

Oral History Kosovo

INTERVIEW WITH AIMAN K. ZUREIKAT

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Duration: 139 minutes

Present:

1. Aiman K. Zureikat (Speaker)
2. Ana Lisa Zureikat (Interviewer / Camera)

Symbols used in the transcript for non-verbal communication:

() - emotional communication

{ } - the interviewee explains with gestures

Other symbols in the transcript:

[] - addition to the text to facilitate understanding

Footnotes are editorial additions that provide information about places, names, or expressions.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: Ready? Can you hear? Okay. First off, I would like to ask for your permission, if it's okay that this interview will be recorded and possibly shown to others.

Aiman K. Zureikat: You have my permission.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: Okay. May you please introduce yourself, who you are, how old you are, what's your name, where you live?

Aiman K. Zureikat: My name is Aiman Zureikat, I live in Hasset, Texas. I am uh, a tad. . . I am 63 years old. And I have agreed to do this interview, with my lovely daughter, to tell her my side of the story.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: So, I'm about to inform you, this interview will be based off [sic] your perspective on the Kosovo War as a diplomatic observer. I would first like to start off, before we get into the military and what you had to go through during the war, I would like to know a bit about you, where you were born and raised and what was your childhood like?

Aiman K. Zureikat: Well, I was born in Amman, Jordan, in 1962. It's a beautiful place, and I was exposed to wars at an early age. In fact, the first war I witnessed, I was only five years old. In 1967, it was the Six Day War with Israel, and I lived on the main Air Force Base in Amman, Jordan. So, I saw a lot of wonderful fireworks out there, and it just never stopped. I lived there till the age of about 12 at the Air Force Base, and we came to the US. Let me go back, we came to the US in 1972, the first time I was 10. Stayed for a couple months, integrated, stayed for a couple months and things didn't work out for my dad. He couldn't retire, so we went back to Jordan two months later, and then two years later, we tried to do it again.

We immigrated again to the US to Salt Lake City, Utah. This time around, we stayed for a couple of years. Going back to 76, my oldest brother stayed here, came down to Texas, and I went back to Jordan. And when I was in Jordan, I was put into a military school. [I] did that till about 10th grade,

and when I was 16, I think I caused enough problems that my parents agreed to send me to the US. And I came to the US when I was 16 years old, just finished 10th grade, but because of the education system, and what we learned back in Jordan, I was able to complete both my 11th and 12th grade in one year. And so, I graduated when I was 17.

During my whole time here as a 16-year-old, I worked full time. In fact, I had two jobs at one time, worked at a nursing home from 3pm to 11pm. And then on weekends, or the nights that I wasn't working, I would go work at a movie theater. So, I stayed busy trying to survive because at that point in time, my dad couldn't afford to support me. So, whenever he could, he would send me money, but most of the time, basically, I earned to live and you know, to be able to attend school. So, one of the things that was instilled in me as a child was always to be your best and do what you can do to improve your education, and that's what I strive to do.

Let me go back a little bit further. There was in '72, prior to us coming to the United States, '71 or '72... we had a civil war in Jordan, and I was privy to that [by] living on the same military installation, but I saw some atrocities there. I saw some death and I saw some gruesome scenes as a nine- and ten-year-old and it stayed with me for the rest of my life. At first, we thought it was, you know, fun. Then, as we started running into atrocities and that kind of scared us and it was difficult, but we lived through it. That's when we decided to come to the U.S. the first time. Does that answer your question?

Ana Lisa Zureikat: Yes, that's a perfect answer. What university did you end up going [to] while you were in the U.S., if you went to university in the U.S.?

Aiman K. Zureikat: Well, so what happened was in 1978, when I came to the U.S., my goal was to join the military and get my education through the military. But the way I wanted to do it was basically start out as enlisted and then try to get into the military academy and get my education through the military academy. I chose the Air Force, and the reason I chose the Air Force [is that] the Air Force at that point in time had higher standards, higher requirements for those who want to join the military. So, after high school, I graduated high school and July 25th of 1979 is when I joined the Air Force. Well, it's funny, that's the same day when I had my open-heart surgery.

So, I joined the Air Force, and my job was supposed to be intelligence, and I requested to be assigned to a unit that is assigned to Incirlik, Turkey. Okay, Incirlik is an Air Force base out there. So, they processed my paperwork and all that and I got to the final, you know, steps. Then they came to me, and they said, "Sorry, son, you can't go to Incirlik, Turkey.

You can't do this job because you don't have U.S. citizenship yet." They gave me the option of where I wanted to go and what I wanted to do. So, I picked something simple and that is administration.

That's where I learned my business administration and learned documentation and things like that, that helped me later on in life, and then I picked Scott Air Force Base, and the reason I picked that particular base was because my older brother was stationed there.

So, I figured, hey, I might as well be in the same place that my older brother's in. When I got to my base, I was supposed to be assigned to a headquarters position. As soon as I got there, I went to my new assignment. They said, well, we got to change. We're going to assign you to a unit position. So, a unit is smaller, and I was blessed.

The unit they assigned me to was a flying unit, 11th Aeromedical Airlift Squadron, okay? That squadron is no longer around because they phased it out and changed how they do things, but it was responsible for medical evacuations. So, we had about 12 airplanes here in the US, modified DC-9s, they called them the C-9A Nightingales, had ramps on the side and could have up to 40 patients on board, in stretchers, okay?

And what we did is basically transported patients all over the US, and the reason we did that is some military medical centers were better at doing certain things. So, we moved our troops to a place where they could get the best treatment they could in the military, okay and in fact, what's funny, in 1980, there was a big fire in Las Vegas, and one of the things that we did, our unit did, is basically we transported all those burn victims to Wilford Hall, which is down in San Antonio, because it's one of the best burn centers around back then. So anyway, most of the pilots that I worked with, the unit I was in, there were only four enlisted people, and the rest were pilots.

Three of the enlisted people worked in scheduling and operations. Basically, they put together the schedule, flight schedule, and pilot assignments for week by week. That's what they were responsible for. I, on the other hand, worked directly for my commander, because I was running the administrative side of the house, and what was nice is my commander had an officer that worked under him that basically directed me. And we were both learning, because he assigned me a second lieutenant, and I had more experience than the second lieutenant did. So, we learned from each other.

But the thing that really opened up my eyes, the pilots that I was talking to, they got close to me and, you know, pushed me into trying to apply to the Air Force Academy and helped me in doing so. While I was doing my job there, I started going to a local college, a junior college, basically to get some college hours, you know, learn about how the universities run and, you know, the kind of work I can expect and things like that. I did that for about a year, and in the process, at the same time, I worked my tail off to put in my application for the Military Academy.

One of my hobbies is and was and still is photography. So, we had a general that was basically a four-star general that was overseeing our command, which was Military Airlift Command back then. Since then, they changed it to Air Mobility Command. But the general's name was Heiser, Dutch Heiser. So, my commander knew I was into photography, and they couldn't get anybody to work his

retirement party. They asked me if I was interested, and that was my first exposure to the general. So, I went there, took pictures, turned my photographs over. They liked what they saw, and, you know, I was introduced to the general back then and introduced to really high-level officers within my command that knew my background, knew what I was doing, that expressed interest in me and pushed me.

So, what I did is I worked, got good grades, got on with my commander. He helped me complete my application. He helped me push it through the command level, and I got basically a military appointment thanks to General Dutch Heiser. But during the same time that that was going on, I got my U.S. citizenship, and that's why I was able to join the academy. In the military academy, you can't be there if you don't have U.S. citizenship or are not born in the U.S.

Okay. So, I had to get my citizenship before I applied to the Air Force Academy and basically it required a lot of work because usually you have to be in the US five years before you can apply for citizenship. However, I had a break in my time, but it was always less than a year that I was out of the country. And I had sufficient years, more than three years. So, what I did is that in the process of the application, I did my paperwork for providing the necessary documentation to get my citizenship application through the system. I applied in, I believe, in '80 or '81 and got accepted and went and got sworn in and in fact, I had a "posse" that went with me. My commander, a couple of officers that I worked with, and a couple of ladies that I worked with, we took a US Air Force man to East St. Louis, got sworn in and became a citizen.

And after that, it was all downhill because immediately after that, I got accepted to the Academy and I went to the Air Force Academy. Unfortunately, while I was at the Academy, I got injured. So, I spent about four, four and a half months in the hospital and then they reevaluated me and deemed that I was no longer qualified. So, I got a medical discharge out of the Academy, but it was unfortunate because at that point in time, I was, even though I wore glasses, I was pilot qualified and that's one of the things that I wanted to do in my life is be a pilot. Unfortunately, that didn't happen.

I came out and spent about three, four months in Salt Lake City, then moved to Texas and went to the University of Texas at Arlington. Initially, I started studying engineering, but because now I was more of having to be able to live and go to school at the same time, engineering would have been very difficult working full time and going to school full time. So, I changed my degree to accounting. That lasted for about one semester. That was for the birds. So, from there, there was another option for me and that was systems analysis, which is basically software engineering on the business side of the house, and it was something I enjoyed because it was logic and I was able to deal with that, and I was able to finish my degree in three years and that's what I did. I went into systems analysis.

After graduating, I got hired by a company and I worked for that company for almost 30 years. I started with them as a software engineer, software developer, and I primarily worked on accounting systems,

and I had one challenging job where I created an aircraft maintenance management system. And that is basically in aviation, you got to be able to track the lifecycle of each and every component that requires maintenance. It could be a point that failure... I did that and saved my company about a million dollars a year because we were able to do it in house, as opposed to going outside and having somebody provide us software to do that. So, to make a long story short, I worked for this company for a while in software development. But the unit that I worked for was our aerospace operations unit.

The company was a lot bigger than that, and they wanted...there was no progress for me within the company because the guy that was my boss used to work for me at the University of Texas when I was running operations there. So, I knew it was going to be a long time before I could move up because he was also younger than I was. During the first few years, you know, I learned a lot about aviation and about the company. I knew about aviation from the military, but there was an opportunity to do something different, and that was actually working on contracts, bidding contracts, and winning contracts for the company. Excuse me.

So, I went to the contracts department and started basically bidding contracts. And that's where I learned the contractual side of the house, how to set up operations from a financial perspective, how to work on making profit, even though you bid profit, but you got to run it to make more profit. Okay, so you got to find efficiencies, find smarter ways of doing things. So, I bid several different contracts and was successful at winning them.

And then, excuse me, in 1990, Kuwait was attacked by their northern neighbor, Iraq. Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. As a result, we had the Desert Storm that was led by the United States and had many countries that joined in to push the Iraqis back and get Kuwait back to their proper owners. That changed my direction of life as far as software development and contracts. By virtue of me being of Arab descent and being able to speak Arabic, and also my military background working with aviation, and then my background that I gained over the few months that I was in contracts, they asked me to go to the first Gulf War.

And I, from there, transitioned to another program that was the U.S. Army. And it was a big operation...We set up what's called the National Training Center in Doha, Kuwait. A National Training Center is basically where the military—Army, Marines, and all that—go out in the middle of the desert and practice war games. So, there are two in the military, one in Kuwait and one in Fort Irwin in the desert in California, and those are basically two places where we do desert training, things like that. That operation, I was reminded to doing my other portion of what I learned in life. I basically was overseeing the ADPE, Automated Data Processing Equipment, that included the maintenance and repair of military computers, civilian computers, and also the software development portion of the house for the entire operation.

So, we had a big base with over 2,000 people living there, and we were supporting the military units and running their systems for them. That was my job, but the project there...we did everything: base operations and support. We worked in every part of the operation. We were running security for the base. We were running maintenance on their tanks, dining facilities. We were doing everything for them. Basically, the warfighter would come out there to practice, use the equipment, go out in the desert, learn how to fight, and they'd come back in. We'd take care of their equipment, repair the damage, do regular maintenance and support, and then put the equipment back in for future operations. So that's what they did in their cycles.

During that time, of course, we had two different missions that were going on, primarily Somalia, and then what was happening in Bosnia. Somalia was operated by another company; it had nothing to do with the company I was working for. However, my vice president who used to work in our contracts department wanted to expand our company internationally. The interesting thing is, when I first came to Kuwait, I was under a project with the Aerospace Operations Division, which was based in Fort Worth, Texas. Then they moved me onto another contract back to our Virginia operation. So, I was working with what was called DIME International. Then my boss in Fort Worth decided, "Hey, we want to expand internationally, but we're going to do it this way."

When I started with the company, we were making about \$89 million a year. When I left the company, we were making \$4 billion a year. And I started on the ground, helping develop that company. Our first mission was working with the United Nations. And I was transferred from Kuwait to Croatia in 1993. My job basically involved handling contracts, finance, and personnel. I was the guy running the business side of things. Of course, they brought in a retired military guy to be in charge.

So, I moved out there and in 1993, I visited Bosnia, Sarajevo, [I] went all over the place. I saw the destruction and what was going on. I stayed there through 1993, and about 1994, it's funny, in June of 1994, I came out of Bosnia for a break. I went to meet with a few friends of mine for dinner. I had like a three-day break coming out of the war zone, a little R&R, and I needed to take care of some stuff.

So, we were having dinner, and I started having some serious back pains. They started on the lower left side of my abdomen, and by the end of the night, the pain was across my abdomen, really bad.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: May I ask, did this happen all of a sudden, or was it ongoing but got worse at that point?

Aiman K. Zureikat: No, it just started that night. I was getting some serious pain. I excused myself and went back to where I was staying. Tried to use the bathroom, but there was nothing...I was in good shape back then, so I made my way to an Air Force MASH unit at Pleso Airport in Croatia. I walked in around 2 a.m. and told the doctor, "Hey, I've got some serious pains. I think my appendix needs to come out." He asked, "Are you a doctor?" I said, "No, I'm not, but I know my body." He goes, "Well, let

me be the judge of that." So, they ran a bunch of tests, and about 3 a.m., the doctor came back to me and said, "I think your appendix needs to come out."

At 6 a.m. that morning, the surgeon came in and said, "Here's the deal. You're the first one on my list this morning. We'll take you in at 7 a.m." I went in, and they took out my appendix. As they pulled it out, it exploded.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: Wow!

Aiman K. Zureikat: So, I spent about three days in the mass unit, and then I went back and stayed there for a couple more months. Two months later, my father passed away in Jordan. It was very difficult to get out of the war zone to go to Jordan.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: May I ask, was your mind clouded while you were trying to work, even though you found out your father passed away?

Aiman K. Zureikat: Well, in life, with what I've done, I've learned to try to stay even keeled and control my emotions. I try not to let my emotions override my logical way of doing things.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: Of course.

Aiman K. Zureikat: So, my friend that I mentioned earlier, who worked with me in Kuwait running that project with the Kuwaiti Air Force, had transitioned to working for the United Nations in air operations. Anyway, he knew what had happened to me. In fact, the way I got the call was they contacted the company I worked for in the U.S., and then they called me to let me know that my dad had passed.

So, I let my friend know. A couple of days before I came up there, there had been a helicopter accident. A helicopter was taxiing, and one of the rotor blades hit a building. The entire helicopter twisted, and they had to transport it back to civilization to get it fixed. They sent out a big Russian aircraft to carry the helicopter, and my friend was able to put me on that Russian aircraft to fly from Bosnia, from Croatia, to Amsterdam. I got my luggage and had already arranged for a ticket. I bought a ticket from Amsterdam to Jordan and from Jordan back to Croatia. It took me about 11 hours to get there.

I arrived in Jordan late at night. My dad had already been buried. They had his burial because he passed away from a car accident. He was diabetic, and the gear shift went into his stomach, hitting his liver and other organs. They couldn't stop the bleeding. His face hit the steering wheel, and, you know, they didn't want us to see him. So, they buried him. I arrived there too late. I stayed for three days because that was all I had, and then I came back to Bosnia.

In September of that year, the U.S. decided to invade Haiti. The company I worked for bid on a contract with the Department of State. That was the first mission where the U.S. sent police officers internationally. Most countries have a national police force, but in the U.S., the only national police, quote-unquote, is the FBI, and the FBI doesn't do regular police work. Each state has its own police force, and counties have their own police as well. So, the U.S. wanted to send police officers to serve with the United Nations. We were invading Haiti.

Before the invasion, the U.S. government issued a solicitation. My company wanted to send police officers to Haiti, but the problem was that the U.N. wasn't ready to set up operations there yet. So, the U.S. government took over the contract, and we ended up running it. Twenty other countries signed up to join us. So, we invaded Haiti. I was on the very first civilian airplane to Haiti. Initially, I was the only passenger, but they added two more people from my company to go out there.

So, there were three passengers on a jumbo jet, but the jet was filled with cars. We had 13 Jeeps, a van, and a pickup truck. We also had MREs, personal protection gear, water, and equipment like generators...When you're going into a place like this, either you take it over or you help build it up. Since we were a civilian company and the U.S. Department of State wanted us to benefit the country, we focused on helping Haiti in the long run.

So, we procured local accommodations, like hotels, and set up operations. We had 20 countries supporting the mission, with each country responsible for policing different areas until the United Nations took over. Okay. No, six months. And the Program Director, who flew out with Bill Clinton at the end of the mission, turned it over to the U.N., and that was the end of the mission. And then I came back to the U.S. in 1995, in June. May 1995.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: Now, may I ask, this would be around the time of the Kosovo War?

Aiman K. Zureikat: No, before. Bosnia was still going on.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: My bad.

Aiman K. Zureikat: Okay, 1994, 1995.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: Yeah, during the Bosnian War. Did you feel compelled to go with your company and maybe try to help the Bosnians?

Aiman K. Zureikat: Well, that's where I'm getting to. So, what happened was, we finished operations there. And then I, they sent me back to Bosnia to help with the mission that we had out there because it expanded. We had other operations, but at the same time, in 1995, the US had nobody in Bosnia. In the process, one of the things that we were doing is more of a marketing effort, trying to expand our

operations and try to help the country. And so, in 1995, around October timeframe, they pulled me out of Bosnia to come and brief one of the Undersecretaries of State.

So, they have the Secretary of State, and then they have different operations, and each operation is covered by an Undersecretary. I don't remember the Undersecretary, but the unit that I was working with was international law enforcement, international narcotics and law enforcement matters. So, that's where the policing came into operations, and since I had the experience of working with the police and running operations in Haiti, they wanted my perspective in comparison to what I thought we needed to do for Bosnia, since I was the only US asset that has travelled and was able to give that presentation to let them know what I thought and let them know the situation from my perspective.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: May I ask, when you were in Bosnia, did you have any of your colleagues with you, or were you the only one there?

Aiman K. Zureikat: I was the only US asset that was in there. Most of the personnel that we had working in Bosnia were primarily...we brought people from all over the world to work in different sections.

So, what we were doing in this particular operation, we were recruiting people for the United Nations, because the United Nations were not able to recruit from all over in a short period of time. So, they hired about four or five different companies that were doing it for them. So, we had people working from Africa, from the Middle East, Europe, Eastern Europe, US, all over the world. So, we had employees from all over the world, and because I was the operations, HR, everything, I was the one that was traveling the same. And it was easy for me to do so, because I was able to navigate and go from Bosnia to the Republic of Srpska to Croatia.

I went all over, and I did not have any problems, unlike other people.

The advantage that I had over other people is, when I was in Croatia and Slovenia, they loved Americans. I had a US passport. When I was in Bosnia, I told them I was an Arab, so they loved the fact that I was an Arab, they thought I was one of them, they were fine with me. And when I was with the Serbs, you know, I'm Greek Orthodox, so, you know, you're one of us, so I was fine. So, wherever I went, I blended in.

And one of the things that I have never done was basically try to learn the language, because I had to stay neutral, and I hated to go into a place where the dialect is different, and they could recognize, you know, you could be killed because you're using the wrong dialect. I even went into Kosovo, Montenegro, and all those places. So, go ahead.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: So, basically, where you were stationed or taken to by your company, you based explaining yourself based off of [sic] hat they were. So, in Bosnia, you were Arab.

In Serbia, you were Greek Orthodox because they were Orthodox. So, you wouldn't have issues with you, and you would have more of a smoother transition with them, correct?

Aiman K. Zureikat: You know, basically, I would fit anywhere I go, okay.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: Yes, of course.

Aiman K. Zureikat: So, anyway. So, I had to go brief the Undersecretary of State, and I told him my views. I said, you know, Bosnians, the former Yugoslavia, you can't treat them as though they're a third world country. By that, I mean, you can't bring people from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, the Middle East, where the type of policing they do is not the type of policing that is in the US, where you have community policing. You're not guilty until proven so, you know, you're innocent until proven guilty. Whereas other countries, it's different. And, you know, the level of education, the level of society and culture was higher in former Yugoslavia than going to Africa or the Middle East. So, anyway, I gave my perspective.

And, of course, when they, and we talked about operationally what they need and all that. But when they finally negotiated with the UN, the UN said, no, we've been doing this for 50 years, and it's been working just fine. So, you know, the UN brought in all the other countries because, you know, because that's the way they're doing it.

But in reality, you know, the level of education, the culture is a lot higher than what was the UN providing by bringing these other people in. So, after that happened, I was sent back to Bosnia, believe it or not, and I started working on contracts for the US. There were US governmental operations coming up. So, I've bid a couple of contracts down there and we won them. Okay, supporting the US military in 1995 at the US embassy. So, in 1996, the US military and NATO started coming into that area. And we bid contracts there. We won them. Okay.

And then in 1996, I was called back to come back to the US. This time they wanted me to work on developing a bid for providing police for Bosnia. So, we did our first police mission in Haiti. And now the US government will come back to us. I guess we're the only company that had that know-how. So, I bid the contract. We won it. And I was picked to run it. It was an unarmed mission.

We went to Croatia. I went to New York. In New York, I briefed the people, the first group, and then I flew out of them to go to Croatia, set up operations to welcome them and things like that, you know, because I was to go between the United Nations and the US government. So, I went to Croatia, and I was in Croatia. While I was there, I got what's called a staph infection. You know what staph infection is, right?

Ana Lisa Zureikat: Of course.

Aiman K. Zureikat: So, I got a staph infection in my right ankle. Yeah. I couldn't walk. I went to the US Navy doctor there. He drained it for me. And he said, "Son, I recommend that you medevac yourself back to the US." So, we had to jump through hoops. We were able to get somebody to come for me. Yeah. We brought in a guy that was in charge of our police in Haiti to cover for me for a short period of time.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: May I ask why the Navy medical doctor told you to go back to the US?

Aiman K. Zureikat: Because he was not sure of the medical facilities in the area. And he wanted the best medical attention that I could get. At that point in time, he wasn't in the country that long, so he didn't know what the hell was going on. So, they sent me back to the US. I went back to the US. This guy came and took over for me. That only lasted for maybe two, three weeks. And then they brought somebody else to take over for me for that mission. The gentleman you know, Mr. Paul Carter. So, he became the police guy in Bosnia. He took over there. Came back to the US. I spent about a week in the hospital.

Came out. Everything was fine. Then I started working on other projects that we won. And then they sent me back to Bosnia to run that project with the United Nations. And also, to oversee the financial and contractual operations for all projects that we had in the area. Okay. I did that from about 1996 till August of '97. At which point, they sent me back. They wanted me to go to Haiti to run the police program in Haiti. So, I went to Haiti. And I was in charge of the US police officers in Haiti. Did that for about a year.

In between all that, they asked me to go down to Angola to work on some issues and clean-up operations there. And I spent about a month and a half in Angola, and I was... We had... It was an interesting trip. We almost came face to face with a lion. That's why I say it's an interesting trip.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: How did you almost come face to face with a lion?

Aiman K. Zureikat: After being there for about three weeks, we took one day off. And we borrowed a van. They told us where to go. So, we wanted to go to the beach. So, we drive the van. We pull up the van on the side of the highway, you know. Get out of the van. Well, on the left-hand side was the jungle. On the right-hand side was the beach. So, we open up the van. We go outside. We walk a few feet. And all of a sudden, we hear lions roaring. So, we hightail it to the van and go to another beach. That was closer to the city and all that, you know. And it was a beautiful beach, you know.

We had a good time in the city. I went back to Haiti. And the mission in Haiti was still going on. They brought in somebody to take over for me. And they sent me back to Bosnia, to Croatia. But this time, I had to go work with the Slovenians.

The Slovenians and the Americans and some other countries were working on putting a project together to demine Bosnia. Yeah? So, I started up operations for my company and started up operations to get people to come and take over. And I spent about, this is in '98, I spent about two months working on it. Then they moved me to Sarajevo. Sarajevo. At that time, the mission in Kosovo, Holbrook had the meeting, yeah? And they contacted me and asked me if I would be interested to go work this mission to help the Kosovo Albanians.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: May I ask you now, when you first heard about the mission, did they give you any context on what's going on? And if so, did it drive you to want to go to Kosovo and help?

Aiman K. Zureikat: Well, they gave me my parameters. They told me what my job is. They told me the expectations. One of the things over the years that I've always done and still do, I have a soft heart. I will do anything for anybody. And I always try to right the wrong.

I do the things that I do. Sometimes I go into different areas to help the abused, to help people. And I don't like seeing children having a rough life because I've been in their shoes and I know what war is like.

So, when they gave me that mission, I did not hesitate. I said, yeah, I'll do it. Okay. And what's great are the people that I work with had faith in me. And not only my company, but the U.S. government that I worked through, the personnel that I worked with. Okay. So, I accepted the mission, but I could not leave. Okay. It took a while for me to leave because the requirement by the Serbs, they wanted, well, the Americans, what they wanted to do is give us all diplomatic passports.

So, we have diplomatic immunity. So that we're covered under the Four Geneva Conventions, and we're also treated a little bit differently because we were diplomats.

So, the thing that delayed my going in was basically, I was, I did not have my diplomatic passport. So, I had to wait. Okay. And where did I wait in Sarajevo? Once I received my diplomatic passport, okay, packed my stuff and believe it or not, took about 300 Deutschmarks in cash with me.

Okay. I was in Bosnia, but we had people that were already in Belgrade. We set up an operation in Belgrade and then we dispatched our people from Belgrade to Kosovo because the Serbs required that we get the personal cards. And we had to go through a briefing with the [State] Department, with the U.S. Embassy and the do's and don'ts and the expectations and things like that before we could go down to the mission in Kosovo.

I get in there and the customs officer goes, basically he wanted to check my bags. I held up my passport, diplomat. I didn't understand him over, you know. Anyway, I said, chief, chief. So, he brings me the chief who speaks little English. And I tell him, you know, "I need to go through because we must check," I said, "diplomat, because we must check." At that time, they were watching CNN on the

big screens, and they mentioned Monica Lewinsky because that was the time that he [Clinton] was having problems. So, I looked at him and said, "Oh, I know Monica Lewinsky." And he started laughing. He just said, he let me through. So, I got there and went to our headquarters, our operations in Belgrade.

Excuse me. Waited till I got my card. As soon as I got my card, I got transportation.

That was diplomatic transportation that took me down to Prishtina, yeah. Prishtina, we were staying at a hotel that we rented at Kosovo Polje where we set up operations. Okay, and that was where I stayed initially. And the first week or so, I went around to meet all my people also to give them money because they were running out of cash, okay, to live on and all that. And started working the diplomatic portion of it, working with the personnel there from the US government that gave me directions and asked me to do things. And I would do, there's things within my company, we have limitations.

The contract says ABC. We can't go outside of that contract. If we go outside of that contract, that's work that's being done for free. So, you have to be smart, say no, this is extra and work on a proposal for it. But anyway...

Ana Lisa Zureikat: May I ask you, with the contracts that you said you had ABC, did you ever want to add anything to those contracts that they did not permit, but you knew that it was needed?

Aiman K. Zureikat: Yes, and the way you work it is basically you have the people in-country that might tell you how to run operations and do things and the expectations. But you also have what they call a technical, a contract technical officer, okay, that technical representative, okay? And their expertise lies outside of the people on the ground because he's looking at it from a technical and operational point of view, okay? If you say, okay, here's the problem, here's what we can do. However, this is what we also need to complete the mission. And that person basically reviews what you put in together and looks if it's really needed or not, the feasibility of it.

And then that's how they say, yeah, yeah, "We do need this, and they'll add money or whatever, or they might send somebody in country to shadow you and have you shown what's going on and the actual operation on the ground and see what people are experiencing in order to make those changes. So yes, okay? So, we start operations anyway. The mission went from Kosovo Diplomatic Observation Mission [KDOM].

A few months later, the OSCE [Organization for the Security and Cooperation in Europe] came in and we split into two operations. Actually, there were three. The Brits had the British Diplomatic Observation Mission. The U.S. had Kosovo Diplomatic Observation Mission and then OSCE, which was the European Union, okay, that included the U.S., yeah?

So, initially, my people were special operations, special forces, Navy SEALs and all that stuff that went to check everything every day to see if they were meeting the agreement that Milosevic and Holbrook signed. And if there were problems, they would report it to the Diplomatic Corps who would bring it up and take care of it, yeah? Well, that was taken away and started operationally under OSCE, yeah?

We kept on doing what we needed to do diplomatically from the U.S. side, but we also had integrated within the OSCE system where we provided both police, military observers and the fusion center, which was the intelligence gathering, okay, that included all nationalities in there. And it was interesting because everything that we were collecting, we had to share.

So, you know, then a sad thing happened, a gruesome thing happened, and the timing of it was really bad and that's the Raçak massacre. My people were on the diplomatic side, they were the first ones on the scene. They reported it. It was reported back to the OSCE. At that point in time, Ambassador Walker, William Walker was in charge. He came out there and saw what we saw. They reported me back and of course, the Serbs are denying it. And they basically said: Okay, you guys are persona non grata. Basically you don't exist. At that point in time I had to go pick up the person that I was reporting to, back in Washington DC, in Macedonia. And to meet with ambassador Walker, and from there drive to Belgrade to have a meeting with the embassy there. And from there drive to northern Bosnia, across the river from Bosnia, in Croatia. Yeah, Croatia or Republika Srpska... Vukovar! Vukovar. To meet my friend Paul, so Paul can take the department state guy and go into Bosnia because both programs were under his purview.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: Now may I ask you, even though you had to stay neutral during your job, basically while working with the Kosova military and the government, and the Serbia military and government... After the massacre did it have an emotional toll on you or did it lean you more towards the Kosova side even though you had to stay neutral?

Aiman K. Zureikat: I'm always on the side of the weak. I've seen the atrocities that happened in Bosnia, Croatia and all around. And I've seen what happened in Kosovo that is inhumane and it is always the Serbs that are doing it. In fact, one thing I didn't tell you, when I came back to Bosnia from Haiti, I bid on a contract where we actually had to go dig the remains of the Srebranica massacre. You heard of that, right?

Ana Lisa Zureikat: I don't think I have.

Aiman K. Zureikat: Yeah, that happened in an enclave in Republika Srpska, where the Serbs took all the men out. They lined them up against that dirt road, and there was a side of the hill, and then there's a creek. They lined them, and basically they were tied either back or the front. Young and old men basically massacred them, shot them all up, and then covered their remains with dirt, while the

United Nations was responsible for ensuring the security and safety of personnel. And it was run by the Dutch, that area. Unfortunately, the Dutch went to base, and they did not come out.

So, the company, we actually went and dug up those remains, and it was gruesome there as well. But it's something that eats at you. It's, I don't know, I don't sleep very deep, because if I sleep deep, I'm afraid of my demons, the things that I see. And it just eats at you, and I don't want that pain. I suffer from PTSD. I mean, seeing all things that I've seen since I was a child.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: May I ask you if your PTSD worsened after Kosovo?

Aiman K. Zureikat: Yeah, and it's something that you have to live with. And anyway, I, where was I at? Anyway, so, that Raçak thing happened. I bring in my former state guy from, pick him up in Macedonia. I'm driving an orange pickup truck, a US military pickup truck that was painted orange.

I drive it up to meet with Ambassador Walker. We walk into his office, and he basically says, "I can't meet with you. We have a serious issue on our hands. We're persona non grata. I'm working on that. So please go." He couldn't have a meeting with us. You know, operationally, Ambassador Walker had input on what he wanted us to do, because we have people here under the OSCE that they can talk, but people that do other things under the Kosovo Diplomatic Observation Mission, I was a conduit, and I would take his input that would come through him to me directly, or through my person in Washington, D.C., tell me what to do.

So, my friend from the Department of State says, "Okay, hey, we can't do this. We gotta leave." We left. We gassed up as much as we can, because they cut off all the fuel to Kosovo at that point in time, and we drove the pickup truck from Kosovo, from Pristina to Belgrade.

That was a rough ride. The whole time, people were honking horns at us and giving us the finger, telling us we're number one. Anyway, and all the way up there, we tried to get fuel. Nobody would give us self-fuel, so we were on fumes, until we made it to Belgrade, and we stashed our pickup, and we were able to go buy, had a couple locals go buy us some diesel fuel. And we filled the pickup up, stayed up there for a night. My friend did his thing at the Embassy.

Afterwards, we had to drive to Vukovar [Croatia]. That wasn't a fun ride, but I went out there, came back and had lunch with my friend Paul and this guy, turned him over. Now, I had to drive back into Serbia.

So, from Vukovar to Serbia. Yeah, at that point in time, you know, there was a, right outside of Vukovar, there was a checkpoint, basically, national checkpoint. So, you had to go through that, and they wanted to argue with me and not let me in. Yeah. So, it was tough getting back through. One of the things that I used to do is I used to wear bracelets, gold bracelets. And for years, I always kept either

coins or, you know, gold, on me. At that point in time, that's the only thing I had. He wouldn't let me through.

And that's what I bribed him with, and he let me through. Gave him the bracelet, and he let me through, drive through, and gave me the finger on the way out. And I filled fuel in Croatia, basically, the Vukovar area there, in the Croatian part.

I filled fuel, came back in, drove to Belgrade, didn't have enough fuel. And for my safety, they didn't want me to drive alone all the way to Kosovo. So, what I did, we stashed our truck, and we had people from Kosovo come and pick it up, a team. And I went in an unmarked vehicle that was hired by the U.S. Embassy to take me down back to Kosovo, to Pristina. So I was in Pristina, and then, of course, what happened? One of my guys that was in the military, on the diplomatic operations side of the house, got into an accident.

They were playing chicken with the local Serbian police. They had a head-on collision. Our car flipped, and my person got really, really bad. They medically evacuated him to Macedonia. That was a joke, because they couldn't provide him the medical service that we needed. So, when that happened, I took a change of clothes, and it was cold. And I took my computer and went and rented a hotel at the Alexander Palace Hotel. Then I worked on getting my person a medical vac. We had him stabilized enough to where I could medically evacuate him to a near location in Ramstien, Germany, where we had a U.S. military hospital on his own, because I couldn't leave the mission. Got him stabilized at 6 a.m. We had the flight. I put him on it. He went to Germany, and he got treated. And I went to the Alexander Palace Hotel.

On my way back, I called the Fusion Center, OSCE. I said, "I did the medical evac." I said, "I did the medical evac." I said, "I did the medical evac. I'm coming back in." They told me, "Don't come back in. Stay where you're at." "Yeah? What's going on?" "We can't talk, okay?"

Ana Lisa Zureikat: May I ask you what was running through your mind when they told you, "We cannot tell you what's going on, but do not come?"

Aiman K. Zureikat: I knew something serious was going on, because at that point in time, we're still negotiating about him staying in the country, you know, and they wanted us out.

So, I went back to the Alexander Palace Hotel, and something told me, "Hey, get a bigger room." So, I got a suite. Yeah? And I had to pay extra for him to give me the suite, because the wonderful OSCE reserved the entire hotel. I said, "I already got a room." So, anyway, we negotiated that one. I paid extra for him.

So, at 2 a.m., my friend that I took to Bosnia, he was back in the U.S. when this was happening. At 2 a.m., I get a call. Pick up the phone. "Hello? I'm in." "Yes, sir. Pop Smoke."

Pop Smoke basically says, get your stuff and get the hell out. Something serious is about to happen.

So, they were telling you, basically, you need to leave as fast as possible with no trace.

Yeah. So, I told him, I said, "I'm already out. I had to do a medical evac." And I gave him my story that I called this morning. They told me they had to come in. He goes, "Well, good on you. Stay there. And, oh, by the way, you got to meet your people." I said, "I know, I'm on it."

Ana Lisa Zureikat: Now, I'm sorry to interrupt, but may I ask who exactly called you? Someone that was dealing with what was going on in Kosovo at the time or your friend?

Aiman K. Zureikat: My friend that came from the Department of State and I was taking him around, he called me from Washington, D.C. Oh. Yeah. Okay. Pop Smoke. So, I was down there. And then I got a call. And my job, try to meet my people, make sure everybody's out. So, I had a list of my people.

About 3.30 in the morning, I get a call from U.S. Embassy personnel in Serbia, in Belgrade, basically. "Make sure that all U.S. Department of State personnel.." "I don't have a list. I don't know who they are. Who left me in charge?" Okay. So, anyway, at 3.30, not 2.30 or 3.30 in the morning, they started coming out to Kosovo. And so, I went to the border to greet my people, just account for them, make sure everybody's out.

We got... we accounted for all our people. We had one genius that was taking a bus from Republika Srpska after taking an R&R to come down to Kosovo. We were able to intercept that guy. Okay. And get him safe. Okay. We did that. Then I had two people that were in Belgrade. And all they did is just back up and went across the border in the middle of the night to Croatia, where we had operations. So, here we are, we've got all my people. That night, in that suite of mine, I had over 20 people sleeping on the floor. There was no place to rent, no places to go.

The OSCE was prepared for this. In fact, they ended up leasing hotels at Lake Ohrid. So, they brought in people and moved them there as quickly as possible. What am I to do? I have people, no places to stay. We don't know what the mission is going to do. We don't know what OSCE wants to do. In the end, what we did is that all my personnel that were under OSCE were sent to Ohrid.

All my personnel that were under KDOM were with me in the hotel room. We found places for my personnel. We took them and stashed them in the area, in the region. And then all the personnel that were under the OSCE, the OSCE decided they're going to move them from Ohrid to Vienna. And they were flying them all out of Thessaloniki and Macedonia.

I couldn't get any tickets in Macedonia. So, I got a ride from Ohrid all the way to Thessaloniki, to the Greek border, actually, with Macedonia. And from there, I took a taxi to the airport in Thessaloniki, and I bought an airline ticket from there, left there at five in the morning, and went to Vienna. In Vienna,

the OSCE contracted the Intercontinental Hotel, and that's where they put my people. Again, no money. So, I spent about three weeks in Vienna with my people.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: I have a question now. In all these three weeks that you guys have left Kosovo, a completely different country now, did they ever inform you why they had you evacuate?

Aiman K. Zureikat: The OSCE, the “Organization for Severely Confused Europeans,” did not. Oh, okay. They were holding us back because the war might get started and things like that. However, my people in the U.S. government would call me and tell me what's going on. So, finally, you know, we couldn't keep people there doing nothing

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And the OSCE did not know what the mission was going to be like after the war. So, my job was basically to try to keep my people happy, keep them out of trouble, keep them fed, and keep them informed. The Americans were really informed. I'd tell them what's going on. If I didn't know, I'd tell them I don't know. So, it came to the point where I had to start demobilizing people and sending them home.

Yeah. And the funny story is I ran out of money, not ran out of money, but my credit card expired while I was there, and I couldn't get a new credit card. So, what I ended up doing is getting my company vice president to give me his credit card number and that's what I used. Okay. I charged over \$300,000 in airline tickets.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: Wow.

Aiman K. Zureikat: Yeah. And send everybody home. Not everybody, we kept a small group. Towards the end of the second week, they told me, the OSCE said, keep some people, we're going to need some help. We did keep some people because they needed some help.

And the people that I kept were special forces, Ranger medics, Ranger physician assistant, Ranger nurses, and a company. Okay. So, that second week they came to me and said, “Okay, we need to send so many people down to Macedonia and they'll be spread out between Macedonia and Albania.”

Yeah. In the mission transition, now my people were doing something completely different and that was collecting data from all the refugees so that could be used in The Hague for the international war crime tribunal.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: So, they were collecting information from the Kosovo refugees.

Aiman K. Zureikat: Yeah.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: To report all the war crimes that Serbians committed.

Aiman K. Zureikat: Yep. So, what they were doing, we were actually the ones that were collecting the data and doing the interviews. So, I was very proud of that. My guys did a great job.

And now I had these two operations, and I still had the Kosovo Diplomatic Observation Mission. After three weeks in Vienna, I mean, I really didn't enjoy my time in Vienna because I had to go to the bank, pick up money several times in cash. I didn't enjoy my time in Vienna because anytime I came out of my room or wanted to do something, all my people wanted to know what the heck was going on. And I was giving them briefings twice a day, in the morning and in the evening, but it wasn't sufficient enough. And I didn't have much data. They gave me like two days to get my guys ready.

So, I went to the nearest outdoor store because we left there with just a gold bag. I had one change of clothes on because I was carrying a metal bag. I lost everything. So, I took them to that store, and we spent about \$5,000 on cold weather gear and sleeping bags and things like that. And then I gave everybody about \$500 to go buy just regular clothes. They went in, to do the mission with OSCE to collect data for the war crime court.

I went back to Macedonia and the Department of State for the Diplomatic Observation Mission. We still had personnel. So, we found a location in Ohrid, which is a monastery, and they had a hotel. We rented the whole hotel. We took it over and we set up our operations there.

And then once the war ended, all these operations transitioned into something like the military. We no longer had the military requirements because now KFOR would come in. They were responsible for everything militarily. However, we became integrated. Our... my personnel were integrated into the United Nations, serving as CIVPOL. So, now my mission transitioned from military, police operations, intelligence gathering, and all that into supporting the US police officers in Kosovo. Yeah. Operationally, they were controlled by the United Nations. Administratively, and if I had to terminate somebody for cause, it was controlled by me.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: Now, when you say terminate, do you mean? Eliminate?

Aiman K. Zureikat: Fire, fire. Yeah. Because, you know, if you do something that embarrasses your country or something that is considered illegal or immoral, you're staining the name of your country. Of course. You're there to proudly present your country. And if you do something that was inappropriate or against morality, you know, there were certain things that we had to do. Then I was the man you had to see. I was responsible for ensuring that we do things the right way. Yeah.

So, our first police officers came into Macedonia, and we had a 747 again, but this time we had weapons because this is the first police mission where they wanted us to carry weapons.

Mm-hmm, and I took a nice Cuban cigar, I had military BDUs [Battle Dress Uniforms]. Actually, I had a pair of BDU pants and wore the, you know, the green undershirt. Yeah, and wore a hat, had the cigar in there, and there was a US convoy, and I just tucked myself in between them and just kept on driving.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: Now, in these moments, did you feel confident?

Aiman K. Zureikat: No.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: Not at all?

Aiman Zureikat: I was not confident, but I had to look confident. That's why I was smoking a cigar. I was scared because I had nobody with me. It was me, okay? I was bringing that crap across the international lines. So, yeah, I was scared. I was scared, and finally, my guy from the US Embassy, he did come across the border, but he didn't say anything to me. He just drove across the border, and I just tucked in, and just drove across the border, too. You know, he had diplomatic plates. I didn't have no freaking plates [sic]. I had a made-up KFOR vehicle. I was scared to the bone, okay? But, yeah, I made it up there, okay? And then we were able to support US CIVPOL operations.

We started bringing people in, okay? And it was funny because at that point in time, everything was safe, culturally safe, okay? But some of the cops that we had made a big deal out of it. Some of them, we had one cop, he comes in, and two days later, there's a news article in this paper that says as soon as he got off the airplane, people were shooting at them and things like that, and bombs all over the place. And it was, you know, basically a lie. You know what I had to do? I had to take that guy and send him home, okay? Because he lied. Yeah. He's lying.

Anyway, so we started the operation. We had approximately 600 police officers there. Later on, the program expanded to where we brought in police officers that also served in Serbia.

They were all under me, okay? The operations there were run by the UN, and it was there for the safety and security of the local personnel, but also part of those people went to work at the police academy where they started teaching the Kosovo police force, you know, getting them ready to take over, okay?

At the same time this is all going on, we also had other operations where we brought in equipment, supplies, to help the Kosovo police force, okay? We brought all kinds of things. We donated all kinds of things just to serve the mission. And I spent four years out there, okay, four years of my life in Kosovo, and I travelled all over Kosovo, off-roaded all over Kosovo.

I used to know Kosovo like the back of my hand, okay? It's a beautiful country. I went all over, and the nice thing about it was I felt more at ease and at home in Kosovo than I did in the other former Yugoslavian countries because Kosovo Albanians had a lot of the same culture that I grew up with,

yeah? And all throughout I had my mission that I had to do for my job, but I also did other things outside my job.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: May I ask you something? Sorry to interrupt, but you said that Kosovo reminded you of home in a way, your culture. Did it come almost like a culture shock to you when you found out that the Kosovar culture is not as far off as your culture?

Aiman K. Zureikat: No. No. And the reason it did not, because as I moved from Croatia down into Bosnia, Bosnia is also, Bosnians have some of that culture. So it was, that initial, well, that initial adaptation to it was in Bosnia, so I wasn't really shocked. And when I went down further south, it's just, you know, hey, from what I know about history and what the Ottoman Empire did, I knew that, you know, some of those culture that's shared between the Arab nation and the Turkish nation, you know, they're similar in a lot of ways.

I knew that some of those influences had hit Bosnia, so, therefore, so, I knew it was gonna be in Kosovo. So, it wasn't really a big shock for me, but it was interesting. And all through my time in Kosovo, I did things that were outside my job. And it is something, you know, you feel emotionally attached, but at the same time, you feel you need to do something. And me and my group did things for the local people, okay, wherever we could help, we did.

So, you created connections, almost communities with the local people that you felt like they deserved more than what you guys were giving. We did things, we did things all over, you know, donated time, donated things, helped, you know, wherever we can. So, it's, I feel a big attachment to Kosovo.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: That's lovely, that's very, very heartfelt. Now, I wanted to ask you, even though the citizens saw an amount of excruciating things that no one should ever see, what were some points that civilians didn't get to see, but you guys had to see and witness?

Aiman K. Zureikat: During the war, when you guys are going all throughout Kosovo, helping people. The death and the destruction that happened in the countryside of the different military units, elements, the equipment, the death toll, things that people did not see. A lot of people were not exposed to it, but they would hear of it, okay?

Ana Lisa Zureikat: Do you think that people fabricated a lot of the things that they told others about what actually happened?

Aiman K. Zureikat: You know, people do tend to exaggerate. However, a lot of the things that people talk about, did happen. Some of it might not be the way they told it, but yeah, it did happen. I mean,

when they, the things that you hear where people take truckloads of Kosovo Albanians and they're lost forever, okay?

The way the Serbs have treated the people, like they were second-class citizens or animals. You know, their disrespect for the human being and their disrespect because of their culture or their religion, it was really sad because here's the problem. In Kosovo, you had Christians and Muslims, okay? So, it wasn't about religion, it was about ethnic cleansing. They wanted to take over. They wanted to get rid of this entire race that's been there for many, many years, okay? And the sad thing, they also tried to do it to their own people. So that should tell you something about the Serbs.

I mean, they tried to annihilate the Serbs Bosnians who were Slavs. The Herzegovinians, Slavs. They wanted to take over Croatia, Slavs. Wanted to take over everywhere, their own people. So that tells you how sick they are in the mind and how sick they are emotionally, the way they are brought up to hate, okay? And there's a lot of hate all over, even in Kosovo. But you know what? It's a hard wound to heal. Unfortunately, it's gonna take generations, but it's also gonna have to be worked on from both sides.

You know, I think that as a nation, ideology should not be dictated to the people that hate ideology. Because if you look at what's going on in Kosovo and Serbia, you guys have businesses that cross the borders, you do business across lines, okay? Yeah, there's hate, but you're still working together. But at the same time, there's conflict while we are trying to work together.

Oh yeah, there's always gonna be conflicts because of ideology, okay? And the problem is you can't always put somebody that was there militarily in charge because he's got so much hate. He's done so much. He's seen so much that he's not looking out for the best of what's going on. He's looking out for his people in an ideological way and not in a compassionate way. Compassion is not there, okay?

And I understand, well, you don't know what they've done to my people. Yes, I do. I've seen it in my own country. I've seen hate. I've seen people killed for ideology. The Palestinians tried to liberate Palestine in Jordan by doing a civil war in Jordan. That's the same as the Serbs basically going after their own people. Yeah, and then people get surprised when the Serbians went after Kosovars, but little did they know that they were doing even worse things to their own people.

Yeah, it's...So, if you're going to do it to your own, who aren't you gonna do it to? That's where you have the brainwashing, the military ideology, the nationalistic ideology, okay?

Now, it probably changed from the ethnic to religious, probably, or there's both, you know?

Ana Lisa Zureikat: Mm-hmm. Yeah. Now, may I ask you, how did your time in Kosovo come to an end?

Aiman K. Zureikat: Well, so what they did is the mission change and the guy that took over for me in Bosnia became my boss because they took Kosovo and put it under his operational control, okay? He had about 200 police officers, I had about 600.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: Wow!

Aiman K. Zureikat: So, what they did is move my boss and bring in another guy to run Bosnia. And my boss moved into Kosovo with me because it's a bigger operation. Business expanded and we decided to open up an office in Singapore, business development.

And my boss at the time, they moved them to Singapore, yeah?

My problem is they brought in a vice president who really didn't care much for me. And the guy in Bosnia used to work for me in Haiti, was one of my cops. They were good friends. However, they wanted somebody with more experience to be overseeing the project.

So, they brought in this retired colonel. And the operation in Bosnia was coming down and I was still running the project, and this colonel did not like me. And I didn't like him either.

So, we were also trying to develop business in the Middle East. So, my vice president, actually now he became the president of the company, decided to move me to the Middle East. I was a program manager in Kosovo. He moved me to the Middle East, and I became the Vice President for information technology business development. But also, it was a way to stash me in some place because things were heating up in Baghdad.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: So, from everything that you've told me, I've noticed a pattern that when things really start to heat up, they always turn to you to come help with the issue because they know that you have experience, you know how to analyze the situation, do's and don'ts.

Am I wrong, Ki?

Aiman K. Zureikat: No. One of the things that used to call me in my old company was basically "the mechanic." "And a lot of times, like I said, they sent me down to Angola. The reason they sent me down there was because we were having problems and I helped clean up and put them back on track. But they sent me back to Bosnia and helped me in Sarajevo before I went to Afghanistan because I was also working on fixing a couple of problems in Bosnia.

So, they always know where to go to get things done and done right. Because one of the things that my dad instilled in me and my mom is basically honesty, loyalty, and hard work.

And the type of work I was doing, pardon my language, you can't bullshit your way through. If you see things, you gotta say things. You can't let things go because in a war zone, if you let things go, people die.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: So, one slip up...

Aiman K. Zureikat: Go ahead.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: It takes one slip up, correct?

Aiman K. Zureikat: Yep. I don't know what I would do if people die because of me. I don't think I could live with myself mentally and emotionally.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: Speaking of mentally and emotionally, from what you saw in the war, how was it adjusting back to your normal life after seeing what you saw, doing what you had to do in Kosovo?

Aiman K. Zureikat: It's not easy. You can never adjust. Your demons are always with you. You become short-tempered. Sometimes it's hard to control. I don't like a lot of things that I have done in the past. The past seven years have been very hard on me. I... It's hard. It's difficult. You know, I get up every day because I want to be there for my kids. But inside, emotionally, I feel like I'm crumbled in. It's difficult, but I feel things are getting better.

I... You know, I had friends in recent years that they couldn't handle the pressure. And... They went crazy and ended their lives. You know, that's, to me, that's a coward. That's a cowardly act. My religious beliefs, what I believe in my heart, is what's stopping me from doing stupid things like that. But I do things. I love what I did. I love what I have done. I'm proud of it. I wish I'm still in it, but my health. And people think I'm too old to do something. But it's in my DNA, and I love to do it. It's engraved in you. Yeah.

Things in my life happen, I will share with my kids once I see them. So, they may understand my DNA a little better. So, they may understand why I am the way I am. So, they might understand some of my actions. Mentally, emotionally, it's not easy being me. I hold things inside, and that caused me to have open-heart surgery. I am my worst enemy. In fact, I expect nothing but perfection out of myself. I'm hard on myself.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: I was just about to say, do you feel like you're too hard on yourself?

Aiman K. Zureikat: Yes, I do. But people that look at me and see me from the outside, they appreciate what I've done. They like me as a friend. They don't know how to take me sometimes. They like my honesty, and, you know, that's that. But life... is nothing but life.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: I can say one thing. I know this may not heal things for you, as much as I wish I could, and a nation could help you heal, and thank you for everything that you've done. Just know that if it wasn't for you and your missions that you did to come help out our country, we would be

nowhere today. We would be part of Serbia, probably. And I can say from my nation, we thank you for your service and everything that you did to make it to the point where we are today as a country.

Aiman K. Zureikat: Well, I was, you're welcome. It's... Kosovo is in my heart, has been and always will be. I have my beautiful kids there. It was a wonderful life for me out there. Have a lot of close friends, have family, have good memories and good friendships. In fact, one of the guys that worked with me throughout the Kosovo missions has retired and settled in Kosovo. He is still there.

He's a former Special Forces guy. So, but anyway, yeah, I went to the Middle East and from there developed some business. And in 2003, started daily conversations while the war was going on in Baghdad. And I had to go to Qatar, I had to go to Baghdad. And that was a treacherous trip because Kuwaitis did not want to let me get a multi-entry, multi-exit visa. And that was solved later on, years later on, we found out what the problem was. In fact, it was funny, I went to Kuwait on a Friday, I was back in Fort Worth on a Saturday because the Kuwaitis would not let me in. So, I came back on the same airplane I left on, and I was able to make it to my daughter's soccer game.

Yeah, so I went to Baghdad and basically, I took a taxi from Amman, Jordan to Baghdad, driving through Fallujah and Ramadi, 12 hours, no weapons, me and the taxi driver. I came out of Baghdad the day before my oldest daughter was born. That's amazing, that's amazing. Listen, Kosovo has a lot of people, heritage that goes back thousands of years, culture that goes back hundreds of years.

The thing I learned about Kosovo Albanians, they're hard workers, they are family men and women, family means a lot and they are hard-headed. Acceptance of what is going on in the region is very difficult for the hard-headed Albanians and for the hard-headed Serbians.

It needs to start now with this generation to bring up kids that are more level-headed, that understand living in a global society, understand about what's in the past, in the past, they need to look for the future, for a brighter future for the country, for the kids, for the world.

The wars that are going on right now are all a waste of time and a waste of life.

I'm 63 years old and I realized a long time ago the things that we do as countries are not always for positive things. They're more financial, they're more economical, they're set up to make the rich richer, and I believe population control. It's unfortunate that people try to put people against each other. We have organizations, we have people like George Soros that are not there to make things better. They're there to cause issues and it's unfortunate. You know, we're all God's children. You know, at the end of the day, it's love, peace, and family.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: Of course. Now, I would like to ask you one last question before we finish off. Would you do it all again?

Aiman K. Zureikat: If they gave me an airline ticket tomorrow, yeah.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: I love that answer.

Aiman K. Zureikat: Well, I will do it. Let me tell you. I will do anything to help people anywhere and everywhere. Even if I went in there as an aid worker, I would do it. That life made me younger, made me feel so alive. People think I'm nuts. I'm not. I spent the best times of my life operating all over the world, helping people, helping places, and helping my adopted country in implementing policies that were put there to better the situation.

Whether I left it better or worse, I don't know. It's the country, the people of the country, are the ones that judge that. Kosovars are the judge of what I've done. What I've done is basically my job, but Kosovo left a great place in my heart. The people, the friends that I have out there, the friendships that I made are always here.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: I can say one thing on behalf of the nation. You bettered our country, and we will always be in great debt to you.

Aiman K. Zureikat: Well, thank you.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: I wanted to say thank you for your time and telling us your story from your perspective on the Kosovo War and telling us about your life that brought you to help our nation while it was crumbling.

Aiman K. Zureikat: Now it's rebuilding, and that's a great thing. Thank you.

Ana Lisa Zureikat: Thank you!