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Testimony for the Afghanistan War Commission Public Hearing

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Good morning commissioners. I am honored to be here in front of you for the Afghanistan War Commission's first public hearing. I will start with a personal story. My family left Afghanistan in late 1979, right before Soviet troops rolled into Afghanistan. My father, the chair of the faculty of economics at Kabul University and my mother, a bank executive at the national bank, opposed the communist regime that took over Afghanistan in the spring of 1978. As a result, my father was tortured and imprisoned in the notorious Pul-e charkhi prison for 18 months. Thousands of innocent Afghans were tortured and killed in that prison, the adjoining killing fields behind the prison, and in many other jails and facilities in Afghanistan during the communist period. When we moved to the US in 1980, my family was traumatized and unfamiliar with life in the United States, as are most Afghans I've met who have arrived after subsequent periods of fighting and since the collapse of the Afghan Republic on August 15, 2021. There was no comprehensive archive of Afghan voices who could speak to the arduous journeys they had faced and the history they had witnessed. Voices that could express the emotions and events of a people who were central to the Cold War.

That is why, when on August 15, 2021, as the era of the Afghan Republic and the US Afghan War came to an end, it was very clear to me that documenting this period would be a great service to Afghans, US veterans of the Afghan war, families of US servicemembers who had died in Afghanistan, and those who cared deeply about Afghanistan's people and history. I knew the status of archives about Afghanistan and during my doctoral research on the history of women in Afghanistan, I used oral histories as a primary methodology because of the lack of archives and documentation about the lives of women in Afghanistan. As I was preparing to build an archive on my own after August 2021, I heard about the initiative that General H.R. McMaster, Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution started at Stanford University. As a trained historian and a seasoned combat soldier who had served in Afghanistan, McMaster was keenly aware that recording individual histories was going to be critical to investigating the truth. I joined the Hoover Afghanistan team as the oral historian and project manager in April 2022 and since then I've conducted more than 120 oral history interviews, culminating in more than 350 hours of recordings with Afghans and Americans who lived and worked in Afghanistan from 2001 – 2021. We have also done a subset of oral histories inside Afghanistan to capture the emotion and sentiment of those who couldn't leave or wanted to stay in Afghanistan.

There were plenty of physical documentation during the time of the Afghan republic, but with the collapse of the republic, the rushed withdrawal of the US forces and the sudden takeover by the Taliban, it wasn't clear what documentation would remain to tell the complex story of this period. Over the last 2.5 years I've learned that some documents still exist, but computers and hard drives were smashed and destroyed in many Afghan governmental

offices. Intelligence documents, personnel files, contracts, official memos, and many other artifacts of that period were destroyed out of fear that the Taliban would get a hold of them. People frantically burned documents, ID cards, credentials, which connected them to US or foreign projects and organizations. One Afghan journalist told me he buried his Pulitzer Prize in his backyard. Within hours of the Afghan president leaving the country and the Taliban taking over Kabul, Afghans were shedding the identities that they had cherished on the one hand and but now could get them killed. The oral history interviews I am collecting are detailing, at times moment by moment, the unraveling of the hopes and dreams of millions of Afghans and the decisions that led to the collapse of the republic.

But documents tell part of the story. Placing individuals in the course of history and understanding documents and artifacts in relation to the lived experiences of those who were leaders, decisionmakers, and people at various cross sections of Afghan society and politics creates a more nuanced and useful history of the period. In the interviews I conduct for the Hoover Afghanistan Oral History Archive, I go beyond the general timelines. Each person has their own mini timelines and events that they saw and witnessed that led to big events such as the 2004 Constitutional Loya Jirga (Grand Assembly) or the 2009 presidential elections. These personal timelines of people in key positions, when paired with documents and other archives, have the potential of revealing critical moments during the period of the republic that things could have gone differently and now help us understand more than simple or general lessons learned.

With Afghans, I conduct life histories, which are longer than regular oral histories. In order to understand why certain decisions were made and choices that shaped the events in Afghanistan, it is important to understand the context of their lives. The patterns of being affected by war, displacement, poverty, and long periods of uncertainty become painfully visible. My longest life history interview for the collection is 10.5 hours and in three parts. Most interviews average 4 hours. This has been an investment on my part and resources at Hoover because this is a tremendous amount of content to transcribe, translate and archive. I have learned so much about the specific moments and people who could have changed the course of the US War and the Afghan republic. As an oral historian, I create the openings in which a narrator or interviewee walks through during the interview. I linger during life moments or periods where more details are needed. The truth starts out as single facts, moments, memories by individuals that are then stitched together to create the picture of a meeting, a person or event. I call this the pyramid of truth. I ask interviewees what some of their earliest childhood memories are in Afghanistan or often times in a refugee camp? It's telling and interesting to see what people choose to share. I ask them to take me back to that moment, draw the scene. Who was there? Where were you sitting? What did people say? What did you say at that moment and do exactly? What were you thinking at that moment? The oral histories are record of affect as much as they are details of places and events.

In early 2022, when I started interviewing, I felt that there was a deep sense of distrust amongst Afghans because of the sudden changes in the country and the fear of finger pointing and blame. That environment of distrust has improved as more details of the

collapse have been released through news reports, congressional hearings, social media and investigations. With oral histories/ life histories I've found there to be more interest because there a sense of understanding that the histography of Afghanistan has been disrupted too often and an awareness that there hasn't been sufficient documentation of important voices.