



Left: Safaa Nekrawesh smiles as she holds a sentimental photo of her parents on their wedding day in Germany at her home in Fremont Saturday. Below: Nekrawesh holds the only photograph her mother saved before fleeing Afghanistan. The photo features her mother, grandfather and cousin.

PHOTOS BY CHRISTINA CASILLAS | SPARTAN DAILY



SJSU Afghans open up about homeland

Student and faculty members dive deep into their lives away from war-stricken Afghanistan

By Amani Hamed
STAFF WRITER

Safaa Nekrawesh, a San Jose State political science junior, is an Afghan who has never seen Afghanistan.

Nekrawesh lives in an area of Fremont known as “Little Kabul” where she said she’s surrounded by Afghan culture that’s imported to California by Afghans like her parents, who came in the late 1970s.

Fremont is one of the largest Afghan communities in the U.S. and more than 66,000 Afghan people live in California, with most of them concentrated in the Bay Area, according to an Aug. 21 San Francisco Chronicle article.

She said her parents fled from Afghanistan as refugees in the ’70s after a Soviet-backed communist coup began nearly 45 years of war and turmoil.

Afghan communists, supported by Soviet soldiers, killed Afghan President Muhammad Daoud Khan which led to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and the torture and execution of hundreds of civilians in the 1978 coup, or better known as the Saur Revolution, according to an Oct. 2001 article from Human Rights Watch.

Human Rights Watch is a non governmental international organization that investigates human rights abuses globally, according to its website.

“As soon as I moved back to Fremont [from Yuba City], I just felt like I was part of this really beautiful community. I felt more open and honest about my culture,” Nekrawesh said.

It has never been safe enough for her to accompany her parents back to their homeland, Nekrawesh said.

She said she credits her parents for creating a life of privilege in Little Kabul and shielding her from racism and Islamophobia they faced after the 9/11 attacks.

On Sept. 11, 2001, terrorists from Saudi Arabia and several other Arab nations flew airplanes into the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon, according to the FBI 9/11 Investigation webpage. A fourth plane crashed into a Pennsylvania field.

According to the same FBI webpage, 3,000 people, including Americans and international citizens, died from the attacks.

As difficult as post-9/11 Islamophobia was for Nekrawesh’s parents, she

said they feel fortunate. Life is much harder for Afghans trying to escape Afghanistan now than in the ’70s.

Once Afghan refugees enter the U.S., they face bureaucratic difficulties, occupational problems and symptoms of post-traumatic stress, according to an Aug. 21 Los Angeles Times article.

Refugees, many of whom have advanced degrees or held senior occupations in Afghanistan, must pay back the U.S. government for the price of their airline tickets and have hardly any choices besides minimum-wage jobs because they need U.S. experience, according to the same Los Angeles Times article.

“Now, all of this politics and everything has just made it so much harder for immigrants to seek refuge,” Nekrawesh said. “I feel like my parents have a lot of survivor’s guilt because of that.”

Nekrawesh said she feels survivor’s guilt too and wants to use her privilege to help Afghans in Afghanistan the way her parents were helped when they came to the U.S.

Similarly to Nekrawesh’s parents, journalism lecturer Halima Kazem-Stojanovic left Afghanistan as a toddler in the late ’70s.

Kazem-Stojanovic came to America with her parents after her father, former economics dean of faculty at the University of Kabul, was released after nearly a year of imprisonment. She said he was imprisoned for being an intellectual and affiliated with the university.

“The war is just about my age,” Kazem-Stojanovic said in a video interview. Kazem-Stojanovic was born six months before the 1978 Soviet-backed coup.

She said the U.S. government armed and trained a small faction, which would later become the Taliban, to push Russia out of Afghanistan after the coup.

The Taliban is a fundamentalist faction that was founded in 1994 and came to power in 1996 but was removed from its position by the U.S. military in 2001, according to an Aug. 18 Wall Street Journal article.

Kazem-Stojanovic said Afghanistan was a geopolitically critical stronghold in the 1947-62 Cold War as it borders Pakistan, a former territory of the British empire before its 1947 partition from India.

Afghanistan became a country caught between U.S. and communist Soviet empires warring for political might and control of a rocky land between the Arab Peninsula and the former Persian empire, now Iran.

A country bursting with mineral wealth, opium fields and the potential for unlimited monetary gain through militarism, Afghanistan suddenly presented an opportunity to anyone who could control it, Kazem-Stojanovic said.

Kazem-Stojanovic returned to Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks, where she interviewed Taliban members at the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and trained other women journalists in the field.

She said she and other journalists raised concerns about the security of Afghanistan’s border as early as 2004.

“I remember a group of us foreign correspondents in Afghanistan, when we heard that the U.S. was going to go into Iraq in 2004, we looked at each other in disbelief and said, ‘Are you kidding me? There’s so much work to be done. This is so fragile here in Afghanistan, it is not mission accomplished,’ Kazem-Stojanovic said.

According to a 2001 Human Rights Watch report, the U.S. government indirectly but knowingly funded the Taliban by sending financial aid to Pakistan, where many Taliban operatives fled after the 2001 U.S. military invasion of Afghanistan.

Kazem-Stojanovic said it was only a matter of time before Afghanistan fell to the Taliban again because of its insecure border and a tenuous peace developing across the country’s mountainous terrain.

“The past three decades of war and disorder have had a devastating impact on the Afghan people,” stated members from the Afghan Civil Society Forum and Association for the Defense of Women’s Rights in an Oxfam International report titled “The Cost of War.”

According to its website, Oxfam International is an organization working to end global poverty.

“Millions have been killed, millions more have been forced to flee their homes and the country’s infrastructure and forests have all but been destroyed,” the November 2008 report authors said. “The social fabric of the country is

fractured and state institutions are fragile and weak.”

Pursuant to the Doha Agreement, a peace agreement signed between former President Donald Trump and the Taliban on Feb. 29, 2020, the U.S. military was to withdraw all military forces from Afghanistan within 14 months.

All U.S. military forces include its allies and Coalition partners including all non diplomatic civilian personnel, private security contractors, trainers, advisors and supporting services personnel, according to the Doha Agreement.

Kazem-Stojanovic said the U.S. military’s hasty withdrawal has put her friends in a dangerous position and they’re “deathly afraid.”

Some of the journalists Kazem-Stojanovic trained are members of the Shia religion and Hazara ethnic minorities. The Taliban, acting as Sunni Muslims, says Shia aren’t really Muslims and Hazara aren’t really Afghans.

Hazara people suffered atrocities at the hands of the Taliban before 9/11 including the pogroms against them in Northern Afghanistan in 1996, according to the Minority Rights Group International Hazara Profile webpage.

In addition to the potential human rights abuses facing the Hazara and Shia minorities, many are concerned that women who were able to seek an education or political office within the last 20 years will again fall victim to the Taliban’s ideology.

The Taliban’s extremist interpretations of Sharia Law, Islamic jurisprudence, comes from a mixture of Deobandi and Wahabbi Islam, according to a Wednesday NPR article.

A Nov. 9, 2001 PBS Frontline article and interview states that Wahabism relies on literal interpretations of the Quran, Islam’s holy text. For example, though the interpretation of Islam is meant to be dynamic, as stated by Maher Hathout in his interview with PBS Frontline, Wahabism allows people to be executed for witchcraft, according to a December 2011 BBC article.

“Women who do attempt to speak out or take on public roles that challenge ingrained gender stereotypes of what’s acceptable for women to do or not, such as working as policewomen or news broadcasters, are often intimidated or killed,” said a Pakistan-based aid worker with ECHO, the European Commission’s humanitarian aid department, in a June 2011 Reuters article.

After regaining control of the country, the Taliban ordered Radio Television Afghanistan news anchor Khadija Amin and news presenter Shabnam Dawran to leave work and not return, according to an Aug. 20 the International Federation of Journalists article.

In the same article, Darwan said she was threatened by the Taliban when she tried to gain access to the building, though a male employee was allowed to return to work.

William Armaline, associate sociology professor and SJSU Human Rights Institute director, said the idea that the U.S. military intervened in Afghanistan in 2001 to protect human rights is a false pretext.

The SJSU Human Rights Institute is a research and policy institution that specializes in human rights research and coverage of human rights crises, and

seeks to influence policy design, according to its website.

The institute plans to discuss the current Afghanistan crisis and the unsustainability of U.S. militarism in its upcoming 2022 lecture series.

The institute also shared links on its website to support Afghan people including fundraising efforts to help support displaced Afghan families and emergency aid for victims of Taliban attacks.

“The military industrial complex is not concerned with the rights of women, I can say that with all of my chest,” Armaline said in a phone interview.

Armaline and Kazem-Stojanovic said the U.S. government’s aim was never to create stability and peace in Afghanistan, but to gain revenue for private military contractors.

Private military contractors have made \$100 billion in Afghanistan since 2007, according to a 2017 Business Insider report.

Business Insider is a U.S. media company that publishes financial news, according to its website.

Armaline said these contractors have received large amounts of the \$2 trillion the U.S. government spent on Afghanistan’s military occupation.

Armaline said U.S. culture must shift away from xenophobia and toward the skeptical judgement of government, media and intelligence agencies’ intentions in order to stop militarism’s cycle of profit.

“Challenge yourself to learn something about Afghanistan. Learn something about Muslim beliefs and culture. Learn something about the diversity of those beliefs, the diversity of those peoples, the diversity of those places,” Armaline said.

“Then maybe it wouldn’t be so easy for all of these con artists to convince you that your tax dollars, your lives and kids, nephews and nieces, need to go die fighting.” Safaa Nekrawesh said she hopes Gen Z can raise awareness of Afghanistan’s dire situation and assist those who are resisting the Taliban on the ground in Afghanistan through social media activism.

“If [the Afghanistan crisis] happened in the early 2000s or even the ’90s, none of this would even be as big as it is right now,” Nekrawesh said. “We have all of this evidence to just put out there.”

Surrounded by Afghan culture in Fremont, Nekrawesh said she still hopes to be able to see Afghanistan one day.

“We need to keep advocating. We need to keep spreading awareness because nobody else is going to do it. And it’s honestly all on us,” Nekrawesh said. “It’s all on the American people and this is our job in life right now. This is what we need to do for those who can’t do it themselves.”

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20 years since 9/11: Two decades of ‘war on terror’

Sept. 11, 2001

Al-Qaida hijackers seized control of four U.S. passenger flights. Two planes crashed into the World Trade Center in New York City and one into the Pentagon in the District of Columbia.

April 17, 2002

Bush calls for Afghanistan’s reconstruction.

2009

U.S. President Barack Obama recommit to Afghanistan and sends 54,000 troops in addition to the 14,000 already in place.

May 27, 2014

Obama announces a timetable for withdrawing most U.S. forces from Afghanistan by the end of 2016.

Aug. 15, 2021

The Taliban surged back into power after U.S.-led forces collapsed its regime in what led to the U.S.’s longest war.

2001

U.S. President George W. Bush pledges a “war against terrorism” and the U.S. intelligence and military focus on al-Qaida and Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan. The U.S. military starts a bombing campaign against the Taliban and al-Qaida forces. The Taliban surrenders Kandahar, Afghanistan, and Taliban leader Mullah Omar flees. Bin Laden escapes. Al-Qaida leaders continue to hide out.

May 1, 2003

U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld declares an end to major combat as Bush said the fighting in Iraq was “mission accomplished.”

May 1, 2011

Bin Laden is killed by U.S. forces in Abbottabad, Pakistan.

April 14, 2021

President Joe Biden decides on complete U.S. withdrawal by the 20th anniversary of 9/11.

Aug. 30, 2021

The U.S. completes its withdrawal from Afghanistan. The U.S. war in Afghanistan from 2001-21 cost about \$2.26 trillion.