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Oral Histories of U.S. Diplomacy in Afghanistan, 2001-2024

ABDUL WAHAB SIDDIQI

Interviewed by: Azaad [pseudonym]
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INTERVIEW

Q: Hello, this is Azaad. Today is Monday, October 7, 2024. I'm doing an interview for the Afghanistan Oral History Project. Today, we are doing an interview with Mr. Abdul Wahab Siddiqi. Hello, Abdul Wahab.

SIDDIQI: Hi, Azaad. It's a real honor to be part of this project as an interviewee.

Early Years, Education and Jobs

Q: First of all, who is Abdul Wahab? When and where was he born?

SIDDIQI: My name is Abdul Wahab. My last name is Siddiqi, but I would go with Wahab. I was born in April 1987 in the western part of Afghanistan. I had my elementary, secondary, and high school education at Sultan High School in Herat City. After high school graduation, my desire was to become a prosecutor and a lawyer in Afghanistan. But there is a big entrance exam called the "Kankor Exam," and I didn't do a very good job with that. So, I chose to study journalism and communications at Herat University in 2008. I started working as a journalist in my second year at the university. I started working with Youth Voice Radio. It was a radio for Herat University, and it was funded by the Embassy of the United States in Kabul. I think it has a branch here in Washington, D.C., one in California, and another one in London, called Internews. When I was a senior at the university, I started working in national TV as a political show presenter. I interviewed highly prestigious and high-ranking authorities in Afghanistan, such as ministers, the vice president, and parliament members.

Q: You were based in Herat?

SIDDIQI: Yes. I produced the programs. The main branch was in Herat City, but we had national broadcasting from there. After a while, I started working as a news anchor. In 2011, I started working with an organization called NAI (Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan). We were funded by USAID, Internews, and some other American organizations. I have been working as a TV trainer since I was working in TV, and I was

a student at Herat University at the time. After a while, I became the Herat branch manager of the NAI.

Q: Before going ahead, I have a question. I think you started attending school during the first Taliban regime, the first Taliban era. Right?

SIDDIQI: Yes.

Q: How was that experience starting school under the Taliban? You were seven or eight years old when the Taliban took power in Herat.

SIDDIQI: As you said, I was a kid, but I was very aware of the situation. I was really following the situation around me. I even remember that I was following the Persian Gulf War, which I think was in 1991. When I started school, the Taliban were very new to the city and to our people. I was born into a very religious and very strict family, so some in our family were Taliban supporters. I was raised as a very religious person, praying five times a day and starting to memorize the Quran. I was in fourth grade when the Taliban came to power. I remember, as a kid, I needed to have a turban. I found all the subjects at the school were going to be religious subjects. We were not studying mathematics, physics, biology, or history. I'm talking about public schools. We were studying Sharia law and Islamic religious subjects.

There was one good point, which was my light, and that was my father. My father had studied in Pakistan, and he learned English. He was at the intermediate level. He had a chance to learn English because he was fighting the Soviet Union forces during the occupation of Afghanistan. As a Mujahideen, he was sent to Pakistan for some military training, and there he had a chance to study English. He told me that the reason that he started learning English was because he needed to operate weapons that were donated by the U.S. forces to Mujahideen. My father was encouraging me to go to the English training center. There was only one training center in Herat City at that time. I was a small kid when I started learning English. So, I became familiar with English.

The feeling that I had about the Taliban regime at that time, since I was a kid, was that they were like angels who had come from the sky in order to save us. It was something that I honestly believed.

Q: Because of the situation the people went through before the Taliban, the internal war.

SIDDIQI: Exactly. All the people were telling us that the Taliban are good. But you know, soon they showed their real faces. Then, I understood who these people were. I never forgot. They were hanging tens of people in Herat City and leaving their corpses out in public for days.

Q: And they forced the people to come and watch, I remember.

SIDDIQI: Exactly. I never forgot that they executed a man and a woman in Herat Stadium. As a kid, I was really curious to see how they were going to kill a person. I saw them do that with my own eyes.

So anyway, the day that 9/11 happened in the United States—

Q: I was going to ask about this. You remember?

SIDDIQI: I remember all the details. Two days before that, I remember that Ahmed Shah Masoud was killed. Everywhere, people were talking about Masoud and how he was killed. After that, I remember that 9/11 happened in the United States. I remember that after that, there was the bombarding of the Taliban, the changing of the regime, and having a temporary government led by Hamid Karzai, and after that, my life continued on this path.

Q: So, coming back to NAI, what did you do with NAI? And how were the changes in Herat during the democratic era?

SIDDIQI: It changed a lot. I remember the first year after the invasion of Afghanistan by the United States. Ismail Khan was the governor. Herat was improving very fast; it was dramatically changing. The Taliban had banned music, so the people secretly listened to music on cassettes. But, if the Taliban caught you with a music cassette, that would be very hard for you. The day after the Taliban ran from Herat, I remember people brought very big loudspeakers to the streets, and they played music. Things were changing from night to day. Young men started shaving their beards, and the barber shops were busy. I couldn't recognize many people because they had shaved their beards. I saw hundreds of people throwing out their turbans. Lots of people who had worn Afghan clothes now wore Western clothes, like jeans and T-shirts.

Q: And what about women? Were there big changes in their presence?

SIDDIQI: At the beginning, it was not visible. As time passed, I found that things changed a lot for women. For example, their presence in the media. Before, you would rarely see a woman showing up in the media. In the bazaars now, they wore hijabs, and you could see their faces. Wow, for the first time, we were seeing the faces of women. It was a shock for me. At the university, female students were sitting on one side, and male students were sitting on the other side. It felt really strange. Nowadays, when I think about all those limitations on women, they are stupid and crazy, a violation of human rights. It created the perception that women were only for sex and having babies.

Q: Unfortunately, this perception and this mentality has come back.

SIDDIQI: Yes, it has come back. Actually, they force people to do that. I believe people in the cities are not like that. Really, they don't like the Taliban. But they are the minority; they are not the majority of the population.

I think that after the collapse of the Taliban regime, one of the biggest changes was the media. It changed from day to night.

Q: Because it was for the first time in the history of Afghanistan, I believe.

SIDDIQI: As a journalist, I don't believe it's for the first time in the history of Afghanistan because we had a decade of democracy during Zahir Shah [King, 1933-1973], during which we had good media.

Q: I meant that back then, we just had the government TV and radio, but not at this level of private news agencies.

SIDDIQI: We had the first TV during Daoud Khan [President, 1973-1978], but radio, yes, we had it. We had lots of magazines back then. So, we had some experience of having free media in Afghanistan at that time. However, the other thing that I think changed a lot was the political perspective of having elections. It changed a lot, even though we know about the frauds, the scandals, and all that stuff that happened during the elections. Still, it was good practice for our people. I can tell you that the elections were for the first time. I'm not talking about jirga; that is something else. It is a gathering of people who only know a few things about the country. Elections were absolutely something new, and the media was changing a lot. These two developments were the main things that significantly changed Afghanistan. Today, if you're going to talk about Afghanistan now, you know that we don't have either of them.

Q: So, let's continue. What did you do after getting your bachelor's degree? Did you decide to go for your master's or to enter the job market?

SIDDIQI: I desired to have my master's degree at that time in 2011, but I continued working with NAI. I really loved working with them. Up until 2014, I was also working with national TV. In 2014, I passed a test to become an assistant professor at Herat University. It was one of my biggest dreams to teach at Herat University. I'm really proud of the job I did there, teaching girls and teaching boys. I understood how significantly I could impact kids, and through them their families, and through their families, society. I was not only showing them how a camera worked but also how to use it as a tool to impact people's perceptions.

Q: So, you were teaching photography at that time?

SIDDIQI: Photography was one subject I was teaching.

I was teaching various courses at that time. During my lectures at Herat University, I always talked about how to be a good citizen and teach them kindness. Yet every day, there were people being killed in the streets. My main goal was to teach against any type of extremism and radicalism in Afghanistan. I believe that the problem that we have, at least in the contemporary history of Afghanistan, is extremism, like the Taliban and the

Mujahideen before them. And if you go through the history of our country, extremism was the main reason that our people couldn't gather as a nation.

My main goal, and I think I was successful, was to train lots of girls and lots of boys and affect their perceptions. Nowadays, at least a few people are not extremists in Afghanistan, and I was a part of that process of fighting against extremists.

Q: Great. We see that you earned your master's degree in China. Can you talk about that?

SIDDIQI: Sure. I was an assistant professor at Herat University. At the same time, I was teaching media law at Jami University, which is a private university. As part of capacity building as a professor at the university, we were required to upgrade our level of education. So, I was searching for scholarship opportunities around the world. One place I applied to and fortunately was accepted to was Shanghai Jiao Tong University, which is one of the high-ranked universities in the world.

Q: When was this?

SIDDIQI: I started in 2018. I left China in December 2019 at the very beginning of the COVID outbreak. When I came back to Afghanistan, I couldn't go back because of the lockdown all around the world. So, I continued working with my professor on my thesis. I finally graduated in 2021. My master's degree was in New Media and Communication.

Q: I wanted to ask when you got married. Talk about your family.

SIDDIQI: I was a little boy when I got married.

Q: You were a victim of child marriage

SIDDIQI: I don't feel myself being victimized, you know. I'm satisfied because I really have a great wife. My wife is my first cousin. Her name is Maryam. I was 17 years old when I got engaged, I was 18 when I had my wedding ceremony, and I was 19 when I had my first child. My wife was a real supporter of me. I now have three kids, one daughter, and two boys. One of my sons has started college, the other one is a 10th grader, and my little daughter is a second grader here.

Q: You said you came from a very conservative and religious family. Was it difficult or challenging for you to send your wife to school?

SIDDIQI: Exactly, it was. Most of the family members were against the idea of my wife going to school. But at the same time, my sister, who was single, was going to school and became an assistant professor at Herat University. I think one of my uncles and I were the first point of changing the family. We were somehow successful.

Well, in 2013, I went to Italy. I said, wow, there is another world; there are other people, and there are other thinkers. You know, we used to think that the world was just Herat City, starting from the north of Herat to the south, from the west of Herat to the east. We thought we were absolutely right and all the other people around the world were wrong. That was extremism, it was radicalism, and it was very dangerous. When I went to Italy, I saw another culture. I read other books, and they helped me gain a new perception. I saw that the people were not dangerous people, but rather they were very kind. They were not as I had thought about them. I had had a very bad perception of different religions, specifically Christianity and Judaism. I came to respect other beliefs, to start living with others in a peaceful way, and to have a peaceful mind for myself as well. I went to churches and to synagogues. I saw they were praying. And they loved me. They hugged me. They were good people. They were not as bad as I had been thinking about them. I realized that those times in the past that I had been thinking about them was wrong. So, I kicked out my past and said goodbye to all those things. I was thinking something like Iran or Turkey or other Islamic countries around the world, where the source of the power and the laws are Islam. I believed in that. Then, I changed my mind and perception, and I thought no religion should be involved in the state's policy. I now thought that the state's policy should be set by politicians, and politics should be separate from religion.

Fall of Herat and Decision to Leave

Q: Great. So, let's move to July and August 2021. Tell us where you were at that time. Were you in Herat? I remember that Herat was one of the first provinces that fell to the Taliban. So, how was the situation there? What were you doing at that time?

SIDDIQI: At that time, I was working as an assistant professor for the School of Journalism and Mass Communication. But, for two or three months before then, most of the students were not interested in coming to school. There was no regular process of teaching and education. At the same time, I was the chief editor for Afghanistan's Women News Agency, AWNA, which was funded by NED, the National Endowment for Democracy. I was in Herat City. It was a really tough time for me. My hair started to change white because I felt under very heavy pressure, stress, anxiety, and finally, a very heavy depression. I was thinking about the situation in Afghanistan. If the war continued, no one would win this war. And if the Taliban came to power again, which they did, I knew that they would be the same regime that they were before.

I knew the Taliban well. I knew that they would not change. So, I was not hopeful. If they came to power, they would not support free media or support women's rights and education. As you know, now they are worse than they were before 2001. I was really under pressure, but I felt that those would be the last days of my happiness. It was being a teacher of girls and having the honor to teach the girls in Afghanistan, but witnessing how their dreams and futures are destroyed by an ignorant group.

I was really worried because Herat was getting surrounded by the Taliban, and the circle was getting tighter and tighter. They were getting closer and closer to us. On the day Herat fell, the 12th of August, 2021, I got a call from my sister, and she was asking me

where I was. I told her that I was at the office. She told me the Taliban had come into the city, and I said that those were just rumors. She replied, no, unfortunately, I'm coming from the bazaar now, and I saw them with my own eyes. It was the worst news that I have ever heard in my life. I love Herat City because I was raised there, and I really couldn't tolerate the idea of the Taliban flag flying over my head there. I called a friend of mine who was working for the New York Times. He was a journalist, and I asked him, "What's going on?" He told me, "Just go home." I went home, actually not to my home, but to my parents' home. I saw my father, who was really worried about the situation. He asked me not to go out because he knew that I was working for the media with foreign-related organizations. He knew that I would be in danger and that something could happen to me. But I couldn't just sit and stay at home. I went out, and I saw for the first time after 20 years the Taliban armed members with my own eyes. What an awful scene!

Q: The same day that Herat fell?

SIDDIQI: It was the evening at around 7:30 p.m. I saw them with my own eyes. I couldn't believe it. That night, I couldn't sleep. And for the second time in my life, I was crying. It was really tough to see such an extremist group again in the city that I loved, every single street, every single mountain. And I had all my friends and memories there. Anything that is related to me as a human, I felt that I had lost it. I was talking with my friends, and all of them were asking me not to go out. But I couldn't stop going out and watching.

The last time, I saw a policeman with a police uniform. I never forgot it. Four policemen stopped their car in the middle of the street in front of my house. They threw their guns out of the car. And they took off running and while running they were taking off their uniforms. Two robbers came and stole the car. After that, I didn't see any more police, whom I really loved. I was always proud to see the police and military forces in their uniforms. I really loved to see them. Even now, when I think about those days, my heart breaks, tears well up in my eyes, and I feel like a complete failure.

After that, I got an email from the organizations that I was working for, stating that I shouldn't go out and I should stay home. I went to one of my relatives' homes and stayed there for at least two days. On August 15, Kabul fell. On August 17, I got an email from NED that I should go to Kabul with my family as soon as possible. They were arranging for me and my colleagues to be evacuated with P2 immigration status. It was 5:30 a.m., and I got a call from a colleague. He was asking me to check my email. When I checked my email, I saw that we should go to Kabul as soon as possible. I asked him what was going on. He told me that he didn't know. I asked him where we would go and who would guide us. He said he didn't know. When we called some of our colleagues at NED here in Washington, D.C., they couldn't give us any information. They kept telling us that they didn't know. For those of you who have not experienced it, it is impossible to understand the feelings of a person who is forced to leave behind everything he has, including his parents, students, friends, and the beloved city, and move to an unknown and ambiguous destination and a future without a plan.

At 7:30 a.m., I went to my parents' home and started talking with my dad. I told him that I would be going now. I had lived with him for 34 years, and we had a very family-oriented culture and a very extended family. He couldn't believe me and asked me if I was joking. I said no, I was serious, and I had to go. My mom told me that it was not a good joke to tell her that I would leave her and Herat forever.

Absolutely nothing was clear. I was going to start on a new trip, and the destination of this trip was not clear. The tools that I would use for this trip were not clear. The timing was not clear. It was now 9.30 a.m., and I had been talking with my parents for about two hours. In all that time, they kept telling me it was a joke and that I wasn't going anywhere. My colleague came to my home, and we went to the bus station because there were no flights to Kabul. We went to the bus station and purchased some tickets.

Q: One of the poorest types of transportation.

SIDDIQI: Everything was very full. I booked my wife, me, and three of my kids. We started at 3:30 p.m. My dad didn't come to say goodbye to me. He was too angry. My mom was just crying. She was not saying a word. My siblings and one of my uncles came to see me off. They said we can't go anywhere, but you have a chance to do something for your family. They told me that they knew it would be very tough for us, but we should go and not stop. In that situation, I left Herat.

We left in a very old bus, a broken down one, and the driver was driving very dangerously. My wife's parents were living in Kandahar. At 4 a.m., we cross into Kandahar City. I saw that she was looking at the streets where she had lived and where her parents were living. She was crying. She was saying goodbye to them under her lips. And then we came to Ghazni, then Wardak, and finally Kabul. After twenty-three hours of being on the road, I saw how damaged the highways were even after the millions of dollars spent on them. You know, for one mile of driving, it seemed like it took an hour because the highway was badly damaged. During the trip, many times, the Taliban forces stopped the bus and came on asking if anyone was a soldier, a journalist, a teacher, or a person who was working for the government. I was working for the government, and I was a journalist, but I kept silent sitting down next to my wife. When the Taliban saw someone with a wife, they didn't come close to you, and they wouldn't ask a lot of questions.

Kabul and Evacuation to Abu Dhabi

Q: So, you finally made it to Kabul.

SIDDIQI: Yes. At last, we came to Kabul. I had a relative living there, and I called him for help. He told me that we could stay at a place he had there. He said that I should go there and stay there, but I shouldn't go outside. We went to the place, and it was empty. After three days of being in a very uncertain situation, living under heavy anxiety and high stress, I got a call from the National Endowment for Democracy. They told me that we should go to the Serena Hotel and be prepared to leave. My father thought that we

would not be able to enter Kabul airport because it was surrounded by tens of thousands of people. At that time, there were many U.S. forces and coalition forces, ISAF forces, and local forces at the Kabul airport. At five o'clock in the afternoon, we went to the Serena Hotel. They told me to say the code phrase "I was sent by Mustafa" to the Taliban guards at the hotel, and they would let us in. That was my first and last time talking with a Taliban member. We got a taxi and went to the Serena Hotel. There was a young Taliban member with different and strange clothes. I hesitated about whether I should talk to him or not. But there was no other option. So, I went up to him and told him in Pashto, "Zada de Mustafa Sareyyam," and he let us in. He told me to get in and get in very quickly with my family. So, we passed the first gate, and Qatari forces guarded the second gate. These were the Arab armed forces in the Serena Hotel. They had my name on the list. They asked me who I was. I gave them my name and my passport. I was on the list. We were there until 2 a.m. in the morning.

I saw many other people inside the Serena Hotel, including ministers, ministers' spokesmen, parliament members, teachers, professors, military forces, and high-ranking authorities. Then, they had us in groups. We were in a group of 270 people. We had 12 or 13 buses, I think. We got onto the buses. There were Taliban security guards in front of our caravan. I saw two new and expensive cars, which people told me had the Qatari ambassador. We started moving toward Kabul airport. And I felt in every single moment that there was the danger of an attack on us since such a caravan could be a great potential target. We were driving around the Kabul airport, and I saw hundreds of thousands of people looking at us with very disappointed and angry faces. I felt like we were in one of those movies with zombies. It felt so dangerous. I was not fearing for my life, but for my kids. I thought these people could throw stones, they could attack our bus, they could do anything. I closed my eyes. I thought that whatever would happen would happen. After an hour or so, when I opened my eyes, I no longer saw the Taliban members around us. I saw soldiers with the Italian flag on their uniforms. So, I took a really deep breath and thought to myself, okay, one difficult stage has passed, but it's not ended.

We got inside Kabul airport at 5 a.m. Then, we were waiting around all day. It was a very bad situation. There was no water, no food, no toilet. Some of my friends had some food and water, but I recommended that they don't eat or drink because there were no toilets. I saw more than ten or twenty big military airplanes flying and landing. After a while, around 8 p.m., after we had waited all day, surprisingly, we got on a civilian airplane and flew to Abu Dhabi. No one knew where we would go, but one thing was clear – we would leave our home for an uncertain time. When the plane took off, I could see the lights of Kabul shining below. As my daughter sat on my lap, I was lost in thought. A bitter feeling of despair and a sense of betraying my homeland, parents, and students overwhelmed me. I thought I would never return to my land, like a flight through the galaxies, heading to an unknown destination for an indefinite period. What a bitter feeling! And the tears that come up in my eyes. Worse still, I had to hide this feeling so my wife and children wouldn't lose their sense of reassurance.

Q: So, you leave Kabul on the same day? Was it a military aircraft? How many people were on the plane?

SIDDIQI: There were many people. We were on a civilian flight.

Q: Oh, commercial flight. You had a commercial flight?

SIDDIQI: Yes, with seats inside. NED had reserved that airplane for us. You know, it was the only commercial or civilian flight at that time. When we got on the plane, a steward was telling us there was no drinking, no food, and no toilets on the plane. So, we came to Abu Dhabi. On the whole way, my daughter was crying, asking me to give her pizza.

Stay in Abu Dhabi

Q: How long did you stay in Abu Dhabi?

SIDDIQI: In Abu Dhabi, we stayed for 4 days. We were in a locked block.

Q: Not a military base?

SIDDIQI: No, it was not a military base. It was a civilian site, but it was blocked. We were not allowed to go out, even from the block. It was about the size of my townhouse now, and we were not allowed to use the door. They were treating us like we were prisoners. I felt like a prisoner because when we were hungry and asked them for food, no one would answer, and we were not allowed to go out the door. It was locked. After four days, thanks to NED, they took us out of that jail. But I have some friends who stayed there for more than a year.

Q: I heard about the Abu Dhabi camp. Some people stayed there for more than a year.

Stay in Albania

SIDDIQI: So, we next went to Albania. Believe me, even at that time, we did not understand where we were going after Abu Dhabi. They just told us we would take you somewhere, but we were unsure where.

Q: What happened then?

SIDDIQI: After four days, they took us to the Abu Dhabi Airport. When we got onto the new plane, I heard a steward talking in English, and she said that we were going to Tirana. I was curious: where is Tirana? What city is this? In which part of the world is this Tirana? I asked my friend where Tirana was. No one knows. I got onto the public Wi-Fi and was able to check out Tirana. I googled Tirana and saw that it was the capital of Albania.

For one day, we were in a university dorm. The Albanian people welcomed us and treated us very well. I am really thankful to the Albanian people. I really didn't feel like an immigrant in Albania. After one day, they took us to a very big hotel called the Hotel Rafaelo Resort, which is one of the very best and most prestigious hotels there. It was near a beach. We had a chance to go and have a good time on the beach. Wow, there was another world. You could see lots of new stuff and new things and new experiences. There was one big contrast - the women. The women from Afghanistan were fully dressed and had hijabs. Then there were the other women, the half-naked women lying on the beach. Why do I compare that? Because I'm a journalist, I'm always looking for contrasts. When I looked at them and compared them, I thought, how big is this world? How strange is this world? And how difficult is this world?

In my second week in Albania, I got a new project with Internews. It was a research project with a friend of mine.

Q: In that situation, you accepted another research project?

SIDDIQI: Yes. I got a new research project. It was about social media dynamics in Afghanistan after the collapse of the regime. Fortunately, that research was published. We had a survey, we had content analysis, and we had qualitative research. I rented a small room as an office outside of the hotel where I was living with my family. I spent all day for six months working on that research.

Q: What about your other colleagues? Did they succeed in leaving Afghanistan?

SIDDIQI: Yes, the majority of them were successfully evacuated. But one of them couldn't enter the Kabul Serena Hotel. He was left behind, but after two and a half years, I think a few months ago, he was able to come to the United States with his P2 immigration status.

Anyway, I started working with Internews as a researcher. Finally, we had a very good project, and it helped me to control my stress and my anxiety. I somehow forgot what was happening in Afghanistan. As you know, at the same time, the Taliban hadn’t taken over the whole country. There was still fighting in Panjshir.

Q: How long did you stay in Albania?

SIDDIQI: In September 2021, we arrived in Albania. In March 2022, we left Albania for the United States. We were there for six and a half months.

Q: After you got to Albania, when did you make contact with your parents and siblings?

SIDDIQI: When we arrived in Albania, there was no internet connection at that dorm. And my laptop didn’t have any charge, and my phone was also out of charge. I went to the administration of the dorm for help. I remember one of the university staff members sharing his hotspot with me. I left a voice message for my dad and another one for my

mom and my siblings using WhatsApp. I told them that we were in Albania. In each step that we took, from Herat to Kabul, Kabul to Abu Dhabi, Abu Dhabi to Albania, my father believed that I would return. By the time we got to Albania, he was hopeful, but his hope was reduced a lot. But the day we got to the United States on March 22nd, 2022, when I called him, he told me that he now accepted that he had lost me and his grandchildren and his daughter-in-law forever.

Q: So, how was the situation for your wife in Albania? What did she do over there? And what about the children? You were busy with your research project.

SIDDIQI: The children were doing great. They were busy. They made new friends, and they did well.

Q: Were there other Afghan families around Albania?

SIDDIQI: There were lots of them. We had about 180 families at the same hotel. It was a great sample of a small Afghanistan. There were people from all over the country in this sample. It was a good place to do other research because you could meet representatives of all populations. You saw people from the west, the east, the north, the center, and the south. You saw people from different tribes and people speaking different languages. So, we were a small Afghanistan in Albania. The good thing about Albania was that we were free to go anywhere, unlike the UAE. We didn't have anything, and there was no documentation. No visa, nothing! But when we got there, they told us, it's your country. Please feel free to go anywhere you like. No one would stop you. I remember that there was a police officer. He told us that they had a war in the 1990s—the Yugoslavia War. He showed empathy with us, and you know, that helped us become hopeful again.

Q: And what about your wife?

SIDDIQI: For my wife, the situation was a little bit different. She came from a very conservative family, from a big, extended family. We all lived together, and we had a very good relationship. She missed my mom, she missed my dad, she missed my cousins, she missed my siblings! All the time, she was on the phone, and she was crying. The relatives in Afghanistan were telling her, hey, we went to this wedding ceremony, we went to a picnic, we did this, we did that. And she was feeling alone. When I found out and saw that she was always crying, I came to the resolution that I needed to talk to my relatives in Afghanistan. I took the phone and called my relatives and her friends, and I told them that if you love her, never talk to her about the good things that you are doing in Afghanistan. Encourage her to follow her destiny. If you love her, please respect us and do not talk about these things.

After that, for a long time, her friends were not talking to her. She became curious, and she asked me why, for example, Shakeela was not calling her. She had been calling every day; why this and that? Why were they not talking to her? After a while, I told her what I did. I told her it was not good that they were treating you in this way because, at the end of the day, you will not get any benefits from that but will end up crying. By doing that,

you make my life, our kids' lives, and your life worse and worse. So, it is something that I really don't want you to do. For her, it was really difficult. Now, she always tells me it was the best decision that I made. Now, she is working here in the United States. She has the freedom to study here. She has the freedom to go anywhere and drive. She has the freedom to wear anything she likes to wear. And she says, "even if I had to go through this process ten times more, I would do it again. I would do that because I never want to see my kids not allowed to go to school or not allowed to have this or that or having to wear beards. They don't have to live in a society that has hundreds of limitations imposed by an ignorant government."

Resettling in the United States

Q: After seven months, you finally entered the United States. How did that happen? When did you get informed about your case being finalized?

SIDDIQI: When we were in Albania, the NED told us that we had two options. One was to go to Canada. The immigration process there was easy, and after arriving, we would get permanent residency (PR) immediately. After three years, we could apply for citizenship. The second option was to resettle in the United States, but there was no guarantee that we would be allowed to enter. We might have to stay in Albania or even be sent back to Afghanistan. If we chose this option, we might have a chance to go to the United States. My brother and his family were with me. He decided to go to Canada with his family. It was the first time in our lives that we would be separated. My dad always recommended that my brother and I stay together, but we had different ideas for our future.

Q: So, were he and his family with you in Albania?

SIDDIQI: Yes. He had been working with the same organization that I worked for. He was not a journalist. He was an engineer, but he had some education in finance. He was the HR manager, and he also handled some administrative matters. So, he chose to start living in Canada, and I chose to try to go to the United States.

The reason that I chose the United States was that I thought that I would have more opportunities to work in media there. In the United States, there are lots of media opportunities. I would have more opportunities to work at a university or any educational organization. So, I chose to try to come here, even though, as I told you, there was no clear information about when we would be evacuated to the United States. Fortunately, after one and a half months, a DHS [Department of Homeland Security] team came to Albania. They had our fingerprints and other information, like face recognition, to help them process our case. After that, we got on a flight to the United States. We came first to Virginia, to Leesburg.

Q: When you arrived, did they take you to a military camp?

SIDDIQI: They took us to a camp, but it was the NCC, the National Conference Center, in Leesburg, Virginia. Actually, there were lots of military forces around.

Q: How long did you stay there?

SIDDIQI: I think it was for 10 days. Then they told me, you know, the immigration agency, they told me that your chance is to go to Kansas.

Q: You mean, the resettlement agency? Which resettlement agency took your case?

SIDDIQI: It was the IRC [International Rescue Committee]. They told me I needed to go to Kansas. I talked with a friend, and he told me to tell the IRC that I would not go to Kansas. I did, and they told me if we didn't go to Kansas, we would have to handle the resettlement ourselves. We would be without help from the resettlement agency.

Q: Oh, you mean go on your own.

SIDDIQI: Yes. A friend told me that we could stay at his home for any time we wanted, but that he had a small space. He was living in Bethesda, Maryland. We stayed at the NCC for 10 days. Then, I made contact with another agency called LSS.

Q: Oh, you mean Lutheran Social Services?

SIDDIQI: Yes, Lutheran Social Services in Maryland. They took our case, and we stayed a few days, I think, in North Bethesda. We had an Airbnb. After that, they found a home in Frederick, Maryland, for us. We started living in Frederick.

There were lots of Jewish people who came and helped us and supported us. I was telling my family members in Afghanistan that the mullahs were always telling us that Jews are our first enemies, but I came here and look how they help us. How good people they are! It was because we had a bad perception of people who were different from us. There were three families that were always coming to help us. When my daughter was feeling sick, a little bit of flu, they came to us and took her to hospital. They were taking us shopping, and they were trying to pay for my groceries and everything that we needed at that time. They were always coming around. There was one lady, Jane, and I am still in touch with her. I will never forget what they did for me and for my family. She was driving 25 minutes and coming to my home, teaching my kids and my wife English. For a long time, she did this.

After a few months of living in Frederick, my anxieties came up, and I was feeling really stressed because everything was strange for me. Everything was new. I knew at that time that integration into this society would be difficult. We had a very long and difficult path in front of us. It was a real test for our new life. So, I started applying for jobs. I did get an offer to work as a landscaper, a person cutting the grass. I applied for 163 positions all around Virginia, Maryland, and D.C. One day, I got a phone call, and the person was talking very fast in English. She told me that she was Dr. Lisa Grillo and that she had

received my resume, which was outstanding. She said we need a teacher in journalism. You worked as such a teacher. I just understood that she needed someone to work with them at her school, and she told me that they would pay me $40 per hour. I couldn't believe it, 40 – four zero. I asked her, "I'm sorry, Dr. Lisa, is it 14 or 40 dollars per hour?" She told me it was $40.

Q: Wow, $40 as a first job in the US.

SIDDIQI: Yes, $40 per hour in the United States as a journalism instructor. I asked her to send me the information by email because it was a bit hard for me to talk on the phone in English and to understand completely. She sent me an email with the job description and everything. It was the first offer that I got, and I had applied for one hundred and sixty-three jobs. I went for an interview with them. It was a Catholic faith-based school called Elizabeth Seton High School.

Q: Was it in the same city where you lived?

SIDDIQI: It was in Bladensburg in Prince George's County, Maryland.

Q: That was far away from where you lived.

SIDDIQI: It was one hour and 40 minutes from my home if it was normal traffic. Still, I decided to take the job. It was my first job, and it was a good one. It was a job that I loved. I didn't want to go to work in a hotel. I had spent all my life being an educator and a journalist. It was the exact thing that I wanted.

It was a Catholic faith-based school. I went there, and they asked me, if a student asked you a religious question, what would you answer? I answered them – I would say, please note your question, and when your religious teacher comes, ask your question since I'm here to teach you digital photography and broadcasting journalism. If you have a question about digital photography and broadcasting journalism, I'm here for you. Otherwise, I am the wrong person to answer this question. They said that they really appreciated my answer. So, I started working with them. I was driving in the early morning, one hour and 40 minutes one way and one hour and 40 minutes coming back.

Q: You got your driving license early on?

SIDDIQI: After two weeks of being in the United States, I got my driver's license. Stan Binder, a person who helped my family a lot, helped me to get my driver's license. He told me that I could use one of his cars, even though I didn't have a driver's license. I didn't even have a permit. I learned the driving rules in the USA. You know, in Afghanistan, drivers are not obeying the rules. As an example, when there is a green light, we need to stop and look around, and if there is no one, then we will go forward. Here, Stan was asking me why I was stopping at a green light. He said you need to go on a green light. For a long time, I would still stop at a green light. Also, in Afghanistan, we don't care about a stop sign. Here, they are very sensitive about stop signs.

We have an expression in Afghanistan saying that if you go to the United States, you will need to start from scratch or zero. Before I came here to the United States, that was just an expression to me. I didn't deeply understand what it meant. Now that I have lived here for three years, I have learned that I have to start from the beginning. I'm still learning lots of new things every single day. Now, I understand what starting from scratch means. For example, do we have something in Afghanistan called a "credit score"? No, we don't. But, for the first time, I understood what that is. Checking accounts, savings accounts, credit cards, I don't know, car insurance, health insurance, you know, all these rules are around you. Over the last three years, I have learned about all of these things, which are really not easy. When I compare my understanding now with what I knew three years ago, I know what starting from scratch means. So, I started working with Elizabeth Seton High School as a teacher, and now it is my third year there. Now, I'm working as a full-time teacher, and in the current year, I have accepted their offer to work as a librarian at the high school.

Q: That is good. I guess they increased your paycheck, too.

SIDDIQI: Yes. I no longer receive food stamps, cash assistance, and Medicaid. Those things are gone, and my paycheck has increased a bit.

Q: You left Frederick after a while. Where are you living now?

SIDDIQI: In Lorton, Virginia. I drive 50 minutes every day to and from the school. I have had many job opportunities and could easily find another job. But the reason I don't leave is that I love working there. They respected me and believed in me when I was feeling hopeless. They gave me the chance to use my skills. They are very kind people. They are Catholics, and they know that I come from a Muslim background and a strict, conservative society. But they believed in me and showed love and kindness to me and my family. They have never been rude or disrespectful to me—never. That is why I work with them with all my passion, heart, and dedication. Even though I have opportunities to earn more money elsewhere, I choose to stay because they have been so good to me.

Final Reflections

Q: Thank you for everything you shared with us. Do you have any final reflections?

SIDDIQI: Thank you. I really enjoyed talking with you. My life has always been changing. My perceptions have changed a lot. My education has changed. My country has changed. My society has changed. My family has changed. All these changes make me feel older—but also full of experience. I feel older than my 37 years. In the end, the hardest part of life here, being this far away—from Afghanistan to the U.S.—is watching my mom and dad grow older day by day without having the chance to live with them or even visit them.

Q: Thank you.

End of Interview