U.S. citizens or green card holders or vulnerable people. This was probably the worst part of it was that they would send these lists. And they would send them to Suzy George, the secretary’s chief

of staff of the State Department, to personally clear the list. And it was an imperfect process, to say the least because she would try to clear the list like she would say, “Okay, these people appear to be U.S. citizens or green card holders.” But we were taking the word of these private Americans that any of this was true. The plane would arrive.



Kam Air flight

And of course, the people getting off the plane did not match those lists. We had stowaways on several of those flights. We had people who had absolutely no really legal ability to enter the U.S. as a refugee as an SIV holder, a green card holder U.S. citizen they were just whoever got on the plane in Mazar-i Sharif through the Taliban checkpoints screened by Kam Air which is owned by an Afghan warlord and somehow allegedly screened by well meaning Americans who wanted to get people out. They had a hard time—the regular U.S. flights and the Qatar flights were pretty much dried up at the time. But these charter planes were starting to crop up and they were a mess and very politically sensitive, because of course, they were very highly connected, well meaning Americans who would engage with senior American officials, congresspeople, whoever

they could, to say America must help them get out of Afghanistan. Even though these private Americans are paying for the planes, they let them into America.

And that's when this list clearing things started. And it didn't work well, because you could clear the list, they all looked good. The plane would arrive. And like I said, about 70 percent of the people were the people on those lists, but 30 percent were not. You couldn't send them back because we had a policy of not returning them. They were not going to stay in Qatar, because the Qataris had said, the one thing they asked of me was whoever comes in, you take out. That was super complicated. Unaccompanied minors, and identified people, stowaways twice, maybe three times, the entire crew, including the pilots of those Kam Air flights. They were not getting back on the plane. They did not want to go back to Afghanistan. They were going to stay and leave those planes in Qatar. We convinced them to go back to Afghanistan with those planes. Technically, we were not allowed to do that. But we had some amazing task force people who were screening the passengers who got off the planes. They did that in the middle of the night. They didn't know that they were not allowed to tell Afghan pilots that they had to go back to Afghanistan. They'd say, you've got to go back. You can't stay here. They left. But potentially, we could have had several Afghan private Kam Air planes at Al Udeid.

We had one plane arrive in Qatar at Al Udeid that had never been given flight clearances, never been given permission to land by the U.S. Air Force, or the Qataris. It just landed. Nobody could figure that one out. I saw the people who got off that plane. This was in the middle of the evacuation, when U.S. air flights had stopped. And the only thing I could think to do is just get them out of there because that plane was full of people who had very well connected, influential backers who were calling Nancy Pelosi. Anyway, this plane, no one could piece together how the U.S. Air Force didn't know that it was landing on their flight line, nor the Qataris. I don't know to this day how that happened. But it did. And we just got those people out of there because they were, it was chaos on these charter flights.

Everybody who was working the charter flights from State to the task force that I was leading to the companies, the private companies themselves, called them different names. Part of it during the middle of the evacuation, there were charter flights, private Americans, chartering flights, were asking the Qataris to bring their people out. One of those flights, we call it the New York Times flight. So the New York Times worked with the Qataris to get all their people out of Afghanistan. The Qataris took them to the villas. They didn't stay at the air base, but they went straight to the villas. Then, for some reason, because they had not come as part of Operation Allies Refuge, the thing that the U.S. government was running, I was told and the Qataris were told, and the New York Times people were told that they could not come in as refugees or evacuees through this process. They had to get to the United States on their own. And they couldn't get on one of the U.S. evacuation flights from Qatar to Germany, Germany to the three points of entry at the time. They didn't like that. So they just chartered themselves a plane or got Qatar air tickets to Dallas or Houston and then tried to enter that way.

Q: They were Afghans, they were working for New York Times but were not U.S. citizens?

HOLTZ: Correct. This is another problem in this whole operation. How many American citizens? And how do we not know? And why didn't we get them all out? For the majority of the people that we saw, maybe the father was a U.S. citizen, but the wife and alleged six kids, and his mother, and father. None of those were. They might be entitled to U.S. citizenship. But for a lot of those families, the only documented citizen was the male, head of household. And we'd get these rather large families, they may all have been U.S. citizens, but only the dad was documented. We had a hard time. And we didn't know if they were really his kids or not. Some were, but I'm 100 percent sure that some were not because they didn't have documents to prove anything. There were very few whole families where everybody had a passport or a green card or some kind of documentation indicating they will be allowed to legally enter the U.S.

Q: All right. Let me just stop here. You've covered so much, I just want to make sure I have a couple of clarifications.

HOLTZ: Sure. Yeah.

Q: The plane that came in without a flight clearance or anything, did you know at all who was on the plane?

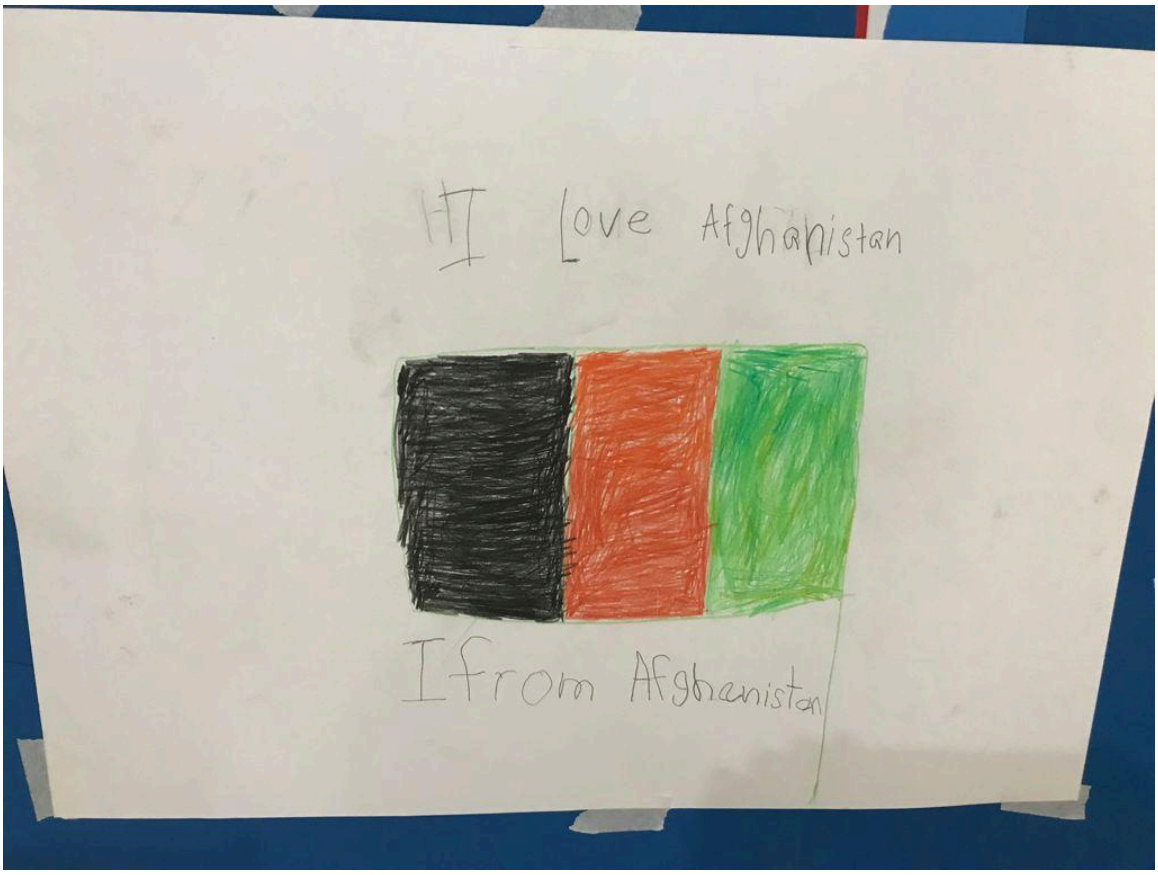
HOLTZ: We did the same process that we did for every plane that we knew was coming, we made a list. We took documents from whoever had documents, we wrote down their names, they went through the same NCTC screening process, and then they went to Germany for onwards. I mean, I can tell you that every person who got off a plane from Kabul or Mazar-i Sharif to Al Udeid Air Base got physically searched, before they could leave the tarmac to come through the little passenger terminal, and then go to one of their housing units. And then at that point, they were either document checked, or we asked for their names and the names of their children.

Q: Okay. And people are needing to be immunized, but you weren't trying to do that because of the delays it would cause?

HOLTZ: At some point, four people who arrived in the U.S. had measles or another of those diseases that we've wiped out in the States. And they stopped all the flights until we were able to vaccinate everybody who needed to be vaccinated for, I want to say measles. Then they decided to Covid vaccinate everybody. With the measles vaccine, there was like a twenty day period where you had to vaccinate and then after twenty days, they would be okay to travel. And then the Covid shots at the time, between shot one and shot two, you needed three weeks. This delayed everybody till we could get through that vaccination process.

That is when we started laying on activities. I called the head of the Islamic Museum in Doha, and had them come to the base to do activities for the children and the families. They did story reading, they did arts and crafts. I lined up the Qatar symphony orchestra to come and do mini concerts out there. We had Afghan women who knew how to teach pilates. The range of education and skills and sophistication among the evacuees was quite broad. You'd have Afghan women lawyers, and they're saying, Yeah, I can teach

pilates. With others we did not couldn't do that. But we had to sort of keep them entertained and occupy their time while they were sort of stuck for like thirty days.



A drawing done by an Afghan child

We sorted out many issues having to do with the single men who were housed at Camp As Sayliyah, the army base, in separate giant warehousing places from the families who were in the containerized housing units. But we ran out of space for that, too. So we worked with our army to open up huge air conditioned warehouses and create separate areas for the families by artfully arranging their bunk beds, where they'd have some kind of privacy. Because even within this giant warehouse where there weren't single men, there were still young men, or old men and men who were mixing it with all the families who had vulnerable women and children. For me, the priority was just to get them out of there before bad things happen in Qatar.

Q: Between August 15 and August 30, how many people came through? The estimate is fifty-eight thousand. But the whole number for coming to Qatar was seventy-five thousand.

HOLTZ: Well, that was after, so they're still coming out of Qatar. Between the dates you mentioned, August I would say October 15. It was about fifty-eight thousand.

Q: And American citizens were going somewhere else. If they were just American citizens, which you said was rare.

HOLTZ: The American citizens who we could identify, we send them straight to the Qatari villas. We got them out eventually, because at the beginning, we were just sending everybody, as soon as you can, get in and get out. But when they had to stay longer for the vaccines, we separated the American citizens from everybody else, and sent them to the Qatari villas. And then they would either arrange their own way back to the States, or we would repatriate them, give them the ticket like a normal citizen services case.

Q: What happened to the baby girl?

HOLTZ: The Qataris really wanted her and half the U.S. military officers wanted to keep her, but she eventually came to the States and was put into foster care.

Q: Okay. And were there a fair number of cases where you are able to reunite children with families?

HOLTZ: Even while we were in Qatar. Absolutely. We had a whole team set up for this. We reunited many. In the end, I would say that there were still some who we were interviewing eight year olds about. Do you have any relatives in the States? What are their phone numbers? Oh, you've never met great Aunt Gertrude who might live in Canada. That required Afghan translators, different dialects. There were some that we just could not find the relatives with. The Qataris were very insistent that we not send them to just any old relative or any old person who claimed they were the relative. They wanted better proof that they were going to a safe relative, who was a real relative, and who would accept responsibility. That was not easy to do when you have an eight year old, who doesn't know anybody's phone number, or where they live in America, or even that they live in America or Canada or anywhere else. We couldn't finish all of that processing by the time the Qataris said we just need to move these unaccompanied out. You can sort that out in Chicago. I would say we got the majority sorted out, but not all.

Q: Were there other categories of issues that you were single handedly handling like Supergirl?

HOLTZ: I mean, it was crazy. I mean, there's so many like little stories from within each of those lines of effort.

Q: Could you tell me your favorite story?

HOLTZ: Favorite stories. We had some funny moments. I had no office but there was a scramble to get whiteboards where you could write down things. The taskforce at one point became like, two hundred people in three shifts, and then two shifts. We needed to be able to communicate with each other, not just on WhatsApp. We were scrambling to get whiteboards. We got whiteboards. And then I needed a little office for my refugee leadership team to be able to run the thing. And not just on my cell. We did everything from cell phones. Okay, so we needed chargers, we needed whiteboards. We had no printers, we had no infrastructure supporting any of this.

We eventually got the Qataris, my good friends, they gave me an office at the little U.S. passenger terminal. That's the Al Udeid Air Base that also houses the Qatari customs and immigration. It's like a mini airport terminal that we would have in the U.S. back in the '50s or '60s in some tiny town. And there was an office in there that was unused, but it was reserved for the Qatari Ministry of Interior people. They just gave me that office. That's your headquarters. And so I could then see thousands and thousands and thousands of Afghans coming in front of my eyes going through the metal detectors to go through customs and immigration, and out the back door, either back in the other half of that airport to go stay at Al Udeid or to the other airbase. This adorable young enlisted soldier came in and he burst open the door into the office where I had like my three or four team members. Yes, ma'am, are you expecting any visitors? And I was like, do you mean the ten thousand people who are like walking in front of our faces right now? We just burst out laughing. There were ten thousand people literally behind him as he was asking if I'm expecting visitors. That's kind of funny.

At some of the housing places at Al Udeid, the men were getting hostile. They were getting into fights and they were frustrated. It was hot and so word came to me that there was what they said was a riot. It wasn't really a riot per se but it was unrest in one of those housing units. I said, "Okay, well what's the plan? What do you guys recommend?" They go, Oh, just send in Amina. Something like that. "What do you mean you're sending Amina in to quell rioting Afghan military age men?" I was horrified. But as it turned out, she was the volunteer who had worked most closely with these men, because they assigned the volunteers to certain housing units. They do their shift at that housing unit and they would help U.S. military folks solve whatever problems came up at that temporary housing facility, be it at a warehouse or a tent or air hangar? So Amina knew those guys and she was a familiar face. And she could help sort it out. And she did. From then on, if ever there was some horrible situation where like, you just say, "Send in Amina, she can solve it."

Q: She didn't speak the language right?

HOLTZ: She did not speak the language. I think she was Lebanese maybe. But she didn't speak any of the languages. That was a huge challenge, the lack of translators. We never really did solve it. In the middle of all this, all the chaos, we had to do sit reps [situation reports for Washington] twice a day. And then we had to make calls with Washington. And at the time they called any country that was receiving evacuees, they called it the lily pad system. So we were one of several lily pads. Abu Dhabi was one and Albania and different places, I think Ramstein Air Base was considered a lily pad. So it was any sort of processing way station for evacuees before they entered U.S. territory. And so we had to do those calls. For me, one of my highest priorities was to keep a good relationship with John Desrocher, who was the bilateral chargé in charge of Doha embassy. And he was great. And we tag teamed doing those lilypad calls. They were twice a night. They had different focuses. At some point in the middle of this. Let's say August 20 to October 20. We started working with the Qataris on bringing more American citizens out on Qatari airplanes. John and I just divided the work and that became his line of effort—American citizen evacuation flights. I continue to try to handle the charter flights

that were for Afghans. In the middle of all of this, the wonderful Qatari one star who helped me get the guys to man the guard towers.

Q: Wonderful Qatari.

HOLTZ: Yes, the wonderful one star, flew to Kabul and worked with our embassy while they were still there, at the airport, to ensure that the airport would be able to be used by the Qataris. And at the time, they were talking about the Turks securing the airport enough to continue evacuation flights. I think John Bass was still there. They were all still there. We were looking ahead to the day on August 30 and the end of the U.S. mission in Kabul, when the Qataris would take over and be the only one flying in and out of there. And so on August 30, because the Qataris had done their homework with us, with our team at HKIA airport, they were able to continue or resume or start up U.S. and other NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] allied evacuation citizen evacuation flights.

Q: When the embassy folks came out on the twenty-ninth and thirtieth. Did they come through your airport there?

HOLTZ: They did. Originally they were supposed to go to Kuwait. And I don't remember what happened. But it was another call in the middle of the night. They said we have to bring them to Al Udeid in Qatar so of course yes. Ross Wilson and his team, the last of the Americans came through Qatar. I had gone to the hotel to get some sleep, like I said these were twenty hour shifts. When I came in the next morning, like six am this broke my heart. I had done the paperwork to assign Ross Wilson as a reemployed annuitant [REA] to head up Embassy Kabul back in 2020. I'm sure he told you the story that when he arrived he had Covid. He had to be isolated in Qatar before he could leave. On my desk he had left me like a post it note with his coin, his ambassador coin, and a thank you for all. Which broke me up, because here he is with full Covid. He was living in the airport for two weeks and seeing horrific things, including being there for the bombing and the killing of those thirteen American marines and military personnel. But, he took the time to write me a little thank you note.

Q: He said that he felt crappy. He felt exhausted, but he didn't know he had Covid. He just thought it was just all the overwork and stress, until he got tested.

HOLTZ: Well, we knew he had Covid while he was in Qatar, so yeah. Anyway, it touched me greatly that he took the time to do that.

Q: You didn't actually see him right?

HOLTZ: They kept him isolated in a separate place, I think DVQ, distinguished visitor quarters, on Al Udeid. And he was only there for six hours or something. Because they got that team in and out really quickly. So no, I did not see him. But he was in my office. I thought it was very kind, thoughtful in the middle of all that absolute chaos that he did that.

Q: Wow. Getting back to you. How are you doing with all these twenty hour days and all?

HOLTZ: I mean, the effects were quite dramatic because the involvement of Washington hadn't quite hit them yet in Washington. They had the task forces set up. And this was another chaotic thing. They renamed the task forces, they had different mandates, they had different working groups but on our end, the twenty hour days, started before they started in Washington. After like four or five days of four hours sleep, for me, and for my deputies and my military colleagues out there who were having some of the same schedule, the physical effects were quite obvious. Your brain works slower, your words come out slower, things like that. I found myself having to write down what I needed to say and do like six times, because it just didn't stick. And so then, Washington caught up. And they were working really hard. But when they started going into their own twenty hour day modes I could hear in their voices, that exhaustion, and that delayed speech and the delayed mental acuity that I had had the week before. It's quite a fascinating phenomenon. And that includes not just the State people, but our military colleagues. I was on the phone quite a bit to Central Command, because they were in charge of the evacuation. And they were able to do shifts better than we were. I didn't have a co-lead. And my deputy and I, we just pushed through, because we were only there like a month. She was there a little bit longer. But the military guys who get to take turns and do twelve hours on twelve hours off, fared better, but not fully.

Q: I'll tell you a quick little story. I was in Iraq in 2013–2014, and John Desrocher was the DCM. In June 2014, ISIS took over the northern part of the country and we had to get people out. That was John's job along with the management counselor. The ambassador was in Washington, so John was up all night and then coming back into the office in the morning to coordinate the action. I was the economic minister counselor; I tried to take care of my boss and insisted we should work on shifts. So, they set up a whole task force space, but of course nobody ever used it.

HOLTZ: I think it's a better thing to do if you can and the military in Al Udeid the guys normally assigned there were able to do shifts to a degree but then at some point even they couldn't. And then, I was like, huh, now you are we are because you can't shift either anymore. There was that.

My overwhelming thought then and now, is how lucky I was to be a part of that great standing American team, and the Qatari team and partner and what a blessing and opportunity was given to me to be able to help human beings on such a large scale. In my life, you always want to help people and you want to do good things. I felt blessed to have been able to help that many people on that large of a scale. And I would not have wanted to be anywhere else. And 100 percent of my team, the task force people from embassies across the globe, felt the same way. We felt blessed, honored and lucky to be a part of helping that many at risk human beings. And we were from all different ages and different parts of our government and different political backgrounds, whatever, it was not that long after the divisive election. America was divided and politically challenged by the election, and Covid and all that horrible stuff in our own country, driving us apart. But every day out there in the field, people put all that aside, nobody cared. And they just helped the human beings in front of them get what they needed. It was very emotional, very touching. And I wrote a thank you note to every single Foreign Service officer who was on the task force. And in doing that, it really struck me. We have people from Brazil,

Georgia, Pakistan, all the Middle East posts, most of the Central Asian posts [not so much the EUR Bureau]. What an honor. And they all felt the same way. We were the lucky ones, regardless of twenty-hour days, and hundred thirty degree heat, and no masks in the middle of six thousand people who probably had Covid, or definitely had other diseases. We felt we were the lucky ones.

Q: Let's go back to the thirtieth of August. At this point, were you able to start getting more people out than were arriving on the charters?

HOLTZ: That was when there were no U.S. planes coming in. And it was only the charters, that's when we got to a whole different part of the operation. We worked with USTRANSCOM—with the State Department evacuation team, which was shrinking, but there was still the hub there—on putting those people who came out after the U.S. airlift on to these U.S. charter flights that were Omni air, usually Delta, all those U.S. charter flights. That was another really complicated set of clearances and logistics and flights that you thought but weren't sure were coming or not. The Afghans often who had taken a thirty minute ride to the airbase had to go back because the flight was canceled, or there were little picky fights about manifests and things. I just wondered about all this manifesting when none of these people had documents. How valid were the manifests? And we just wrote on yellow legal pads, then we sorted them out. But it was a lot of hassle.

I would say, for a week, we had like, two or three incoming flights daily, because they were out of our control. They were controlled by the Taliban in Mazar-i Sharif who were not under the control of the Taliban in Kabul. The Taliban in Maz were probably just taking money and letting these flights leave until the Taliban in Kabul got wind of it. But the passengers had to somehow get through all the Taliban checkpoints in and around Mazar-i Sharif, to get on the plane. And then we had to work flight clearances from Doha. I was on the phone at one point to the air traffic controller in the airport at Mazar-i Sharif, who spoke perfect English, and I'm sure had been there before the Taliban takeover because not too many Taliban speak English, and telling him what he needed to provide us to be able to give to our flight clearance guy in Embassy Doha, to be able to provide that to the Qataris who had to give written permission for that plane to enter Qatar and land at Al Udeid.

The Qataris at that point were getting a little more demanding of documents. And at one point they said, Nope, we're only gonna let in people with actual passports. We had to fight that one and say, Look, the dad has the passport, are you going to tell me that the women and children can't come in? They don't have them. Can we please go back to at least letting people in who have some form of ID? I agree, not the ones who have nothing, but the ones who have a piece of an Afghan ID which shows that they have some linkage to the American citizen. So they let that happen for a while. But the flight clearances. It was literally like going over the edge of the waterfall every day with two or three flights with the clearances. There were no working runway lights at the airport in Mazar-i Sharif. They had to take off during daylight hours. Three hour flight, more or less to Qatar, but the flight clearance took so long, and they had to be cleared by two or three different parts of the Qatari government. They had to have the tail number, the

cellular number, which would change in between when you put in the paperwork to two days later, when the plane was actually coming. This was a nightmare.

The embassy guy who had been the enlisted U.S. soldier who had been at the embassy when I was chargé, who was in charge of doing all these flight clearances, spoke fluent Arabic. He was so frustrated, and was so hard to work with that the ambassador chargé sent him home. He couldn't take it anymore. Nobody who worked with him could take it anymore. He was just relieved. We had the deputy defense attache doing all the flight clearances, which of course is way beneath his pay scale but he had to fill in for the guy who just exploded. I would say we averaged for a while two flights a day coming in. And then they had the thirty day wait for all those vaccines. Then we got down to one flight a day. Then at some point Washington said stop all the flights, because the passengers arriving don't match the manifests. We had one plane with thirteen stowaways in the crew rest area and the belly of the plane. So they stopped it all.

Q: But flights going out to Germany and the United States and Kosovo, they continued?

HOLTZ: Well, yes, we have the numbers somewhere. We had eight thousand at Camp As Sayliyah, declining to six thousand then five thousand then two thousand. By the time I left, we got down to like a thousand because once they passed their waiting period for the vaccines, we would arrange a charter flight. And we would document them. Yes, we got down to like a couple of hundred by the time I left. They were all Afghans except you occasionally would get the American citizen male whose wife and kids had come up much later, like the American maybe hadn't gone back to Afghanistan for summer vacation. This is why we had American citizens trapped over there. Because they went to visit their families, then Kabul fell, and they were kind of stuck. The Americans who didn't go back or had left, often had pregnant wives and little babies and mothers and brothers. We had the pregnant wife, the siblings, the other kids that have aunts and uncles in Camp As Sayliyah. But the father was an American citizen, sometimes those American citizens would come back to help accompany their family back out. If they could prove they were U.S. citizens, they would go on their own. If they couldn't, they would go on these U.S. DOD [Department of Defense] charter flights.

Q: I'm just trying to piece everything together in Washington. They had formed CARE in Washington to facilitate the logistics on their side. Beth Jones picked it up at the beginning of October 2021. I am interested in the reason for the difference between getting down to a thousand versus the numbers that she had helped out during the ensuing year.

HOLTZ: They would come into Qatar and then go out if they got the— When Beth took over, I think we maybe had a thousand, maybe eight hundred. When we had Tony Blinken and Lloyd Austin come through, when they came through, we had gotten the bulk out so they came before October. They came through, we showed them the two air bases, and I was really mad. They didn't see it when it was completely insane. They see now when it looks good, now. We have no more evacuees left at Al Udeid Air Base, no more warehouses with people going into seizures because of the heat. No more standing groundwater in a hangar with vomit and shit and rats. They didn't see any of that stuff. That was all done by the time they got there which is good; before Beth got there. We

were way down. I have slides somewhere because we had Senator Menendez come out and I did a briefing for him in October. And if I can find those slides, it will tell the numbers.

Q: That'd be fine. Have people interviewed you before?

HOLTZ: Nothing like this, I've done a couple talks for the U.S. Army up in Carlisle. I did a talk for Spirit of America, an NGO who helped us because they are authorized to work with DOD and State. You don't have to complete the contract, they just get paid by DOD. I've done those kinds of talks. But no, nothing like this before. Nobody was interested.

Q: I'm sure people are and we look forward to posting this interview. People all talk about your effort in these stellar terms. Everybody that knows what you did has been extremely laudatory. Do you have any lessons learned or advice for the future for people in the future who are plunged into challenges like this?

HOLTZ: Absolutely. So one thing we didn't do a good job of was, because I had like, literally twenty-four hours to get from full retirement to full recall, other than talking to my buddy, Barbara Leaf on the phone, and working. I gave my own mission statement to NEA that said this is what I bring to the table. These are the things I want to ensure happen or don't happen. But we didn't have time to explain to the U.S. military, except by me just showing up on their airstrip. Here's who I am, here's my job. I didn't have a title. I came up with the title, which would explain my role. I think I would advise people to do a better job of explaining to the people with whom you're going to be working, not just embassy people and people who knew I was gonna have the task force. But these military colleagues at the bases, like who was I? I look like a retired housewife or something. They had no idea. So I had to explain it to them.

And then I wanted to have a little ops center with the three parts of the Qatari government that made up their task force, and then the three parts of our government, which were my task force. I could never get the U.S. Air Force guys at the base to agree to do that. They're like, nope, if you want to have a taskforce room, come over to our place, and we've got this lovely conference room. I went over there and it's a skiff. We are doing 100 percent of this evacuation on our iPhones. We can't bring them in there. Because you can't actually do any work. And you can't bring our laptops in there. I would have insisted upon some sort of integrated Qatar-U.S. Task Force, like an op center with a couple of whiteboards, a printer, a couple of laptops where you can plug in your laptop and churn out the reports that you needed to do. So sort of a command center so that we didn't have to throw the USO people out of their quarters, and then an explanation and more of who I am. Here's what I'm doing. Here are the elements of the U.S. government at Al Udeid Air Base that I wanted, I needed it to match with the Qataris had, but we really couldn't get that done. We just cobbled it together. The better way would have been to have it sorted out in advance.

Q: As far as support from the Department of State, how did you feel?

HOLTZ: They were amazing. So any NEA's whatever I asked for, she would send me or try to send me. When I needed permission to accept the generosity of the Qataris, they

offered eight thousand free flights. That's a lot of money when they offered food, medicine, and tents and clothing. I quickly called. I was on the phone a lot with Brian McKeon, and with acting Management Under Secretary Carol Perez at the time. They ran through the traps. McKeon was great at working with the Pentagon, to get them to also chop on my ability to accept these tickets on behalf of the U.S. government. Whatever permission I needed, they got it really quickly. They sent people when I had specific needs for a couple of leadership type people, people who'd had op center experience or crisis management experience. They put out the call for those. So they were absolutely amazing. Absolutely amazing.

Q: And then you left on what day in October?

HOLTZ: October 15, I recall.

Q: And you retired again?

HOLTZ: Well, yes. I mean, you can only retire once is what they told me. I stayed in Washington in REA [Reemployment and Eligibility Assessment] status to finish writing awards, and doing some of the documentation.

Q: Was there anything else that you wanted to discuss? Any overall reflections on our effort in Afghanistan or on the withdrawal and evacuation?

HOLTZ: I think it's amazing that we were able, at least in Qatar, my little portion, to safely receive and move on fifty-eight thousand people in almost just two weeks, because by the time we got to the end of August, so from August 15 to August 30, we have pretty much moved all fifty-eight thousand. I'm trying to get you the number that we ended up with in the first couple of weeks of September. I would say yes, there are much better ways to do it. If you'd had notice. And if you knew this was coming, but apparently we didn't. We did it anyway. We did the entire evacuation on our iPhones with WhatsApp if you can do that and not lose a living soul. One little girl died. She came to Qatar with a terminal illness. She was two years old. She was going to die anyway, she did die in Qatar, but we got her to the hospital and her whole family was there. But nobody else died. And that's quite amazing. When you think about all the challenges of the heat and the lack of water and the wounds, mental and emotional. There was one incident where somebody grabbed the gun of one of the U.S. soldiers, and one of those hangars, and they got— It all worked out. But I would say that yes that we could do much better with planning but the fact that we could do it at all was a testament to the people who volunteered to do this.

End of interview