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

**DURANI WAZIRI**

*Interviewed by: Azaad [pseudonym]  
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**INTERVIEW**

*Q: It is April 12, 2024. I am Azaad, and today I am interviewing Durani Waziri for our Afghanistan Project. Welcome, Durani.*

WAZIRI: Thank you.

*Q: To start, we would like to hear your story from the beginning. Can you tell us where and when you were born?*

WAZIRI: I was born in Kabul, in a place called Guzarga.

*Q: Please tell us more about your family background and childhood.*

WAZIRI: My mother was pregnant with me during the final days of Babrak Karmal's regime, which ended with Dr. Najibullah coming to power. At that time, Kabul was in chaos. My father was a teacher at Khushal Khan High School, a well-known boys' school. The instability made my mother fearful of a miscarriage. This period is significant for me as it reflects the turbulent history of the Afghan people; many were born into hardship.

When I was seven, the Mujahidin began a civil war in Afghanistan.

**Growing Up During the Mujahidin and Civil War**

*Q: You were in Kabul at that time?*

WAZIRI: Yes, we were in Kabul. The civil war forced us to leave our home in Guzarga, 7th District. At that time, I had three sisters, and later two more sisters and two brothers were born. We moved to Karte Parwan, hoping the situation would improve quickly, but it worsened, leading us to relocate several times due to the ongoing conflict between Mujahidin factions. I was in first grade when the war began and attended Naswane Guzarga School, which was later destroyed.

*Q: A war zone.*

WAZIRI: Exactly. We had nothing. I remember sharing a large plate with my eight family members. We had to boil rice in water, as that was all my father could provide. We lived on boiled rice for months.

Later, we moved to Macroyan, where the war was less intense. A relative offered us his apartment in the 3rd District of Macroyan, where we stayed for years. However, the conflict reached us there as well, with fighting between Dostum and Jamiyat Islami parties. We had to move again, eventually ending up in Karte-Mamorin. I recall a girl falling from the sixth floor of Block 16 in 3rd Macroyan. That night remains vivid in my memory.

The situation became dire, and we had to stay underground for four months due to constant bombings and missile attacks. The shelter was so low we couldn't stand.

### **The Taliban Era**

After a year, the Taliban took control, and while the fighting ceased, the city was left in ruins with no schools and extreme poverty. The city was almost deserted.

When the Taliban came, I was a teenager. Despite the lack of formal education, I continued to be curious and smart, partly due to my father's influence. He had no income, but supported my education with whatever resources he could. I managed to get some books, including "Aeen-e-Zendagi" ["How to stop worrying and start a new life"] by Dale Carnegie. Reading it changed my life.

Then 9/11 happened. I listened to news about the attacks on New York and the U.S. demand for the Taliban to surrender Osama Bin Laden. My father, concerned about the potential consequences, feared for our safety and the future.

*Q: How did you and your family react to the news of the U.S. attacking the Taliban?*

WAZIRI: I mostly stayed at home, not interacting much with others. My father was worried about the potential for violence and instability. We had no money to escape, and he was concerned about the possibility of violence affecting us directly. When the U.S. began bombing Kabul, we could see the attacks from our balcony. My father reassured me that the attacks were aimed at the Taliban and not at us directly.

*Q: Did the situation improve after the Taliban's fall?*

WAZIRI: Yes, but there were still significant challenges. When we returned to Kabul, it was a new era. I resumed my education and eventually graduated from high school in 2001. I passed the Kankor exam and started studying Islamic law at Kabul University in 2003. I graduated in 2008 with high honors and was personally awarded my diploma by President Karzai.

*Q: What was your educational journey like?*

WAZIRI: I started at Kabul University studying Islamic law. I was one of the top students and participated in various international projects, including those funded by Canada and the U.S. Department of State. Despite not being selected for their initial project, I continued to pursue opportunities and eventually got a position through another organization supported by Italians and the U.S. Department of State. I graduated first in my class of 45 students.

### **Working for USAID**

*Q: How did you come to join USAID?*

WAZIRI: I joined USAID in November 2014. My career started with a Department of State project and ended with USAID.

*Q: Where did you learn English?*

WAZIRI: Initially, my English was poor. I promised to improve it during an interview for a Department of State project, and I committed to self-study and took the TOEFL exam. My English improved significantly through self-study and courses in the U.S. I applied for my first LLM degree and was accepted to Ohio Northern University in 2011.

*Q: How was your experience working inside the embassy as a young woman?*

WAZIRI: The embassy offered a supportive work environment for women, which was rare outside. The opportunities for learning, professional growth, and respect were exceptional. I appreciated the respect and support, which motivated me to excel.

### **Coming to the United States on a Special Immigrant Visa (SIV)**

*Q: When did you leave USAID?*

WAZIRI: I left USAID in 2016 and came to the United States on an SIV visa in September 2016.

*Q: Were you married at that time?*

WAZIRI: No.

*Q: How was your transition to the U.S.?*

WAZIRI: Leaving Afghanistan was challenging. While I was reluctant to leave my job, the deteriorating situation made obtaining a green card a prudent decision. In the U.S., I initially stayed with a resettlement agency's contact in Maryland and later moved to

Virginia for better job opportunities. I worked with the World Bank and IRAP [the International Refugee Assistance Project], as a legal translator, and visited Afghanistan and India for projects. I got married after coming to the U.S. and eventually continued to work on various projects supporting Afghan women's businesses.

### **Returning to Kabul to Work in President's Office**

*Q: I remember that after 2018, President Ghani was trying to give more space to the youth, especially to young women, in senior positions and senior management levels in the ministries in Afghanistan. That was when you joined President Ghani's team. How did you enter the government position as a young lady?*

WAZIRI: I decided to go to Afghanistan to see my family in November 2017. When I went there, I wanted to stay for a while in Afghanistan and think about establishing my own business. I started the pilot part of my business with India and exported dry fruits and saffron to India and earned enough money from my first trip. When I returned back from India I got information that the presidential office was looking for a female spokesperson. I found the link for the position and applied.

I came back to the U.S. on the 25th of January. In January and February I heard no news. On March 1st or 2nd, I received a message from the presidential office saying that the president had accepted me. I booked my ticket and went on the 25th of March back to Afghanistan. Then the President interviewed me, asked me about my education. I remember that day well. They said, you have to stay here in the waiting room. I could hear the President's voice and he was so angry speaking to one of the ministers on the phone. I was thinking, oh my goodness, the first time I am meeting the President and he is in a very bad mood. Then he called me into his office. He was a nice guy. He spoke very respectfully to me, a woman. He asked me, "What is your dad doing? How is your family?" He had a cup of tea with me and tried to make me feel comfortable.

*Q: When you started your new job with the presidential office, how was your experience there?*

WAZIRI: I had a different image from what I found there. When I went there, I saw there was a big conflict between employees, between departments. People did not like each other. There was a kind of discrimination against women.

I found not only with me, but with all the women, there was bad discrimination against us. Another thing, I found out that they never believed in your ability. It was not an easy job. I had to work many late evenings under so much pressure and stress. Also, my boss would tell me to do other people's jobs, like translation. We had just one translator, and so I had to help with the translation of documents.

After I got married, I told my husband, this awful job is killing me. I'm doing everything, and the President doesn't know that I'm doing it. My husband supported me. He told me, no, if you resign then people will think that you were not the right person for the position.

Be strong and whatever they say, you say, okay, I will do it. One day the President will know what you do. It was not easy, but I'm glad I stayed. However, I had many different memories of working there. I would be there with presidents and ministers from other countries, especially during the peace negotiations. Also, I saw the conflicts between the Americans and the Afghans. Sometimes the president was angry with the Americans, and sometimes the Americans were not happy with the president.

My last job was as the chief legal advisor for the National Security Council. It was a big job for me. I received an award from NATO, from ISAF. I still have the picture of when they awarded me. One good thing for me, there, was that my boss was so respectful. He respected me more. And he gave me more opportunities to show my abilities.

It was the first time that I had responsibility to the President directly. I had communication with the president. It was a very critical time because the peace negotiations were going on in Doha. And it was the time that we had talks with ISAF and NATO. I was the only woman in the meetings of the National Security Council. We had a high-level committee that was composed of the Commander of ISAF, the National Security Advisor, the Minister of Defense, the Minister of Interior, and me.

*Q: What sort of issues did you handle as a chief legal advisor? What were some of the big issues you remember handling?*

WAZIRI: Most of the issues were military issues, especially when we wanted to ask for assistance from ISAF, from NATO. I worked on the policies for civilian protection during the war and to deal with the civilian cases that arose. I had two responsibilities with the National Security Council. First, I was the Chief Legal Advisor. Second, I was head of the Commission for the Protection of Civilians. When I say head, it was a big job because there was a commission that had been established by a presidential decree. That commission was composed of UNAMA, ISAF, international NGOs, and also the government related ministries. I was head of that commission. We had to make policies and procedures. Most of our engagement was with ISAF. We had to ask them to provide us with weapons and military aid for our soldiers. Also, we had the negotiations process going on in Doha. I should say that the name of ISAF changed to RS, for Resolute Support.

Another issue was managing the internal administration. For example, there was a need for procurement procedures in accordance with the laws. We had to check with our bilateral agreements with other countries to be sure we complied with them. I had to sign these documents saying we were complying. I had a team of lawyers, they were very smart people, and they would look into this and at the end, they would send it to me. I would check it myself and I would sign the documents. Most of the agreements were military-related, but we also had some others, like commercial agreements.

*Q: Thank you. We have a lot of things to share.*

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*Q: It is July 12, 2024. I am Azaad. Today I am having my second interview for our Afghanistan Project with Durani Waziri.*

*The first part of our interview ended in a very critical point. Today we want to continue from the same point we ended, from the summer of 2021. At that time, you were still on duty at the presidential palace.*

WAZIRI: Yes.

### **The Fall of Kabul**

*Q: I remember that the fall of the districts all around Afghanistan started in June. In July, the fall of the provinces started. We would like to know what was the environment and the mood in the presidential palace in the last months of the power?*

WAZIRI: It was not an easy time, not only for those who used to work in the presidential office, but for all Afghans, regardless of their jobs or their occupations. Everyone had concerns about their futures and about the future of Afghanistan, especially starting with the last months of 2020 and then into 2021 when the war reached a peak. Unfortunately, so many lives were lost, either in suicide attacks in Kabul or those soldiers that were fighting with the Taliban. It was not a good time at all.

In those last days, what I saw was representatives from the U.S. government coming to the presidential office and having so many meetings with the president of Afghanistan. Sometimes these meetings went well. Sometimes these meetings were so disappointing because we knew and the president knew that the Americans were going to leave the country. That is why in the last few meetings, I remember that the special representative of the United States to Afghanistan, Mr. Zalmay Khalilzad, was not allowed to come to the presidential office or to have a meeting with the president of Afghanistan.

*Q: Do you remember when that was?*

WAZIRI: I think that was in March of 2021. It was the last attempt by Mr. Khalilzad to meet with the president of Afghanistan, but it did not happen because the President was so angry. He said that Mr. Khalilzad does not deliver my clear message to the White House. That was why the president used to think that Khalilzad had his own agenda. That was why he was nervous. There was no one to connect him with the White House. Nobody at the White House, even President Biden, was interested in talking with the Afghan president or even with the rest of the delegation of Afghanistan.

After that, I made a trip to the ICC [the International Criminal Court] in the Hague in May 2021. It was the last trip outside of Afghanistan that I made as a governmental official. It was an important issue that we used to talk about. I was a member of the high delegation of the Afghan government to the ICC. The Prosecutor of the ICC had asked the Afghan government to help the ICC regarding transitional justice in Afghanistan. It

was not a new issue because that issue was going on for years. The ICC wanted to look at the military operations that happened in Afghanistan. That was the issue. The President assigned me, the Minister of Foreign Affairs at that time, the Attorney General, and two others to the delegation. We went there and we asked the ICC to give us more time to respond because the situation was so bad.

There were two big reasons. The first was that Afghanistan had been hit so badly by the coronavirus in 2020 and 2021. The second was the war was worsening and reaching a peak. That was why we asked the ICC to give us more time. This was not the correct time that we should talk with them about transitional justice in Afghanistan. The Afghan government cannot fight on all these different fronts at the same time. From one hand, there was the Taliban that the Afghan government had to fight with them. The second battlefield would be with the warlords because if the Afghan government raised transitional justice issues it would anger them. About 80 to 85 percent of the Afghan government was composed of these warlords. So, it was very difficult for us.

When we returned back to Afghanistan, it was the beginning of June and the situation was so bad. We were losing the districts. And the morale of the Afghan defense force was so low, especially when they saw the U.S. government announced that they will withdraw their soldiers. The Americans will not leave even one soldier in Afghanistan. It was disappointing, and that is why the soldiers lost their morale.

*Q: At that time, I remember that a lot of people said that they didn't believe the United States would leave Afghanistan. What was the view inside the palace? Did you believe they were leaving Afghanistan or did you think they were going to stay?*

WAZIRI: From my personal experience, I saw just a small part of the Afghan government. I was not that close to the president. There were meetings that, even as the spokesperson, I was not allowed to attend. We often would have a translator, especially in meetings with the Americans and the Afghan government. But sometimes there were meetings that even the translator was not allowed and I was not allowed to participate in.

In the presidential office, everyone knew finally that the American soldiers were leaving Afghanistan. But for me, what I saw in my last job as Chief Legal Advisor to the National Security Council, I used to participate in what we call the high National Security Council meetings. It was composed of me and two or three deputies of the National Security Council, the National Security Advisor, sometimes the Minister of Defense, the Minister of Interior, and also the head of the NDS [the National Directorate of Security].

In the last meeting that I saw, the NATO commander and American high-ranking generals were there. These meetings were very important and happened once or twice a month. There would be discussions about military weapons or how to make plans for military operations, and these generals from NATO used to say, no this is wrong or this is right. In the last meeting I attended, however, they didn't talk. They just sat there looking at each other and didn't participate. I thought, "how could they stay quiet?" Outside everyone knew the situation was bad and everyone knew we were losing districts every day. Even

in that important situation they didn't talk. They didn't say anything and just left the meeting. At the end of the meeting, I asked the secretary of Dr. Mohib [Hamdullah Mohib, National Security Advisor to the President Gahni], "Did you see how they didn't say anything? Why?" She told me, "You have to leave the country." I said, "How do you know that I should leave the country?" She said, "I heard something." I said, "What did you hear?" She said, "I want to tell you that you should leave the country."

*Q: Is this during July or August?*

WAZIRI: It was the end of July. When the first province collapsed, do you remember my colleague, Dawa Khan Mina Pal, former spokesperson and head of the Afghan government media center? They killed him before the collapse. When the first provinces collapsed, I was not in Afghanistan. I was in India because I had been sick. I went there with my husband, and my son stayed in Kabul. This is important. I returned to Afghanistan just one day before it collapsed.

*Q: You came back on 14 August?*

WAZIRI: Exactly. Yes. When I arrived in India for some medical treatment and entered the hotel room, the first thing I heard from my WhatsApp group was that they had killed Mina Pal. I was shocked and I started crying and yelling. My husband asked, "Why are you yelling?" And I said, "Do you know what happened? They killed Mina Pal." It was so bad. I told my husband that it felt like they had killed me. We had been so close to each other. Mina Pal was a humble man. Then the collapse happened.

*Q: Could you talk more about Mina Pal? What was his position and how was he killed?*

WAZIRI: Mina Pal had been a presidential spokesperson, just like me. We used to work together closely. A month earlier, he had told me, "Sister, I know some people are going to follow me and they will kill me." He had a sharp tongue, and he was not the kind of person to hide something. He used to write so many posts, not only about the Taliban, but about warlords, too. He told me, some people had left a "night letter" [often used by the Taliban to threaten violence or death] in front of his door. He said, "They will kill me. I don't care because I already have lost a few members of my family." In 2018, the Taliban captured two of his brothers and they kept them for nine months before releasing them.

*Q: He was killed in Kabul city?*

WAZIRI: Yes. It was in Kabul city. It was a Friday when he wanted to go for prayers. The Taliban took the responsibility for that attack.

*Q: So, you decided to come back to Afghanistan despite all the security threats and the falling of the provinces? Was it just for the children?*

WAZIRI: No, it was not because of my children. I did not believe that they would lose Kabul. On the same day of the fall, I was in the office when the Taliban came.



*Q: When you came back from India to Kabul on August 14, how was the environment in the airport?*

WAZIRI: It was normal.

*Q: The crowds started after the 15th.*

WAZIRI: Exactly, yes. I came back home. Then I went to my office on August 15.

*Q: In Kabul, everything was normal?*

WAZIRI: No. The people had concerns because they knew the Taliban were already in Jalalabad.

*Q: A few hours away from Kabul.*

WAZIRI: Exactly, yes. People had concerns. The people knew that maybe today or maybe tomorrow, soon the Taliban will come.

One day before that the President went with the Minister of Defense to Bala Hesar because they wanted to put some soldiers on the high mountains. That is why they wanted to send some soldiers onto the mountains just in case the Taliban wanted to come to the city. Then they will defend the city from there.

There was one issue at the same time. The peace negotiations were going on in Qatar. As I heard it because I was not a member of that negotiation team, there was an agreement that the Taliban would not come into Kabul city.

So, when I went to the office on the morning of the 15th, I brought some small gifts for my colleagues.

You know, the NDS had told me two months before the collapse that I was on the target list of the Haqqani network. They are following you and they want to kill you. That is why you should not go outside.

*Q: On the 15th, you decided to go to your office. You were not aware where the President was or what was going on around the city?*

WAZIRI: In the morning, when I went into the presidential palace, I saw that there was not anyone. Usually, there were colleagues. I saw no one was there. I knew that we were going to lose everything, but I did not know that would happen that day. When I passed the first door, I started crying when I saw there was no one. I thought we would lose everything.

When I was just a few steps away from my office, I saw one of our colleagues, who had just come out from his office. We said salam to each other, and when he saw that I was crying, he asked, "Why, sister, did you come to the office today? Why are you crying?" I said, "We are going to lose everything. That is why my heart is aching. I am crying for that." Then he told me, "You should not have come to the office." I didn't say anything to him, and I went to my office.

My office was located in a long hall with five or six other offices, and each office had five or six colleagues in it. When I walked down the hall, there was no one. Then, like I usually did, I put my purse on the table and took off my high heel shoes, because in Kabul on the job women wore those shoes, and put on simple sandals. The first thing I did was to open the door to the room where my team worked, and I saw that there was no one. I wanted to give my colleagues the gifts that I had bought for them from India. I saw there was no one, and I was really afraid. I said, I think I'm the only one in the presidential office.

At that time, I saw a gardener. I like to have flowers and plants, and that gardener knew that I liked them. He would come and bring water for the plants. He saw that I was crying. He put the water pot away, and he also started crying. In our culture if you go to some place that you do not know, you will say to everyone, "Please pardon me if I have done something that you didn't like." Then the gardener said, "Please pardon me. I know we will not be able to see each other after this." I said, "My brother, I have something in my purse. It is not that much but it is a small gift for you." And I gave him that.

I wanted to take care of a personal issue that day. I wanted to ask Dr. Mohib for help in getting a visa to India for my son. Everyone knew the situation was getting worse. My husband and I both already had visas to go to India, but my son did not. My husband said, "Durani, if the situation keeps getting worse it will be good to have a visa for our son. It will be easy for us to leave for a while to India." I wanted to ask Dr. Mohib to send a letter to the Indian Embassy to get the visa for my son.

When I went to his office, I didn't see him. I saw two of our colleagues. They were so nervous and busy on the computer. I asked the guard and said, I want to see Dr. Mohib. They told me that he had just left. He went to talk to the president, and so I should come back later.

*Q: On that day, did you have a chance to meet President Ghani in the palace?*

WAZIRI: No.

*Q: When was the last time you met him in the palace?*

WAZIRI: Before I went to India.

*Q: So, you were not aware that they were leaving?*

WAZIRI: No, I did not know.

*Q: Did you stay in the palace?*

WAZIRI: Yes. Then my husband called me around 10:00 a.m. and said, “Durani, go home and pick up your green card. I'm going to buy a ticket for you because we do not know when the Taliban will come. I'm afraid, not for me and for my son, but for you because they know you.” No one knew what would happen if the Taliban came. That is why he said, “Who knows if they do something that is bad, take your body to the street and all these things. It is not acceptable for us. So, I'm going to purchase a ticket for you to the U.S.” He said it looks like the situation was very bad. I said, okay.

Then I came out of the presidential office and called my driver and sat in the car. Our house was close by. When I came to the Wazir Akbar Khan, I saw that all these people had come out in the streets, and everyone was running. When I had gone to the office at 8:00 a.m., everything was fine. There had been nothing on the street. But now, just in one hour, everything had changed, and thousands of people were running on the streets. It was shocking for me.

Now, because of all these people and crowds, my car was not able to move forward. Then I asked my driver, “What should I do? We cannot go home because of all these people.” My driver told me, “I will lock the car doors, and we can just stay in the car for now.”

My husband called me. He told me, “I found a photo of your green card. So, there is no need for you to go home and pick up your green card. I can buy your ticket with this picture. When I show the picture, they will give you a ticket.” Then I asked him, “Do you know what is going on?” He said, no, he did not know what was going on outside.

*Q: Where did your husband work at that time?*

WAZIRI: He was at the medical counsel. He was the head of the licensing department. He's a doctor.

*Q: He was on the job that day.*

Yes. He went to work that day. I told my husband, “I cannot go anywhere because there are all these people in the street.” And he started yelling at me. He said, “Go back to the office! It is a very dangerous situation. At least, your office will be safe.” I asked my driver to turn around the car and go back to the office. So, we went back to the office. It took about one hour to get back to the office. It normally would take just five minutes, but there was no way to move the car.

The presidential office had checkpoints all around it. When we reached the first checkpoint, I saw there were some employees from the presidential office and they were running on the streets. And I asked the guard, “What is going on, brother?” And he said, “Nothing, you can go back.”

We passed through the first checkpoint and then the second checkpoint. Then we reached the third checkpoint, which was the one where only the ministers could go in by car. Otherwise, the people were supposed to exit from the car at the second checkpoint. When I went there, the guard said, "Where are you going?" They knew me. I said, "I want to go back to my office because I left my shoes and everything there." I was in sandals. I said, "I left everything in the office. I want to go back to my office." He said, "If I tell you that you should not go back to your office, this will be good for you."

During this discussion, we could hear the start of gunfire nearby. When the gunfire started, I forgot about everything. My driver just started up the car and we left the presidential office. That was the last time that I saw that place.

### **Getting into Kabul Airport**

*Q: When did you decide to go to the airport? How did you get to the airport with your family?*

WAZIRI: When we came out from my office, the streets were the same. People were running everywhere. The first thing I did was I called my sister. I don't have parents, and my siblings are younger than me. Also, I have the responsibility for six orphans from my sister. I told my sister, "Just collect the necessary items and passports for them." Because I knew if the Taliban came, they would come for me. If they didn't find me, they would go after my family. So, I told them, "Leave everything. Come with me." We just ran out and left everything. My husband's family found us a temporary home, an apartment. We went there.

*Q: When did you hear that the President left the country?*

WAZIRI: On the same day in the afternoon. When we turned on the TV, I saw it on the news.

*Q: You heard it on the TV.*

WAZIRI: Yes.

I had turned off my phone because they might find me by phone. I already had my green card, but my husband and son were about to have their interviews for the visa. That was why I contacted the U.S. Embassy, and they sent me the documents. We stayed for two more days. On the 16th, we left the apartment. My son, my husband, and I went to the airport. You know what was going on at the airport. The bad thing that happened at the airport was that even though we had very little luggage with us, we lost that too. We didn't have anything. There were thousands of people. Finally, we reached the road. I don't know if it was the Taliban or the U.S. military, maybe the U.S. soldiers, they shot gas canisters. It was like dust. We started coughing, and we weren't able to see.

*Q: They fired some smoke on the ground?*

WAZIRI: It was like dust. It was chemical, not just smoke. It was like dust. It was a big amount of dust.

*Q: To control the crowd?*

WAZIRI: We were so close to the gate. When that happened, for a few minutes, I was not able to hear.

*Q: There was an explosion? Noise and dust?*

WAZIRI: It was not noise.

*Q: Just the dust.*

WAZIRI: Yes. I lost everything, my vision and I was not able to hear anything. Finally, when we reached the gate area, first there was the Taliban and after them were the American soldiers. The Taliban asked, who has a red passport, and they allowed them to go to the airport. I knew that the red passport is not an American passport. They said we will only allow Americans. They have the red passports. I don't know who told them that Americans had red passports. The Taliban were beating the people. They didn't beat me, but they were beating others. My son was so scared, and he wanted to go back home.

*Q: How old was your son at that time?*

WAZIRI: He was 11. He was very small. Then my husband went and talked with the Taliban. He said, "I am a doctor." My husband is calm and he has good confidence. I was not able to talk with the Taliban. He said, "We have to leave, my wife needs help" and all these things. It was like magic. I cannot believe that they allowed us – and only us from among all those people – to go forward. The interesting thing was that there were two doors. One door was the entrance and the second door was the exit. They allowed us to go in by the exit. And when we went in the exit, the American soldiers wanted to fire. Then my husband said, "Stop. The Taliban allowed us to come in." Then we went in. There were so many other people there. We got to the airport at 2:30 p.m. and stayed until the following afternoon.

*Q: You stayed there more than 24 hours.*

WAZIRI: There were no restrooms. There was no water. There was nothing. This was the first time that I didn't have water in my life. The only thing that I had was connections with a few of my former American colleagues that I used to work with on different projects in Washington, D.C. Also, there was a lawyer. He was from Florida, and he continued to contact me, and asked me, "Where are you going? What is going on?" I'm lucky that I heard from some of my American classmates whom I hadn't had any

communication with for years. I don't know how they found me. We spoke and they wanted to help us.

*Q: Did you have the chance to rest, you and your son?*

WAZIRI: We were at the airport. We could just rest on the ground. There was no water.

*Q: You were waiting for the aircraft?*

WAZIRI: We did not know what would happen next. There was a crowd. Even the Americans did not know what would happen. Finally, we could enter an aircraft with hundreds of other Afghans.

*Q: A C-17 aircraft?*

WAZIRI: Yes.

*Q: On August 17th?*

WAZIRI: Yes.

### **Stops in Doha and Germany**

*Q: Where did you go from Kabul Airport?*

WAZIRI: To Qatar. When we reached Doha, my health situation became worse because of that chemical thing that had happened. I started to lose my hair and had some skin injuries on my face. I was not able to talk. Those passengers on the plane with me were such nice people. They did not know me, but they took care of me because I was not able to take care of me. I tried my best to keep going on.

We spent four days and nights in Doha. We faced the same thing there as at the Kabul airport. If you wanted to go to the restroom you had to wait four hours.

*Q: There were long lines of people at the Al Udeid Camp in Doha?*

WAZIRI: Yes. For a few thousand people, there were three mobile restrooms. So, I stopped drinking water and eating because otherwise I would have to stay in a line for four hours, even if I go for one time. I told my husband that I should stop eating and drinking so there wouldn't be a need to go to the restroom. During 24 hours, I drank just one bottle of water, otherwise I would die. I was so sick because of that chemical incident.

*Q: Did you get a chance to be visited by a doctor?*

WAZIRI: There was nothing. Just some basic first aid if you had injuries, otherwise there was nothing. After four days, we left Doha for Germany. I was not able to walk. I was faint. My husband took me to the aircraft to go to Germany.

*Q: It was a military aircraft from Doha?*

WAZIRI: Yes, the same. When they took me to the aircraft, I fainted. I do not know what happened. The only thing I remember was that the pilot himself went and called for an ambulance for me. We had to go by car from the airport to a military base in Germany. The airport was in Frankfurt. Then they took me out from the aircraft. There was a mobile clinic and a German doctor. He gave me some strong medicine. Then they took me back to the airport and they transferred us to a military base.

It was an even worse situation there. I remembered those movies from World War II. We were in Germany, but we didn't have a Hitler. It was a bad situation for all the Afghans. There was no food. Even if there had been food, I would not eat any food because it was a problem for me to go to the restroom. I would take some water. They had just one egg and some bread and a very small piece of butter. Sometimes there was bread. Sometimes there was a small amount of soup. That amount of food was not enough even for the children. During the three days, all the Afghans lost weight. There was nothing to eat. At the base, they separated men and women. The women were in a big place.

*Q: An airplane hanger?*

WAZIRI: Yes, a big hanger and I had to stay there. We were 4,000 women, with children. And the men were in tents. A very interesting thing was the weather. Doha was burning hot. But when we came to Germany in August, you had to have a coat because of the cold weather.

[Medical care providers were brought in and a senior U.S. military official got involved.] He was a nice guy, and he then said, "I'm sorry about what is happening in this situation. Could you please stay here." And he separated me from the crowd in front of the military tent. He said, "Please stay here for a few minutes." I said, yes. He told me, "What is your name?" And I gave it to him. In a few minutes, he came out and he said, "Come into the tent." Then my husband and my son joined me. [The family got on a commercial flight to Dulles.]

*Q: The aircraft belonged to United Airlines?*

WAZIRI: Yes. It was not military.

*Q: It was a commercial flight?*

WAZIRI: Exactly. When we went into the aircraft there were two people waiting. This general told me, "Whatever you are doing, even if you want to go to the restroom you cannot go without allowing these two guys." He told the crew that these two people

would be with her and her family to Washington, D.C. I just said, wow. And my husband started joking, and he said, “Durani, these people treat you like a VIP.” Then they took us to the business side of the plane.

*Q: Before landing in the United States, how long did you stay in Germany?*

WAZIRI: Four nights and four days.

*Q: Do you remember which day you left Germany or which day you entered the United States, finally?*

WAZIRI: Yes. It was the 26th.

*Q: On August 26 you entered the United States?*

WAZIRI: Yes.

### **Resettling in the United States**

*Q: Finally, after all the difficulties and challenges, you left Germany for the United States. On August 26th, you and your family arrived safely in the United States. What happened at Dulles Airport?*

WAZIRI: I landed in Washington, D.C. at Dulles Airport. My husband and my son did not have the documents. We were told they had to stay at the camp. I talked with the people responsible for checking all the documents and they did not want to allow those people to go outside the airport who did not have the documents. But I talked with them, and I said, I have a green card and we don't need the small aid they give to the refugees. I said, “I want to take my husband and my son with me.” And then we went to my sister-in-law's house.

*Q: So, they allowed you to take your husband and son?*

WAZIRI: Yes, exactly. I heard that I was the only one. I do not know how this happened. They said, you are the only one. I was so sick, and my husband was also sick. Then we went to my sister-in-law's house in Maryland.

*Q: You left the airport and went directly to the house of your sister-in-law?*

WAZIRI: Yes. And we stayed there one month until the 1st of October. Then on the 1st of October, we rented this house where we are living right now. Because my husband didn't have his documents, we didn't have a car for seven months. I had a green card but was not able to drive a car. That is why the first seven months were a bit difficult because we didn't have any aid and no one helped us.

*Q: You didn't enroll in the resettlement process for you and your husband?*



WAZIRI: No.

*Q: What was the status for your husband and son?*

WAZIRI: They were on [humanitarian] parole.

*Q: Did they receive the work permit and social security?*

WAZIRI: After seven months.

*Q: Why didn't your family enroll in the resettlement process?*

WAZIRI: Because we left Dulles Airport right away. They said if you leave, then you will not be able to get the resettlement benefits.

*Q: So, it was your decision?*

WAZIRI: Yes.

*Q: How did you handle it during these seven months? How did you pay the rent?*

WAZIRI: People think because I used to work at the government, I would have so much money. Unfortunately, I didn't have anything. The most difficult thing was the rent. My father-in-law sent the rent money from Afghanistan because it was a difficult time for us. For the household, I had friends and colleagues here. One of my USAID colleagues bought us carpets. My other friends brought us a mattress and other things.

*Q: American friends or Afghan friends, or both?*

WAZIRI: American and others. After that, when my husband engaged in the society in the second or third month, he found so many good friends, especially the doctors and they helped us a lot. They bought us lots of things, not used things, very expensive things. They came and they put everything in my home. They even cleaned the home. Men and women, medical doctors, they helped us. They bought us lots of good things.

*Q: What about your other colleagues from Afghanistan? Did you hear about them when you were in Kabul Airport, in Germany, or when you arrived in the United States? What happened to them?*

WAZIRI: I didn't see them myself. Most of them were evacuated and have immigrated to different countries. Some of them are in Europe. Some of them are in the United States, but not from the presidential office. I do not know if they are here.

*Q: Did any of them stay in Kabul in their position in the office?*

WAZIRI: No.

### **Situation Today**

*Q: What about your son? How was school and how was the new environment for him?*

WAZIRI: It was good because here—even if you don't have documentation—the schools will enroll the children. This is good. And he went right away. When he came here, he went because the school had started in September. That was just one month missed. He's doing very well, all the awards, all A's and B+'s.

*Q: Same like mom and dad.*

WAZIRI: Thank you. Now, he is going to be an American. He's very good. Even today, he is preparing for the SAT exam, because he's going to graduate next year. He is very good.

*Q: What did you do for a living? Did you start a job in the United States?*

WAZIRI: When I came, the first year, it was not like a job, but I just did some research with the Max Planck Foundation. It is a German organization. They announced a research project and said, you will have a monetary prize. Fortunately, I was a winner of that prize. They invited me to Germany, to Heidelberg, and I presented my paper. It was the first year.

Sometimes, especially during the first year, I worked part time, doing legal translations, especially with the immigration offices. The offices were happy with me. They told me that they would ask for me when they needed a translator. I'm a lawyer and I know the terms, so it was easy for me to do the translation.

After that, in the second year here, I applied for my second Master's degree. And now I just graduated. And this is my story.

*Q: How is your life currently in the United States with your husband, with the children?*

WAZIRI: For me, it was not a big change because I received my green card in 2016. Since then I've been working with Americans and I have engaged with Americans, with colleagues, neighbors, friends, classmates. That is why now life is going well. When you immigrate from one place to another it is not easy. It is a challenge. But Afghan women, they are brave women, and whatever is coming we have to fight.

Of course, it's not easy. I told you on my first day of my interview I started from zero. I didn't even have shoes to go for a school examination. By my own efforts, I came out to this place, but everything collapsed back. Now, I have to start from the beginning again. I have to study. I have to find a job.

*Q: You are doing great.*

WAZIRI: Thank you. It is very difficult because I remember years back when I graduated, I needed to find a job for me. I had a job, but the salary was not good, and I had family responsibilities at that time because my dad was sick. I used to knock on doors of organizations to find a job for myself. Now, I am in the same position again and I have to do these things again.

*Q: I heard from many Afghan women talking about you as a role model.*

WAZIRI: Thank you.

*Q: Is your husband now able to work as a doctor in the medical field?*

WAZIRI: Yes, he's a staff scientist at Washington Children's National Hospital.

*Q: It would be interesting to hear if you have any final reflections on what's happened to you in your life and your transition to the United States.*

WAZIRI: Thank you so much for your time. First, I want to say that this is an interesting project. I said to my son a few days ago, your children will be so proud of me because they will be American. They will learn here and they will be American, but still they will talk about me and say you can find information about my grandma's background in this project, on this website. Thank you so much.

Who knows, the future generation will read about Afghans and about their struggles and all about these stories. This will give good lessons learned, not only for Afghans, but for internationals. And they will learn, too, what is going on in the world, not only in Afghanistan. This gives courage and power to others.

Whenever I'm tired and sometimes disappointed, I think that who knows, someone in the future generation will read about us and about our struggles and how we overcame them. So, thank you so much for giving me this opportunity. It's kind of good therapy. When you talk about something, you write about something, it helps. It gives you relaxation.

Just remember your past and how you overcame all those problems. This gives you more power and courage that something good will happen again and again. Life is like this, especially for people like us, who were born in the war, grew up, and now we have children. We are sometimes internal and sometimes external immigrants, but this is life. Life is not equal for everyone. Those people still have all these problems, they found opportunities, and when they move forward, this is a good thing.

*Q: Thank you, Durani.*

*End of Interview*