

A Safe Haven for Scholars

DISPLACED FACULTY FROM
INTERNATIONAL DANGER ZONES FIND
A NEW BEGINNING THROUGH OU'S
SCHOLARS-AT-RISK PROGRAM.

BY MAURA MCANDREW
PORTRAITS BY SHEVAUN WILLIAMS



Husnia Hazara



SHEVAUN WILLIAMS

Feroz Bashari

HUSNIA HAZARA didn't want to leave Afghanistan. Kabul was home—she had family there, a career in urban planning and a dean position at Payame Noor University. But when the Afghan government fell to the Taliban in August 2021, the home she'd known changed. Women's rights and academic freedoms were severely curtailed, institutions shut down and citizens lived in fear of the Taliban's violence. She and her husband, Mahdi Rahimi, faced a heart-breaking decision.

"When you have to leave your country, it is very difficult," she says. "My husband and I stayed in the country for four months after the government collapsed. And we hoped that maybe the situation would change. But unfortunately, it didn't."

Unlike many Afghans, the couple had a lifeline: a new offering at the University of Oklahoma called the Omar Khayyam Scholars-at-Risk Program. Named for the famed Persian philosopher and scientist and led by College of International Studies Dean Scott Fritzen, the program offers visiting positions to academics displaced from their countries due to conflict or restricted freedoms. Fritzen extended a position to Husnia Hazara. "At that time, this opportunity was hope for us in the dark and despair," she says.

The Omar Khayyam Scholars-at-Risk Program began shortly after the Afghan government fell to the Taliban, when faculty members in International and Area Studies proposed hosting Afghan scholars at OU. CIS donors Jalal and Mohammad Farzaneh agreed to a funding match, and Fritzen invited several college deans on board to provide support to scholars in their academic areas.

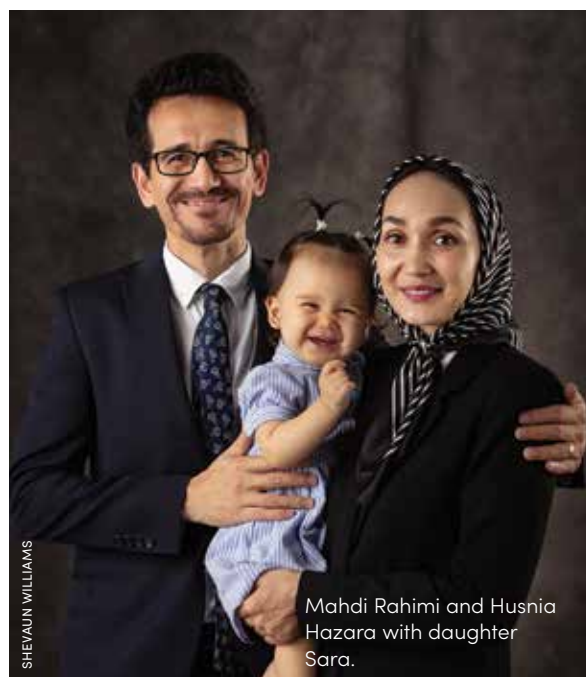
The goal of the program is to bring scholars to campus who enrich OU's research and teaching communities, while also allowing them to continue their work. "These individuals offer unique skills, perspectives and a dose of reality about what's happening in the world in a way that's really unique and high-impact," Fritzen says. The program also has a humanitarian aspect, prioritizing those whose safety is most imperiled.

For invited scholars, getting to the U.S. is a challenge. Husnia Hazara and her husband first flew to Mexico, where they waited months to obtain a visa. She was several months pregnant at the time, so the wait was especially difficult. Fritzen found a creative solution, housing the couple at OU's study abroad center in the city of Puebla.

"Via the offices of Armando Garcia, our director there, we arranged for some pro-bono health care, as well as assistance with other necessities," he explains.

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— COLLEGE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
DEAN SCOTT FRITZEN



Mahdi Rahimi and Husnia Hazara with daughter Sara.

The couple finally arrived in Norman in March 2022. They welcomed a baby girl, Sara, two months later.

Navigating motherhood far from home wasn't easy, especially while pursuing research, learning English at OU's Center for English as a Second Language, giving lectures and assistant teaching in Persian language classes. But the couple drew strength from their new community. "When my daughter was born, a lot of colleagues here helped us. I felt alone being away from family, especially my mom," Husnia Hazara says. "But the other scholars were very good to us."

Fellow visiting scholar Myo Win has also felt the heartache of being away from family. A human rights advocate from Burma, Win began the difficult process of leaving home after a 2021 military coup plunged the country into a humanitarian, economic and political crisis. "People like me—a human rights defender working for the religious minority—are not so secure living in Burma," he explains.

Win's OU connection began in 2018, when he received OU's Clyde Snow Social Justice Award for advocacy work in Burma. He kept in touch with anthropology professor and award chair Misha Klein, who recommended him for the Scholars-at-Risk Program when the situation in Burma worsened.

Despite challenges, Win has made the most of his time here, continuing human rights work and giving lectures. He is also collaborating with faculty and students to promote awareness of South Asian issues and struggles facing developing countries in the region. "All the faculty from the College of Arts and Sciences and CIS gave a very warm welcome to me," he says. "I thank OU for hosting me and letting me move forward in my work."

A third scholar, Feroz Bashari, is unique among the group for having arrived in Oklahoma City through Operation Allies Welcome before joining the Scholars-at-Risk Program. An expert in strategic communications, he worked for 20 years with the Afghan government and U.S. Embassy, serving as a media adviser for U.S. officials and, eventually, as communications director for the Afghanistan government. He describes the role as "the face of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan."

These years of service meant that Bashari, along with his wife and five children, qualified for U.S. military evacuation from the country in August 2021.

He described the end of the U.S.-backed Afghan government as a memory he won't forget. "It wasn't only the fall of a government, it was the fall of democracy, people's hopes, human rights, freedom of speech and the end to the values and gains we achieved



Bashari shares his experiences in Afghan public affairs with OU journalism students.



Husnia Hazara in her homeland of Bamiyan, Afghanistan.



Husnia Hazara and her husband, Mahdi Rahimi, at Puebla, Mexico, where they awaited U.S. entry.



Feroz Bashari in Times Square.



Myo Win visits the United Nations, presenting information on the status of human rights in Burma.



Myo Win



Feroz Bashari meets former U.S. Rep. Kendra Horn at the Oklahoma State Capitol to discuss issues regarding Afghan immigrants.

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with our American/NATO partners over two decades. It isn't easy seeing something that took you years to build fall suddenly apart.”

After learning about Bashari through local media, Fritzen reached out to discuss a visiting scholar position. Bashari is now co-hosted by OU's Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication and Price College of Business. “I provide lectures in both colleges related to strategic communications, global security, public affairs and cultural management,” he says. “The classes are good, very engaging. I like the students—and they like me, too.”

For the Basharis, Oklahoma has become a permanent home, but they are still adjusting to the shock of fleeing their country. “We left everything behind: our house, our relatives, our friends—everything,” he says. “It's not an easy decision to leave your birthplace, but we were forced to.”

These stories only scratch the surface of the challenges faced by OU's Scholars-at-Risk. Several arrived from Afghanistan recently, facing harassment and violence from the Taliban. Others have been offered positions but have not yet been able to make it out.

The current cohort of scholars includes Esmat Ayoubi and Mehri Rezaee (International Studies), Zahra Eyvazi (Atmospheric and Geographic Sciences), Shabnam Khalilyar (Journalism and International

Studies), Shogofa Rafi (Business) and Masooma Vaezi (Arts and Sciences). All are women from Afghanistan—an indication of the incredibly harsh conditions for women scholars in that country.

Fritzen emphasizes that as much as these scholars benefit from being at OU, their contributions are also shaping the university in positive ways. “It's important for universities to address the biggest challenges facing humankind, and often perspectives from less-developed or unstable parts of the world tend to get underrepresented on campuses,” he says. “So it's incredibly valuable for us to have these scholars engaging with students, as well as the research community.”

“I still believe that I made the right decision to be here,” Bashari concludes. “I would like to continue working for OU.”

For others, the future is less certain. They take it day by day, supporting one another and pursuing the work they love.

Now in her second year at OU, Husnia Hazara hopes next to pursue a Ph.D. “I like it here,” she reflects thoughtfully. “Being active in the university—that was good for me.” ●

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