

LEFT BEHIND



A Brief Assessment of the Biden Administration's Strategic Failures during the Afghanistan Evacuation



The United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Minority Report
February 2022

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LETTER OF TRANSMITTAL

U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
February 2022

Dear colleagues,

Over the past 20 years, the United States and its allies were engaged in a military and diplomatic mission in Afghanistan. Our mission made great achievements in combatting terrorism and supporting the rights of the citizens of Afghanistan, particularly women and girls. While there is substantial disagreement about the policy to leave Afghanistan, Americans share an outrage in how the United States withdrew last August and what that failure has done to America's standing.

Despite countless warnings that the Taliban had the ability to take the country swiftly, the Biden Administration failed to properly plan a coordinated evacuation of U.S. citizens, Afghans, and allied partners. The administration waited until less than a day before Kabul fell to make senior leadership decisions on organizing and executing a withdrawal, which proved to be too little too late. While the Department of Defense and Department of State pulled off a major feat in the number of people evacuated, more of our partners could have been saved if proper planning had been conducted.

There are many issues to investigate and address, but this report will describe how the Biden Administration's failure of duty allowed for a quick Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and a botched withdrawal that left hundreds of Americans and tens of thousands of Afghan partners behind. The United States will have to deal with the fallout of this failure for years to come.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "J. Risch".

James E. Risch
Ranking Member

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On August 31, 2021, the United States concluded its military engagement in Afghanistan. The failure of senior Biden Administration leadership to plan for this fateful day resulted in a rushed evacuation of hundreds of thousands of Americans, third-country nationals, and Afghans. It left behind hundreds, possibly thousands, of American citizens, tens of thousands of Afghan partners, and a legacy of American betrayal of allies.

The Biden Administration ignored numerous intelligence reports about the potential for a speedy Taliban takeover of Kabul, decided to abandon Bagram Air Base, disregarded dissent cables from the State Department (State), failed to plan an evacuation until it was too late, and in the process, abandoned tens of thousands of Afghan partners. The administration did not make a decision on evacuations from Afghanistan until a National Security Council Deputies Committee meeting on August 14, mere hours before the fall of Kabul.

One of the most important roles of the U.S. government is for the protection of American citizens overseas. The Biden Administration failed to properly plan for an evacuation despite countless warning signs that a Taliban takeover was imminent. The U.S. government failed to even account for the number of people who would need to be evacuated, let alone for how this evacuation would occur.

When the decision to evacuate was belatedly made, the evacuation effort was severely hampered by the earlier decision to close Bagram Air Base. This air base would have improved the ability for evacuations to take place and its abandonment allowed for the release of thousands of extremists, including one who participated in the terrorist attack which killed 13 U.S. service members.

From August 15 to August 31, the United States completed its largest air evacuation. However, this evacuation was marred by a lack of planning, coordination, and communication. The United States failed to establish a clear system of how to contact evacuees and processes to allow them into the airport. The result left American citizens, U.S. legal permanent residents, and Afghan allies abandoned to the fate of the Taliban regime.

Over the 20 years of military and diplomatic engagement, the U.S. government worked with thousands of Afghans who were eligible for the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program. This program has been impaired by numerous challenges, including but not limited to insufficient staffing, poor coordination, and the inability of State and the Department of Defense to verify employment. These challenges predate this administration, but it is remarkable that the Biden Administration took minimal action from the time of President Biden's withdrawal announcement in order to address these deficiencies.

In conducting interviews for this report, it is clear that despite substantial failures of leadership and foresight, it was junior and mid-level civil servants, Foreign Service and military officers, and enlisted personnel who would help mitigate a number of issues through extraordinary feats. In fact, it was the heroic initiative taken by these people that prevented the evacuation from being even more disastrous than it could have been. Our diplomats on the ground and in Washington outdid themselves, working around the clock while the enemy circled, with few, if any, resources outside of the Hamid Karzai International Airport.

Any criticisms found in this report are not of the many people mentioned above, or their herculean effort. America, and the myriad Afghans they helped, owe them an enormous debt of gratitude, and I am thankful for their dedication and excellence.



CHAPTER 1

150 DAYS

TIME TO PLAN

On April 14, 2021, President Biden announced the full withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan by September 11, which provided 150 days to plan for and execute the withdrawal. Within this time, the U.S. military would need to remove its equipment and personnel while the State Department (State), U.S. Agency for International Development, and other U.S. agencies and contractors would need to ensure American citizens, legal permanent residents, and other Afghans who supported the U.S. government and our mission could leave quickly and safely. While Afghanistan was stable in April, President Biden's interagency should have begun the planning process for a mass evacuation if it became necessary.

The U.S. military immediately began its rapid withdrawal of personnel and equipment, and President Biden curtailed U.S. support for the Afghan security forces. Within two weeks, the U.S. military had conducted approximately 60 flights to remove people and equipment, and completed roughly 5% of the withdrawal. By July 6, U.S. Central Command reported it had

completed more than 90% of the withdrawal process.¹

During the withdrawal, many senior leaders in Washington failed to recognize or adapt to worsening conditions on the ground. Meanwhile, those in the field, who could not wait, were forced to develop impromptu plans without guidance from senior leadership.

State should have stepped up its accounting of U.S. citizens and improved the process for Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants and others who assisted the United States. In May, there were 17,000 principle SIV-eligible applicants in Afghanistan who were in the pipeline, and when dependents were included, the number would be substantially higher. Beyond those who had applied, neither State nor the Department of Defense (DoD) could even estimate how many Afghans were eligible for the program. As we now know from additional applicants, this number is in the tens of thousands. With the Taliban hunting down those who had assisted the United States, State should have planned to relocate a sizable amount of these people. The administration only took

minimal steps to address the backlog and neglected to take significant steps or apply the appropriate resources to address the magnitude of the issue.

Further, a noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO) would entail relocating tens of thousands of people and require the support of allies and partners, but State did not officially reach out to regional partners until the middle of July, and DoD did not engage the Qatari government about using facilities there until the middle of August. Offers from the Pakistani government to host evacuees were rebuffed. To its immense credit, the Qatari government was quick to help, and roughly 57,000 people moved through Qatar during the NEO. As one Foreign Service officer noted, it was Qatar's support "that encouraged other Gulf partners to provide assistance."² Had the Qatari government refused to help, many of these people would likely still be in Afghanistan. However, even with its support, conditions on the ground in Qatar were incredibly difficult for the first couple of days of the evacuation. U.S. airmen and soldiers accomplished amazing things during this time, but prudent planning would have spared them many of the horrors they had to endure.

DoD's rapid departure from Afghanistan and President Biden's decision to cease air support for the Afghan security forces produced problems later in the withdrawal. The United States abandoned Bagram Air Base on July 4, without even telling the Afghan base commander. In the process, the administration abandoned a facility that could have been critical to a better evacuation. At the same time, cutting support to the Afghan National Security Forces eliminated their ability to properly defend the country and set the conditions for the rapid fall of Kabul.

The absence of U.S. forces left other U.S. personnel in Afghanistan exposed. On August 12, the Biden Administration sent 3,000 troops back into Afghanistan to improve security for

the departure of other U.S. agency personnel. Two days later, the United States began a NEO and the president sent a total of 6,500 troops to help facilitate the evacuation. A slower military withdrawal from garrison locations would have helped other U.S. agencies manage their own departure.

The interagency failed to keep DoD and State in sync with each other. As the manager of the interagency process, the National Security Council (NSC) had a responsibility to coordinate the withdrawal of all U.S. personnel and the safe operations of anyone who would be left behind.

Having wasted 115 days, the NSC did not conduct its first senior meeting to discuss the withdrawal until August 14 at 3:30pm, just hours before Kabul fell, when evacuations became life or death for Americans, Afghans, and U.S. military personnel.³

In the latest National Security Council Memorandum (NSM-2) to renew the National Security Council system, the Deputies Committee (DC) "shall review and monitor the work of the National Security Council (NSC) interagency process and consider, where appropriate, resolve policy issues affecting national security."⁴ The DC "shall also focus significant attention on policy implementation and strategic planning."⁵ Comprised of deputies from each of the relevant national security agencies, the DC is routinely tasked with solving policy issues, including topics like contingency

planning for Afghanistan and the imminent fall of Kabul. In practice, the DC meets for roughly one hour to discuss national security matters and then assigns each regular member or special attendees tasks to accomplish the overall policy goal. The DC, therefore, was the senior most forum for analyzing the warning signs coming from Kabul, implementing policy choices to protect national security interests, as well as tasking effective relocation measures for American citizens and our Afghan partners. There is no record provided that the DC met any time before August 14 to begin discussions on safe and orderly relocations out of Afghanistan.

The summary of conclusions from the DC meeting on August 14 included actions which should have been taken months in advance, including but not limited to: reaching out to third countries to serve as transit points, alerting locally employed U.S. embassy staff about relocation, and standing up a communication/manifest team for flights out of Kabul. It is inexcusable that the DC met at such a late date.

The remaining two weeks were defined by chaos, and impromptu efforts to manage that chaos by U.S. personnel on the ground. U.S. commitments to help NATO allies evacuate their personnel were tested, and the credibility of the United States was at stake.

The Biden Administration's senior leaders have argued the disaster in Afghanistan was inevitable and there was nothing anyone could do about it. These arguments are indeed true, but only because after squandering 115 days, events would control them, not the other way around.

CHAPTER 2

AMERICAN CITIZENS IN AFGHANISTAN

“After the president has announced his decision, before the latest surge in violence, in the context of this ongoing surge in violence, we have always been engaged in contingency planning. This was a contingency that we had foreseen. This was a contingency that we had planned for.”

State Department Spokesman, Ned Price, August 12, 2021⁶

“We were taken by surprise. It is undeniable that we were surprised at the pace by which the Taliban were able to pursue their territorial advances and the speed with which they encroached on Kabul.”

State Department Spokesman, Ned Price, August 17, 2021⁷

A FAILURE TO PLAN FOR A WORST CASE EVACUATION OF AMERICANS FROM AFGHANISTAN

In order to facilitate planning for the potential evacuation of American citizens abroad, the State Department (State) directs each embassy and consulate to submit an annual report on the estimated number of Americans in its area of responsibility. This report, known as the F-77 report, plays a pivotal role in planning for and conducting evacuations.

However, based on discussions with Embassy Kabul staff responsible for the evacuation of Americans from Afghanistan, the F-77 report is “50% art and 50% science and educated guesswork.”⁸ Embassy staff further highlighted the process is largely broken and prone to error. American registration with the

embassy is entirely voluntary through the Smart Traveler Enrollment System, which is designed to keep Americans apprised of safety conditions in foreign nations. In addition to Americans who choose not to register at all, some may choose to register with the embassy upon arrival to the country, but may not inform the embassy upon departure. General interest in registering with the embassy may ebb and flow based on the security conditions and the likelihood of an evacuation. According to some at State, the F-77 report for Afghanistan was driven by informal advice to “guess big.”⁹ These inaccurate guesses then informed other decisions and messaging.

To compensate for the lack of visibility, State often relies on host governments to provide greater accuracy regarding the number of Americans on the ground. According to Embassy Kabul staff, “Had this been Austria, we would

have known the number of Americans down to the last person. The Austrian government would track this information with a high degree of accuracy. The Afghan government, on the other hand, did not have this information.”¹⁰

Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in response to questions from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, underscored the challenges with accounting Americans abroad, “U.S. citizens are not required to register with the Department of State or an embassy when they arrive in or depart from a country, and as a result we have no means of providing an exact number of U.S. citizens currently in Afghanistan.”¹¹

On August 17, 2021, and at the height of evacuation efforts, senior State Department officials leading the evacuation task force indicated there were 10,000 to 15,000 Americans in Afghanistan, according to the F-77 report.¹² By August 31, when the president ordered an end to evacuation operations, State and DoD had evacuated approximately 6,000 American citizens. Even taking the most conservative estimates from the F-77 report, this meant the United States left at least a few thousand people behind.

However, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, during testimony to the House Foreign Affairs Committee in September, asserted that only a “small number” of American citizens, “approximately 100-150 remained in Afghanistan who still wished to depart. We are in very close contact with them and are assigning teams to each of the remaining Americans who wish to depart.”¹³ In testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Blinken underscored that State was “...intensely focused on the safety of Americans in Afghanistan. In March, we began urging them to leave the country. In total, between March and August, we sent 19 specific messages with that warning, as well as offers of help, including financial assistance to pay for plane tickets.”¹⁴

According to General Mark Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, “the President made strategic decisions to reduce American forces to zero by August 31. On August 25, we were asked to re-examine if we should go beyond August 31. You have to know where AMCITs [American citizens] are and how to get them. From the data State had, it was unclear how many were left or if they wanted to depart.”¹⁵ Chairman Milley’s comments underscore that a continued lack of State visibility on the number of remaining Americans coupled with the threat of continued Islamic State attacks was a primary factor in DoD’s recommendation to the president to end the evacuation 11 days early.

To highlight the last-minute nature of planning for the evacuation, it was not until the August 14 National Security Council (NSC) Deputies Committee (DC) meeting that State was formally tasked to “immediately stand up a communications / manifest team responsible for notifying individuals from various priority lists” – including Americans.¹⁶ At the same meeting, the White House tasked State to “...work to identify as many countries as possible to serve as transit points” for evacuees.¹⁷ State would spend the next several days issuing a flurry of demarches to elicit support for evacuation operations – leaving little room for diplomatic error. Regardless of estimates on the pace of the fall of Kabul, these actions were inexcusably late and should have been considered as part of worst-case contingency planning performed months earlier following President Biden’s withdrawal announcement in April.

These are not the only instances of last minute planning. State did not deploy Ambassador John Bass, charged with untangling the logistical challenges impeding evacuations, to assist with evacuation efforts until August 17 – long after he could influence unfolding events on the ground. By the time Ambassador Bass arrived in Kabul, chaos reigned at Hamid Karzai

International Airport (HKIA), the die was largely cast, and only 14 days remained until President Biden would pull the plug on the entire operation. Similarly, the Department of Defense (DoD) suffered from delays in sending senior leadership. Ambassador Bass' counterpart, Major General Donahue, did not deploy to HKIA until August 17 following DoD's emergency activation of a U.S.-based contingency response force – in this case the 82d Airborne Division.

On August 20, five days after the White House issued last-minute planning guidance at the NSC DC meeting, the Transportation Department finally issued an order allowing foreign carriers to conduct U.S.-approved evacuation flights to U.S. airports.¹⁸ The administration activated the Civil Reserve Air Fleet (CRAF) on August 22.¹⁹ The CRAF, which allows U.S. airlines under a contractual obligation to augment U.S. military airlift during emergencies, was barely used and did little to impact evacuation operations. In mid-August the interagency hosted “tabletop exercises” to work through various contingency scenarios. According to participants, the exercises could not make up for the lack of time.²⁰

Despite the president's withdrawal announcement on April 14, and the intervening time period to plan and refine estimates, it is clear State did not conduct prudent planning necessary for a successful evacuation operation. It is also now clear there were substantially more than just 150 Americans remaining in Afghanistan that wished to depart, as Secretary Blinken previously claimed. Since August 31, the Biden Administration has evacuated at least an additional 479 American citizens.²¹ As of a mid-December 2021 press statement, State claimed it was in touch with “fewer than a dozen U.S. citizens who want to leave Afghanistan, are prepared to depart, and have the necessary travel documents.”²² However, according to a briefing around the same time with the Coordinator for Afghanistan Relocation Efforts, Ambassador

Beth Jones, the number who wish to depart, with or without travel documents, is more than 100 and growing.²³

Apart from the confusion over the number of Americans left behind, the Biden Administration's characterizations of “Americans left behind in Afghanistan” were problematic. Instead of reinforcing the administration's commitment to continue to evacuate Americans, Secretary Blinken instead parsed between dual nationals and American citizens claiming the remainder were “...dual citizens living in Afghanistan for years, decades, generations. Deciding whether or not to leave the place that they know as home is a wrenching decision.”²⁴ Dual citizens faced the same security threats and deserved the same efforts to depart Afghanistan as American citizens. The effort to distinguish between dual citizens and American citizens is a distinction without a difference, and appears to have been a messaging tactic to minimize the number of American citizens left behind.

Despite the deeply flawed execution of the evacuation, comments from State officials in the field, and last-minute planning directives revealed in interagency documents, Secretary Blinken defended State's planning efforts. He argued “the safety and security of U.S. citizens and our personnel is my highest priority. U.S. Embassy Kabul and various Department offices participated with the interagency in noncombatant evacuation operations (NEO) planning discussions throughout the spring and summer of 2021. Planning efforts included a range of evacuation scenarios.”²⁵

Yet, it is clear not all at State shared Secretary Blinken's assessment of planning efforts. As early as July 13, 23 U.S. Embassy Kabul staff sent a cable to Secretary Blinken and the Director of Policy Planning, Salman Ahmed, through State's dissent channel. According to media reports, embassy staff were eager to get the cable into the secretary's hands as they were firsthand witnesses to the deteriorating security

situation on the ground. Specifically, staff “warned of rapid territorial gains by the Taliban and the subsequent collapse of Afghan security forces, and offered recommendations on ways to mitigate the crisis and speed up an evacuation.”²⁶ Further highlighting the disconnect between State headquarters and officials in the field, media reports indicate Secretary Blinken largely took no action after receiving the dissent cable as “contingency planning was already underway.”²⁷ Despite repeated requests, State has refused to provide the Senate Foreign Relations Committee with a copy of the July 13 dissent cable and documentation of changes, if any, the secretary made as a result of the cable.

A Foreign Service officer (FSO) in the Middle East region reinforced State’s lack of appreciation for the disaster confronting them in the field. “We received no guidance from Washington” on the potential for a NEO, “like I had when stationed in Iraq during the Islamic State offensive.”²⁸ This FSO also noted that in Iraq, they routinely planned for a NEO to occur. Instead, in the absence of guidance from main State, embassies in the region took initiative and established their own ad hoc task forces to work the Afghanistan evacuation in the absence of senior State leadership.

The New York Times interviews with people at the center of planning efforts revealed the Biden administration “consistently believed they had the luxury of time. Military commanders overestimated the will of the Afghan forces to fight for their own country and underestimated how much the American withdrawal would destroy their confidence.”²⁹ Despite a drumbeat of intelligence assessments that continued to shrink the time estimate until Kabul’s collapse, the Biden Administration did not change course until it was too late.

ACCOUNTING FOR AND PROTECTING AMERICANS - A VITAL NATIONAL SECURITY OBJECTIVE

The protection of Americans abroad is among the highest priorities of our diplomatic and military missions overseas. Formalized in Executive Order 12656, primary responsibility for the protection and evacuation of Americans from threatened areas falls on State, with the support of DoD. Specifically, the Secretary of State is charged with:

“Protection or evacuation of United States citizens and nationals abroad and safeguarding their property abroad, in consultation with the Secretaries of Defense and Health and Human Services.”³⁰

NEOs from hostile and non-permissive environments are among the most complex interagency undertakings, and require extensive rehearsal and coordination. As a result, a memorandum of agreement is necessary between State and DoD that further refines the duties and responsibilities of each department. While not in the scope of this report, whether this document and the accompanying checklist are sufficient to address the range of issues the executive branch faces during a NEO remains an open question.

ACCOUNTING FOR AMERICANS REQUIRES MORE SCIENCE AND LESS ART

As the protection of Americans abroad remains one of the highest priority for our diplomatic missions, it is clear there are not sufficient processes in place to support that mission. As evidenced by the Afghanistan evacuation, the F-77 reporting process is deeply flawed and does not provide the executive branch

with sufficient data to plan and execute a NEO. Worse, many of those involved in the Afghanistan evacuation accepted the process as broken, and made minimal attempts to fix it.

As early as 2007, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) identified weaknesses in State's planning for evacuations and crisis management. Specifically, GAO found that F-77 reporting required improvement and identified weaknesses in crisis management training and evacuation preparation.³¹ Fourteen years later and following the uneven evacuation from Afghanistan, it is clear these deficiencies persist.

In addition to flaws in State's processes to account for Americans, Embassy Kabul staff pointed to the inability of the Afghan government to provide accurate data on the number of Americans in the country as a contributing factor.³² However, the lack of host nation accounting for Americans is likely not unique to Afghanistan and will be a persistent feature in countries with weak central governments and inefficient accounting systems. Further, it is exactly these countries that are most prone to rapid onsets of instability requiring the evacuation of Americans.

State must develop a new system, less reliant on host nation data or Americans to volunteer their status. As we have seen with COVID-19 screening and contact tracing around the world, there are technological or process solutions that would likely help State account for Americans abroad. Additionally, these solutions should not be applied to every country. Instead, State should identify those countries most likely to require an evacuation and implement enhanced accountability procedures for Americans in those locations.

While administration officials were hesitant to address lessons learned during the evacuation operation, it should now be a pressing national security concern to address gaps in the training and process that contributed to the breakdown

in the Afghanistan evacuation. Accounting for Americans in conflict-prone areas must be a central focus of State reviews of the Afghanistan withdrawal. Additionally, there should be robust discussion between State and DoD to determine if the memorandum of agreement between the two departments adequately addresses contingency planning for NEOs.

FAILURE TO PLAN FOR LOCAL PARTNERS

On numerous occasions in the lead up to the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan, President Biden claimed his administration “inherited a deadline. We did not inherit a plan.” The Biden Administration points to this as one of the reasons that led to the chaotic scenes at HKIA, which dominated the news cycle in August 2021. But, as Commander in Chief of the United States, he was ultimately responsible for setting the constraints under which the evacuation operation was carried out. The fact is, the deadline the president inherited was contingency based – tied to certain conditions on the ground, conditions which his administration actively ignored and discounted at the expense of American citizens and local Afghan partners.³³

President Biden and those around him were repeatedly warned about the threat the Taliban posed to the stability and safety of Afghans who had put their lives on the line to support the U.S. mission. These were the very same people who President Biden pledged to protect. In a July press conference, for example, President Biden pledged to “take on Afghan nationals who worked side-by-side with U.S. forces...so their families are not exposed to danger...our message to those men and women is clear: there is a home for you in the United States if you so choose, and we will stand with you just as you stood with us.”³⁴

At the same time, senior Biden

Administration officials claim they were blindsided by the Taliban's rapid takeover of Afghanistan's capital city, Kabul, on August 15. Just days later, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley posited, "there was nothing I or anyone else saw that indicated a collapse of [the Afghan] army and government in 11 days."³⁵ However, for months, open source reports, backed by analysis from Biden Administration officials, warned of the increasingly likely prospect of Kabul's collapse and the general threat to stability in Afghanistan. In early July, an internal State dissent cable underscored these concerns, calling on the administration to begin collecting data on Afghan refugees and preparing to begin emergency evacuations flights no later than August 1.³⁶ Assessments from the intelligence community issued around the same time echoed similar concerns, predicting the Afghan government could collapse in as little as six months following the U.S. military withdrawal. By early August, DoD officials were predicting Kabul could collapse in as little as 90 days; others, cited by the *Washington Post*, indicated "it could happen in as little as a month."³⁷

Civil society organizations expressed similar concerns about the rapid deterioration in the Afghan security environment. In meetings with Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff, these organizations underscored the growing threat to Afghan partners, and stressed the need for the Biden Administration to take immediate steps to shore up their security. As early as February, organizations were attempting to engage with the administration to make this a priority. One particular organization, No One Left Behind, wrote that "since 2018, we have documented over 300 incidents in which interpreters who applied for SIVs were targeted and assassinated as they waited for their visa applications to be processed. We expect that number to increase dramatically moving forward."³⁸

Yet, as was previously highlighted, it was not until August 14 that the Biden Administration took steps to address the security risks to our local partners, despite increasingly dire predictions from the U.S. intelligence community and reports of increased risk to our Afghan partners. The increase in Taliban violence over the course of 2020, and into 2021, should have prompted concern within the administration, leading to a greater focus on planning for the protection of those who had served the U.S. mission over the past 20 years. Yet, as detailed in subsequent portions of this report, the Biden Administration's efforts to step up planning for the evacuation of our partners and allies tragically left much to be desired.

LOCALLY EMPLOYED STAFF

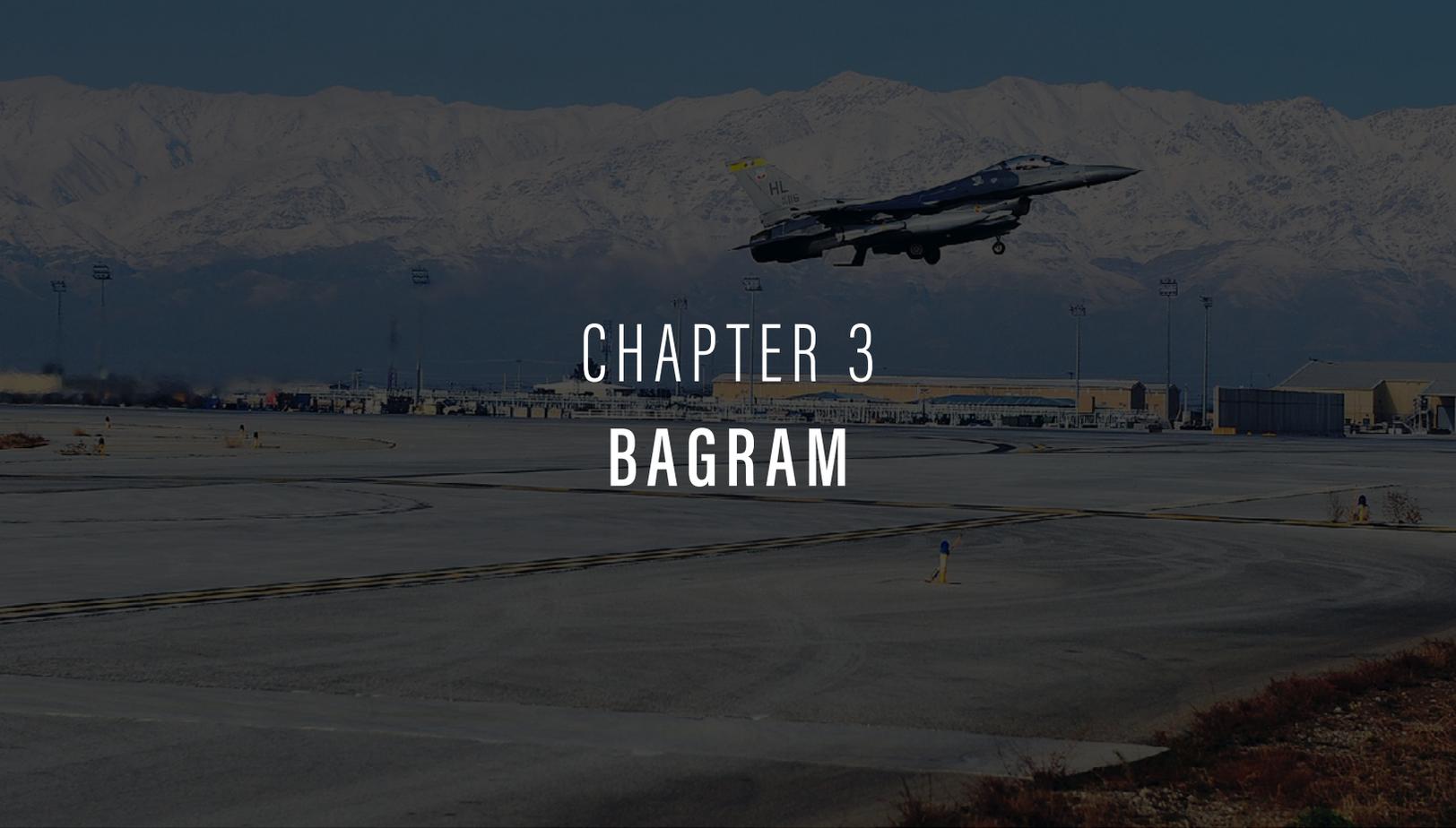
U.S. Embassy Kabul's locally employed staff (LES) population made up a small fraction of the overall U.S. personnel presence, often categorized as "longtime partners." Despite their direct employment by the U.S. government, the NSC only tasked Embassy Kabul with notifying interested LES about the need to sign up for relocation to the United States mere hours before the fall of Kabul.³⁹ Some of these LES were employees of U.S.-sponsored news agencies, like the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), and Voice of America, who had placed great trust in the U.S. commitment and ability to get them to safety should it ever be necessary. Over the years, the Taliban had demonstrated its commitment to brutalizing these employees and their families, even killing four of them since 2016.⁴⁰ When the fall of Kabul became a clear and imminent danger, the administration was notified of these peoples' presence and the need to get them to safety. After all, the U.S. government was continuing to fund their operations and missions in order to promote press freedom in Afghanistan. The need to evacuate vulnerable people with targets on their

backs who were working for the U.S. mission seemed obvious, until it wasn't.⁴¹

With no hope of evacuation due to poor communication and increasingly violent crowds surrounding the gates at HKIA, many LES or contractors affiliated with the United States fled Kabul in hopes of avoiding the wrath of the Taliban. USAGM personnel were classified as LES at the last possible minute to expedite the evacuation of employees and their families, yet 140 employees and their families – roughly 500 people – were left behind. These people are still in Afghanistan awaiting further movement.⁴²

Jamie Fly, President of RFE/RL, stated, “You would have expected that the United States government, which helped create the space for journalism and civil society in Afghanistan over the last 20 years, would have tried to do more over the last several weeks to assist journalists who made a decision that it was best for them to leave the country... but they failed to do that.”⁴³

Concluding a full 24 hours earlier than the anticipated deadline, and amidst bitter disagreements with allies present at HKIA, the U.S. military ended the 20 year war in Afghanistan on August 30, 2021, having evacuated some 123,000 people, including 6,000 Americans. Estimates of those left behind have varied from that day and changed significantly since. *The New York Times* stated on August 25, that “at least 100,000 people, by one estimate” were left behind, to include those with legitimate ties to the U. S. government and who are at serious risk of being tracked down by the Taliban.⁴⁴



CHAPTER 3 BAGRAM

INTRODUCTION

Since pledging to withdraw the remaining U.S. troops in Afghanistan in April 2021, the Biden Administration has worked hard to convince the American people that what happened in Afghanistan was tragically inevitable. During a press conference delivered on August 23, at the height of the noncombatant evacuation operations (NEO), National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan argued to reporters “whether Kabul fell in August or September or December, or next August, the fact is whenever it fell there were going to be American citizens in Kabul who needed to be evacuated...an evacuation operation in a dangerous situation was going to have to happen at some point.”⁴⁵ On August 22, President Biden made similar claims, remarking that “the evacuation of thousands of people from Kabul is going to be hard and painful no matter when it started or when we began... it would have been true if we started a month ago or a month from now. There is no way to evacuate this many people without pain and loss – of heart breaking images you see

on television. It’s just a fact.”⁴⁶

Yet, an analysis of events leading up to the Taliban’s takeover of Kabul suggests the chaotic and haphazard nature of the U.S. withdrawal, which left thousands of Americans and tens of thousands of local Afghan partners behind, was far from inevitable. It was the result of inaction and, in some cases, deliberate decisions taken by senior leadership within the Biden administration. They failed to conduct worst-case contingency planning in the months leading up to the U.S. military withdrawal. The blame cannot be assigned to one agency or department, but it is shared across the senior leadership of the Biden Administration who repeatedly failed to heed interagency warnings, refused to imagine worst-case scenarios, and neglected to coordinate with our partners and allies, making a botched evacuation the only possible outcome.

INTELLIGENCE WARNINGS AND SUPPORT FOR THE AFGHAN SECURITY FORCES

There were numerous warnings across multiple government agencies, both public and private, classified and unclassified, about the rapid deterioration in the Afghan security environment. As early as April 2021, the Department of Defense's (DoD) Lead Inspector General wrote in its report to Congress that the "Taliban's strategy involved overrunning key provincial capitals to set the stage for a military takeover of Kabul."⁴⁷ Then-Commander in Afghanistan, General Austin Miller, similarly noted the rapid loss of government-controlled district centers with alarm.⁴⁸

By late June, concern within the national security community mounted as the Taliban continued to make advances on the ground. These advances were facilitated by President Biden's decision to suspend air, intelligence, and contractor support to the Afghan Air Force, which depended on continued U.S. assistance to maintain its advanced planes and helicopters. As early as January 2021, officials within the administration began to raise concerns over the lack of planning with respect to the long-term maintenance over Afghanistan's advance air fleet – its primary competitive edge over the Taliban. In a recently declassified report, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan (SIGAR) underscored these concerns, warning "that the potential withdrawal of contractors from Afghanistan, in addition to U.S. and Coalition forces, may leave the [Afghan Air Force] AAF and [Special Mission Wing] SMW without the necessary support to sustain and develop the Afghan air forces."⁴⁹ To address these concerns, SIGAR outlined several recommendations, including to "finalize a mitigation plan to ensure the continuation of essential maintenance, operation, and advisory support to the AAF and SMW."⁵⁰ Yet, SIGAR never received a response

from DoD. Lacking both maintenance and U.S.-provided enablers, the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) were unable to defend against Taliban gains. Former National Security Council Director Lisa Curtis compared the decision to pull air support to "pulling the rug out from the Afghans, not only are we withdrawing our troops, but we withdraw their ability to maintain the capabilities that we have provided."⁵¹

Brigadier General Matthew Trollinger and Acting Assistant Secretary David Helvey provided details of DoD's plans for continued support to the ANDSF post U.S.-withdrawal to the Senate Armed Services Committee as early as May 2021. In a hearing titled, "The Transition of All United States and Coalition Forces from Afghanistan and its Implications," a bipartisan group of senators pressed the witnesses on the administration's plans to maintain the Afghan security forces aircraft – the Afghan army's primary comparative advantage over the Taliban. General Trollinger indicated that "we continue to work with them in looking at the potential ways...we can get after continuing to support them to work on their aircraft in-country, and then looking at options whereby we can facilitate more extensive work on those airplanes elsewhere."⁵² DoD even suggested it would assist in the maintenance of Afghan aircraft by video teleconference. Given a rapidly changing battlefield and the need to repair aircraft and get them immediately back to the fight, DoD's proposal was a less than ideal scenario on the eve of the fight for Afghanistan's future. Ultimately, the president's insistence on going to zero force presence by September 11, irrespective of the shifting security dynamics on the ground, substantially constrained DoD planners' ability to devise workable solutions to support the Afghans.

Similarly, on the provision of U.S. air support, administration officials indicated it was a work in progress. On July 22, Chairman of the

Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Milley offered that, “The Afghan security forces have the capacity to sufficiently fight and defend their country, and we will continue to support the Afghan security forces where necessary in accordance with the guidance from the president and the secretary of defense.”⁵³ Despite these words of support, in May, Assistant Secretary Helvey indicated that, “In terms of support to Afghan forces, we are looking at ways to be able to adjust that to an over-the-horizon type of support, things that we can do that does not require a large-scale military presence in that country.”⁵⁴ Of the few strikes that did occur in the lead up to the U.S. military withdrawal, much of DoD’s support was focused on strikes against captured U.S.-origin equipment, rather than slowing the Taliban’s offensive momentum.⁵⁵

Meanwhile, President Biden pressed ahead with the planned U.S. withdrawal date. In fact, in July, as the security environment further deteriorated, the president announced plans to move up the withdrawal from September 11 to August 31, arguing “speed is safety.”⁵⁶ In reality, the Biden Administration was driven by its own arbitrary deadline to withdraw and made no efforts – despite months of time – to craft a plan.

BAGRAM AIR BASE

With the U.S. military withdrawal close to complete and Taliban violence on the rise, the evacuation of Bagram in early July reflects a strategic unforced error that negatively impacted the security of thousands of American citizens and vulnerable Afghans left behind. It has been characterized by one former intelligence official as, “the original sin of the evacuation.”⁵⁷ It meant losing access to a secure airfield, and reduced resource availability as air assets were re-deployed outside Afghanistan, undermining the U.S. ability to move personnel and rapidly evacuate American citizens and local partners in a safe and orderly manner.

As early as June 2021, senior leadership in

President Biden’s cabinet, including National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, began raising concerns with the planned departure from Bagram. Despite internal opposition, President Biden pressed DoD to move forward with its planned departure from the base, affording little consideration for the shifting security landscape.⁵⁸ Thus, security over the country’s largest, and arguably most important, airfield, that also had a 5,000-strong prison population, was quietly handed over to the Afghan security forces in July in the dead of night, with reportedly no advanced notice to local partners.⁵⁹

President Biden has attempted to justify the decision to close Bagram citing recommendations from DoD. In an August press conference, he claimed the military concluded “that Bagram was not much value added, that it was much wiser to focus on Kabul. And so, I followed that recommendation.”⁶⁰ However, according to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, DoD’s mission was to “protect the embassy in order for the embassy personnel to continue to function” with a force size of around 650 to 700 uniformed personnel.⁶¹ He said, “If we were to keep both Bagram and the embassy going that would be a significant number of military forces that would have exceeded what we had. So we had to collapse one or the other, and the decision was made... to go ahead and collapse Bagram. That was briefed and approved...[it was] estimated to be the better tactical solution in accordance with the mission set we were given and in accordance with getting troops down to about 600, 700 number.”⁶² With a force posture constrained by the White House, the cards were stacked against DoD and they were left with no choice but to abandon Bagram.

Forced to focus solely on the number of troops on the ground, DoD recommended shifting the focus to Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA), which, in theory would require a far smaller force presence to secure and defend. Yet, as events in Kabul would soon demonstrate,

the United States was ultimately forced to redeploy more than 6,000 additional forces to mitigate the rising violence and, in the words of President Biden, “accommodate” the military withdrawal. Had these forces not been pulled out until after the civilian numbers had been reduced, the United States would have retained Bagram and conducted a more secure and controlled departure from Afghanistan.⁶³

On August 27, the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, John Hyten, explained the Bagram rationale to senators, “As we walk through withdrawing below 2,500 troops, Bagram was one of the last places we closed down because of its importance. The last forces we left were for embassy security and access to the airport. That was our posture until the situation changed. The situation changed quickly and we made a decision to establish HKIA as focal point for the NEO – a very difficult thing and combat power intensive.”⁶⁴

The decision to depart Bagram and focus on HKIA constrained U.S. evacuation efforts, and led to the concentration of large numbers of people, in the heart of Kabul, making the airport extremely susceptible to attack. Unlike Bagram, which houses a 12,000-foot runway that can accommodate military aircraft of any size, HKIA is relatively small in scale and capacity. HKIA’s capacity limitations undermined evacuation efforts, and its urban surroundings complicated efforts to safely call forward Americans and at-risk Afghans for evacuation. In addition to problems with capacity, HKIA hosted both civilian and military-controlled portions of the airport, substantially complicating coordination for evacuations. Aircraft moving from one side of the airport to other initially required clearance from multiple entities. Surrounded by a ring of mountains and with numerous open and obvious security vulnerabilities, HKIA was also the least secure choice. The only positive attribute of an evacuation focused on HKIA was its proximity to the U.S. embassy.

In testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin later defended the decision to vacate Bagram arguing that retaining the air base would have required “putting as many as 5,000 U.S. troops in harm’s way just to operate and defend.”⁶⁵ The fact remains that Bagram was a much more defensible location than HKIA. Replete with perimeter fencing, stand off from potential threats, ample holding areas, and well-established access control points, Bagram was much better suited for evacuation operations as they unfolded in Afghanistan. Not to mention, President Biden had to send more than 5,000 troops back into Afghanistan to secure HKIA.

Further, when the U.S. military vacated Bagram in early July, it did so without any framework in place to address the nearly 5,000 prisoners detained at the base as was done in 2012.⁶⁶ As a result, when the Taliban captured the base in mid-August, it released thousands of detainees at Parwan prison – including dozens of senior Al Qaeda operatives.⁶⁷ Tragically, a prisoner released from the Parwan prison at Bagram following the U.S. departure was responsible for the twin attacks outside HKIA on August 27, which claimed the lives of 13 U.S. service members and dozens of Afghan civilians – the deadliest day for U.S. forces in Afghanistan in a decade.⁶⁸

A focus on HKIA continues to hamper continued evacuations to this day. The Taliban still have yet to finalize a formal agreement giving a third country responsibility over the airport’s functioning, and airport operations have all but come to a halt as a result.



CHAPTER 4

CHAOS AT HAMID KARZAI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

INTRODUCTION

Forced to rely on Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA), on August 14, 2021, just hours before Taliban forces entered the city, the State Department (State) and Department of Defense (DoD) began a noncombatant emergency operation (NEO) in Kabul to evacuate civilians and nonessential military personnel.⁶⁹ Working together, State and DoD were responsible for the evacuation of thousands of American citizens, their dependents, Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders, U.S. Legal Permanent Residents (LPRs), at-risk Afghans with U.S. visas, and others. Looking back, this operation was set up to fail with a lack of planning, an abbreviated timeline, and not enough dedicated resources to meet the demand of evacuated populations with legal pathways to the United States.

The evacuation should have been designed to facilitate the timely movement of American citizens and others to the airport, provide appropriate security screening and vetting, and assist with the forward movement to designated

safe havens for additional security measures. Instead, the evacuation became marred with bureaucratic delays, major security concerns posed by a hostile encroaching Taliban force, and failure to communicate between interagency partners and those on the ground in need of evacuation. Had the Biden Administration not waited until August 14 to task out the priority list of individuals for relocation, communications processes for manifesting and notifying eligible persons for further travel, the establishment of transit points prior to August 14, and designation and subsequent eligibility for evacuation for locally employed staff (LES), the evacuation may not have been obfuscated by Americans and allies left behind.

As the Taliban drove into Kabul, thousands rushed to HKIA in hopes of being evacuated to the United States or another safe haven. President Biden doubled down on criticism of the evacuation as photos emerged of Afghans clinging to planes taxiing down the runway. Still, the president contended that the United States was not meant to stay there forever.⁷⁰

Crowds swelled to sizes barely controllable by U.S. and coalition forces, forcing personnel to pick and choose who entered the airport dependent on proximity to the gate, their status, and control of crowds. Such conditions and security challenges at the gates of HKIA caused periodic hours-long closures, further hampering efforts to evacuate any populations and angering violent crowds outside the gates.⁷¹

As the lead agency during the NEO, State did not issue consistent or clear guidance for who should make their way to HKIA, and subsequently, who would be granted access to the gates guarded by U.S. personnel. American citizens, the highest priority, became stuck in violent crowds pushing their way to the gate openings. Violence and injury marred the path towards ultimate evacuation on an airplane. Visa holders, including SIV holders, had to become creative with making U.S. personnel aware of their immigration status by flashing passports, visas, hand signs, and eventually, covert symbols for entry into HKIA.⁷² However, the chaos became so intense that many American passport and green card holders would be turned away or the price for getting one American through the gate was a dozen Afghan nationals with no documents or known U.S. affiliation who were subsequently let on planes.⁷³

A hallmark of the botched NEO became the lack of clear communication, including between senior leaders at State and DoD, populations in need of evacuation, as well as Congress, which became a conduit for many on the ground to make their cases known. On August 12, senior Senate leaders were informed of the plan to remove U.S. citizens from Afghanistan, but it took State three days – after the fall of Kabul on August 14 – to establish a generic email for congressional inquiries about cases and individuals.⁷⁴ Congress was finally notified of its establishment at 3:16pm on August 15.⁷⁵ In an emergency situation where thousands of American lives were at stake, simple delays

like this add up.

Further, on August 18, an internal report sent through State titled “SITREP No.36” explained that in three days, congressional staff had sent over 2,500 inquiries to the newly established HAfghanInquiries@state.gov inbox, and further claimed each was receiving a “personalized response.” This inbox did not provide any guidance on who, what, or how to communicate cases or individuals in need of evacuation.⁷⁶ Further guidance from State on the parameters for communication between Congress and State did not arrive until August 23, a full week into the evacuation and seven days before the end of the NEO.⁷⁷ Congressional offices submitted cases about American citizens, LPRs, SIVs, dependents, and refugee referrals to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. Despite Congress transmitting thousands of cases in need of evacuation, State was unable to appropriately staff and monitor this inbox, and did not attempt to open or adjudicate most cases until October.⁷⁸

During the NEO, State announced a new “Priority 2 designation” for Afghans who did not meet SIV criteria but who worked for U.S. forces, contractors, LES, U.S.-funded programs, and other U.S. government affiliated services. This new pathway gave certain eligible and vetted Afghans an additional and expedited opportunity for evacuation.⁷⁹ During the entire evacuation, State received about 26,000 Priority 1 and Priority 2 refugee applications, but State neglected to process these applications until October 21. At that point, State had accepted roughly 2,000 and marked roughly 14,000 as incomplete. Had Congress been more informed of who qualified for both Priority 1 and Priority 2 status, or who was eligible for more immediate evacuation, the backlog could have been streamlined and less Afghan partners left behind.

Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) minority staff collected over 2,500 cases of individuals in need of evacuation between

August 14 and August 30. Each case was unique, but each case was desperate for the attention of the U.S. government to provide them safe passage out of Afghanistan. To this day, it is unclear how many cases were successfully evacuated. In a survey of 50 Senate offices from October 2021, offices submitted more than 16,000 cases to State. At the micro level, their stories highlight the frustration with senior leadership at State and DoD.⁸⁰ Some offices were attempting to save children's lives after they had been injured in the chaos at the gates of HKIA. Others were trying to evacuate interpreters who had saved their life, or the life of someone they knew. Some Senate offices were simply trying to do the right thing and honor the promise made by the U.S. government to Afghan commandos at the conclusion of the military campaign in Afghanistan. In other instances, Biden Administration officials reached out to SFRC in order to help Afghans get out who had supported their agency's work because State and DoD were unresponsive.

In short, the evacuation was poorly planned and executed by senior leadership at both State and DoD, and it was further hindered by a lack of clear and honest communication with Congress. While the Biden Administration has loudly taken credit for evacuating tens of thousands of Afghans from late July to August 30, many of the gaps caused by the Biden Administration's poor planning actually had to be filled by congressional staff, independent veterans groups, non-governmental organizations, and other private entities who coordinated pick-ups, documents, and other means of continued evacuations and advocacy for U.S. partners left behind.

Evacuations during the NEO were not consistent, and many who wished to leave relied on outside groups to get them to safety. This included various veterans task forces that were set up to aid their former interpreters, their families, and other Afghan allies who the U.S.

government had made commitments to in exchange for their service alongside U.S. military personnel. One of the most successful task forces, Task Force Pineapple, was able to evacuate over 500 Afghan special operators and their families over the course of the NEO.⁸¹ Other task forces provided transportation, housing, safety, and communications when the U.S. government could not.⁸² Working covertly and usually under the darkness of night, such task forces were able to aid the overall evacuation mission by focusing on the promise made to our Afghan allies: no one left behind.

INTERAGENCY POLICY COORDINATION PROCESS

A successful NEO is only possible through a rigorous interagency policy coordination (IPC) process that aligns policy objectives with lines of effort across all U.S. government departments and agencies. At its best, a good IPC process ensures policy coherence alongside measurable outcomes on the ground, while incorporating feedback and de-conflicting views from different agencies. The chaos of the NEO, and indeed of the entire U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan more broadly, reflects the failure of this policy coordination process. The lack of meetings was indeed a problem. However, the other problem was that the NSC-led policy coordination process in the months leading up to the NEO was focused on marginalizing bureaucratic opponents of President Biden's decision to withdraw from Afghanistan and managing the associated optics of that decision. Wary of DoD's perceived success in thwarting previous administrations' efforts to withdraw from the conflict, the Biden NSC team was determined to avoid a similar fate.⁸³ As a result, legitimate warnings about the risks associated with a hasty withdrawal – from military decisions like the closing of Bagram air base to State's lack of preparedness to handle a surge in SIVs, or even

to protect locally employed staff – were viewed suspiciously as attempts to undermine President Biden. These increasingly urgent logistical and operational issues were sidelined, while efforts related to managing optics such as a full-court press to convince allies like the United Kingdom not to close their embassies were led by President Biden himself.⁸⁴

Perhaps the most glaring indicator of the extent to which critical planning decisions took a backseat to silencing dissent and micromanagement of messaging and optics was the recent revelation that the NSC Deputies Committee meeting to task out key lines of effort for the NEO did not occur until the afternoon of August 14, mere hours before Taliban forces entered Kabul.⁸⁵ Until this point, State, DoD, and other departments and agencies had no senior-level direction on how many individuals they needed to evacuate, who they were or how they were to be processed, where the U.S. government was supposed to transport these people, and what to do with them when they reached their destination. Regardless of the heroic efforts of many frontline personnel trying to make the best of a terrible situation, it was simply not possible to carry out an evacuation on such a large scale and in such a short timeframe on less than a day's notice. U.S. diplomats, service members, Embassy Kabul employees, and other U.S. personnel charged with executing the NEO were betrayed by the failure of those higher up the chain of command to adequately plan for or resource the operation in a manner that would have ensured its success. That responsibility ultimately lies with President Biden, his National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, and the processes and procedures the NSC put in place following the president's decision to withdraw from Afghanistan.

NATO ALLIES

The 20 year-long military mission in Afghanistan was not just a U.S. military mission

but a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) mission. When the Biden Administration made its unilateral announcement in April 2021 that the United States would be withdrawing, NATO allies were dismayed at the lack of consultation ahead of that decision. This lack of coordination extended to the NEO and closure of Embassy Kabul. Numerous NATO nations have shared with SFRC minority staff that they only learned of the U.S. evacuation from news reports rather than directly from the United States. The U.S. government's failure to coordinate with its partners resulted in placing NATO personnel and local partners at extreme risk during the evacuation. With zero notice, NATO partners had to organize their own evacuation plans for their troops and citizens during the chaotic NEO at HKIA. The logistics of so many nations trying to evacuate at once were clearly underestimated by U.S. leadership. Allied nations made clear their frustration at the difficulty of landing their evacuation planes at HKIA, the extremely short windows given to them for getting their people out, and the chaos on the ground at U.S.-controlled HKIA.

For many allied nations, the reality of having to rely on the United States to ferry their citizens to safety created political earthquakes, even leading to the resignations of some ministers. This failure to consult, notify, and coordinate with NATO partners has left a stain on the U.S. reputation as a credible and reliable partner.

Failing to safeguard those who assisted in the U.S. mission in Afghanistan represents a strategic vulnerability. It has led allies and adversaries alike to question U.S. reliability and credibility as a partner in future conflicts. Months later, one senior NATO official noted, “Afghanistan is the elephant in the room at every meeting now.”⁸⁶ In an era of great power competition, this could have serious implications for U.S. national security interests. It is imperative U.S. allies and partners know the United States will stand with them in their hour of need, as countless Afghans have done for us since 2001. Despite these challenges, soldiers from NATO nations were invaluable at HKIA. Some of them undertook evacuation missions outside of the HKIA gates that the United States would not attempt and Norway’s field hospital treated the U.S. soldiers killed and wounded at the suicide bombing of August 26, 2021.

POST-NEO

On August 30, at 3:29pm EST, the last U.S. military C-17 cleared Afghanistan’s airspace, marking the tactical end to the NEO and also America’s longest war. Yet, with hundreds of Americans, their dependents, SIV applicants and holders, at-risk Afghans, and LPRs still on the ground, the United States had to continue evacuations.

On August 31, President Biden addressed the nation regarding the botched evacuation stating, “The bottom line: Ninety percent of Americans in Afghanistan who wanted to leave were able to leave,” and added that:

“Now we believe that about 100 to 200 Americans remain in Afghanistan with some intention to leave. Most of those who remain are dual citizens, long-time residents who had earlier decided to stay because of their family roots in Afghanistan.”⁸⁷

The Biden Administration made a point to insist in further press briefings and other engagements that the number of Americans remained in this range. On August 30, House Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy stated at a conference,

“Our own government told us just a few weeks ago there was probably 11,000 to 15,000 Americans there. Today they told us they’ve gotten 5,400 out. All of us have had emails, phone calls of Americans trying to get out, for days.”⁸⁸

State, including Secretary Blinken, continued to insist that there were only 100 or so American citizens left in Afghanistan, despite the fact there were hundreds more. On one call regarding Operation Allies Welcome/Operation Allies Refuge, State briefers stated there were over 350 American citizens (not including their dependents/LPR family members) that were in touch with the administration and Embassy Kabul out of Doha, Qatar regarding forward movement or evacuation.⁸⁹ The State stated 176 Americans were ready to leave at that time, and that 218 had already departed. Upon inquiry, State reluctantly stated there was no way to track U.S. LPRs in Afghanistan, and it did not have a number for such population in need of evacuation. As of December 14, 2021, the White House and State had evacuated 479 Americans and 450 LPRs and SIV holders post the end of the NEO.⁹⁰ However, there are over 30,000 SIV holders or principal applicants post-Chief of Mission Approval and with approved I-360 petitions left in Afghanistan.

If the Biden Administration could not admit how many Americans and partners they left behind, what considerations did they take prior to August 14 to safeguard Americans amid the chaos and impending Taliban domination? Until October 21, veterans groups and congressional offices had informally asserted the true number of Americans left

behind was much higher given the amount of communications and individual cases that were collectively being tracked.

Even more so, Secretary Blinken further stated at the joint press availability for the U.S.-Qatar Strategic Dialogue on November 10 that, “All U.S. citizens who have requested assistance from the United States Government to depart Afghanistan ... have been offered an opportunity to do so.”⁹¹ As of December 14, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki continued the narrative that “if Americans who are in Afghanistan wanted to leave... we would get them out.”⁹² That same day, State informed congressional staff that evacuation flights from Afghanistan had been suspended for the past two weeks and State could offer no details as to why, let alone when they might resume.



CHAPTER 5

AFGHANISTAN SPECIAL IMMIGRANT VISA PROGRAM

INTRODUCTION

The Biden Administration's botched withdrawal from Afghanistan had many flaws. The most indelible was its betrayal of the local Afghan partners who had assisted the U.S. mission over the course of 20 years that were left behind and targeted for death by the Taliban. The Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program was created in 2009 to avoid this precise situation, but has been bogged down by numerous challenges, including but not limited to insufficient staffing, poor coordination, and the apparent inability of the State Department (State) and Department of Defense (DoD) to verify applicants' employment. These challenges pre-date the Biden Administration, but the administration took no action to address these problems.

Despite credible and substantial forewarning that the Taliban was advancing across the country, the Biden Administration took minimal steps to improve processing under the SIV program. Instead of taking decisive executive action, the administration dithered,

wasted time, and subsequently blamed Congress for the inability to expeditiously process SIVs at that time.⁹³ As a result, the United States left behind tens of thousands of vulnerable Afghan SIV applicants and dependents. The abandonment of U.S. partners, after repeated promises to save them, will have strategic implications for the ability of the United States to recruit partners in the future.

HISTORY OF AFGHAN SIV PROGRAM

In the wake of the ongoing war in Afghanistan, Congress created the Afghan SIV program through enactment of the Afghan Allies Protection Act (P.L. 111-8) in 2009. This law established a special visa program to enable Afghans employed by the U.S. government to advance the U.S. mission in Afghanistan to resettle in the United States. The program was specifically designed to assist Afghans who had worked for the U.S. military and diplomatic missions as interpreters, translators, advisers, and other positions, whose association with the U.S.

mission made them vulnerable to attack by the Taliban or other extremists.

Eligibility Requirements

The legislation set out specific criteria for an Afghan to be eligible for the program, including a minimum of one year of employment with the U.S. government and the experience of an ongoing and serious threat as a result of this employment. In the FY2016 National Defense Authorization Act, the eligibility requirement for an SIV was raised from only one year of eligible service to two years. In FY2014 and FY2016, respectively, eligibility was expanded to include certain Afghans who were employed by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and certain Afghans employed by the ISAF's successor mission. Despite these clear eligibility requirements, neither State nor DoD have been able to provide a clear number of how many Afghans would qualify to apply to the SIV program. In 20 years of operations in

Afghanistan, the U.S. military had the fingerprints of most high value targets and could easily identify them on the battlefield. Yet somehow, DoD could not figure out how to maintain a similar database to identify the very Afghans who risked their lives to help us succeed.

Number of Visas Allocated

Throughout the lifetime of the program, the number of SIV visas available to vulnerable Afghans has varied. This variation can be attributed to the numbers and means by which Congress has authorized them. The Afghan Allies Protection Act originally authorized 1,500 SIV visas per year from FY2009-FY2013.⁹⁴ The authorized amount is for principal applicants for the visa and does not include their dependents. Starting in FY2014, Congress began taking a more lenient approach, whereby authorized numbers were approved through various legislative vehicles, as seen in Figure 1.

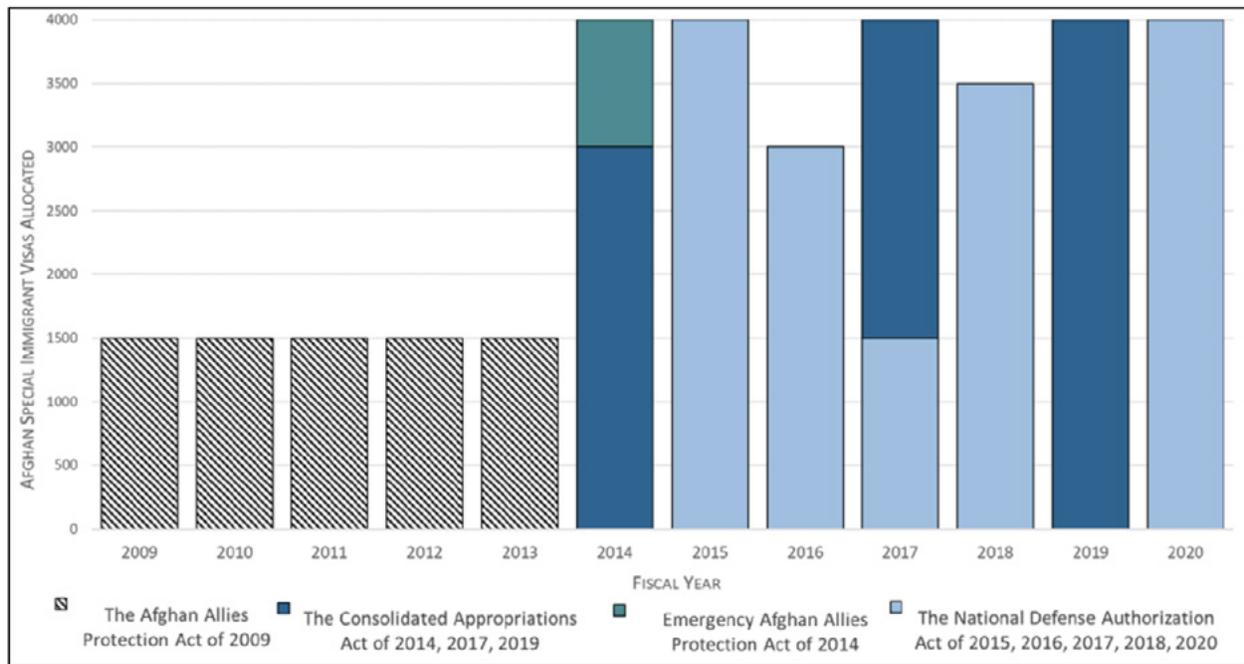


FIGURE 1: Source: Department of State's Office of Inspector General's Report Review of the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program June 2020

SIV Application Process

Processing of SIVs includes 14 steps, as summarized in figure 2. These steps have been broken into four stages: Chief of Mission Application, Form I-360 Adjudication, Visa Interview, including Pre- and Post-Interview, and Visa Issuance. This process includes steps that need to be completed by various agencies and offices including: National Visa Center, the Afghan Special Immigrant Unit, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, and

Embassy Kabul. Additionally, the applicant has to complete various parts of the process. Pursuant to the FY2014 National Defense Authorization Act, State and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) are required to publish quarterly reports describing the average wait times across the four stages. The complicated structure of the program and the variety of agencies which work on each step have contributed to serious structural delays.

Stage	Step	Description	Responsible Entity
Chief of Mission Application	1	Applicant submits Chief of Mission application package to the National Visa Center.	Applicant
	2	National Visa Center reviews documents for completeness.	National Visa Center
	3	National Visa Center sends completed package to the ASIV Unit for Chief of Mission decision.	National Visa Center
	4	ASIV Unit reviews applicant packages and sends to Chief of Mission for approval or denial.	ASIV Unit
	5	National Visa Center receives the applicant's Chief of Mission decision. If approved, the National Visa Center sends an approval letter to the applicant. If denied, the applicant can appeal the decision or reapply as a new applicant.	National Visa Center
Form I-360 Adjudication	6	Applicant petitions U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services using form I-360.	Applicant
	7	U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services adjudicates the petition and sends the completed applicant package to National Visa Center, if approved.	U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services
Visa Interview, Including Pre- and Post-Interview	8	National Visa Center instructs the applicant to provide documentation for an immigrant visa.	National Visa Center
	9	Applicant submits requested documentation to the National Visa Center.	Applicant
	10	National Visa Center reviews documents for completeness.	National Visa Center
	11	National Visa Center schedules an interview with the applicant to take place at the embassy.	National Visa Center
	12	A Consular Officer interviews the applicant; administrative processing is initiated following the interview.	Embassy Kabul
	13	The applicant's case undergoes administrative processing.	Interagency partners ^a
Visa Issuance	14	When administrative processing is complete, the applicant is instructed to obtain a medical examination. The visa is issued if the applicant is eligible.	Applicant

FIGURE 2: Source: Department of State's Office of Inspector General's Audit Management Assistance Report: Quarterly Reporting on Afghan Immigrant Visa Program Needs Improvement June 2020

Efficiency

Acknowledging that the program was experiencing delays, Congress amended the Afghan Allies Protection Act in 2013, to include provisions meant to improve efficiency and speed up processing of applications.⁹⁵ A key change was to require that all steps be completed within nine months of the date that an eligible Afghan submits all their required paperwork. However, it also allowed for additional processing time for cases that required it due to national security concerns.

Another key part of the 2013 amendment was the requirement that State, DoD, and DHS each designate a senior coordinating official for SIVs. These officials are tasked with improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the program. Despite these changes and the best efforts by Congress to speed up the process, backlogs continued to grow due to the lack of interagency coordination.

SIV BACKLOG

Since its inception, the program has been plagued with a large backlog. At times, the backlog was just as large as the number of total approved applicants. Between FY2009 and FY2019, a total of 18,471 Afghan SIVs had been admitted to the United States. As of September 2019, there were 18,864 applicants in process for SIVs.⁹⁶

Congress had acknowledged these delays, hence the addition in 2014 of the requirement to process SIVs within nine months of a completed application. Also beginning in 2014, Congress required quarterly reports from State and DHS on processing of SIVs. Those reports, which are still produced today, paint a disturbing picture of timing. Of the 30 reports dating back to April 2014, there is only one instance, in the April 2016 report, where the average government processing time was less than 270 days.⁹⁷ For the

whole reporting period, the average is 570 days, more than double what is required by law. However, it should be noted the State's Office of Inspector General (OIG) published a report in June 2020 entitled, "Management Assistance Report: Quarterly Reporting on Afghan Immigrant Visa Program Needs Improvement." This report reveals that various agencies used contradictory methodologies to calculate wait times in the quarterly report, and the numbers listed above are more generous than the actual averages.⁹⁸

Employment Verification

A major delay in the SIV application process is the apparent inability of agencies to verify employment with the U.S. government. State is the lead agency for SIV processing but requires each of the other departments and agencies employing eligible Afghans to verify employment. In particular, DoD's inability to provide employment verification has been one of the most acute and substantial delays in this process, especially because an overwhelming number of SIV applicants worked for the U.S. military. When it comes to applicants who worked for Embassy Kabul, State is able to use internal sources to confirm an applicant's employment. But DoD lacks its own centralized database to document or verify an applicant's identity and employment, and there is no database to track status across any of the other federal departments and agencies. This lack of a central database has caused delays in processing and also increased the risk of fraud.

In 2013, DoD acknowledged there was need for a centralized database and even identified the Department's Synchronized Predeployment and Operational Tracker (SPOT) system as a candidate.⁹⁹ However, DoD never moved forward to address the situation. Seven years later, State OIG issued a recommendation for State and DoD to re-examine establishing a unified database, including SPOT. Despite this

recommendation, neither a new database was established nor was SPOT utilized and expanded for the Afghan SIV program.

In the absence of a central database, a majority of the applicants must pass through the Afghanistan Special Immigrant Visa (ASIV) unit, which emails the employer's human resources contact. The ASIV unit then waits for the employer to respond. In order to verify a contract, the ASIV unit must search for the contract on a public government website which does not keep a full accounting of all U.S. government contracts. SIV applicants who worked for DoD face a particularly significant challenge because of the lack of recordkeeping by DoD. In particular, SIV applicants must find their DoD supervisor, but DoD ended its "Supervisor Locator Program" in 2018. State maintained a link to the DoD form on its website to assist applicants, but the link was broken: <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/immigrate/dod-supervisor-locator.html>. During the evacuation, State's Frequently Asked Questions Page still had a prompt which instructed SIV applicants to use this broken link to contact their supervisors.

Staffing

Staffing was a perennial problem for SIV applications. As laid out in State's OIG report from 2020, State did not have proper staffing for processing SIVs. In particular, State did not track or reliably maintain SIV-specific staffing from 2009-2016.¹⁰⁰ However, once State did start tracking staffing, it maintained the same staff level despite a sharp increase in applications. For example, the same number of staff were expected to process 18,864 applications in FY2020 as were expected to process 12,300 in FY2016.¹⁰¹

At the ASIV unit, with a staff of only eight to 10 full-time employees, they were unable to keep up with the number of applications. In June 2020, the unit admitted it would need at least 50 employees to address its current backlogs within

the nine month timeframe required by law.¹⁰² Embassy Kabul experienced its own unique staffing challenges. Consular officers were dependent upon consular support staff to assist in preparing case files and translation into English. In October 2019, 30% of Kabul's consular section was vacant.¹⁰³ State subsequently cut the staff from five to three during the 2019 staff reduction.

One of the main impediments to improving staffing was a lack of leadership. State was required by law to have an overarching Senior Coordinating Official, but that position was vacant from January 2017 until March 2020. This gap contributed to the program's lack of strategic focus and poor coordination, and, as a result, the inability for the program to meet its legislative requirement to complete applications within nine months.

The issue of staffing extends far beyond State. As of June 2020, the National Visa Center had only about 10 full time employees dedicated to processing Afghan SIVs, a level that had remained constant since 2016. At this staffing level, emails from SIV applicants were left unopened for approximately 30 days after they had been received.

BIDEN ADMINISTRATION'S FAILURE TO EXPEDITE SIVS

As laid out above, the SIV program has been marred with delays and administrative issues since its inception. Over its 12 year history, the backlog of applications only increased, while resources remained steady or decreased. The Biden Administration should have been well aware of these issues, particularly following issuance of State's OIG report in June 2020.¹⁰⁴ This report contained six clear recommendations to improve processing of SIVs.

When President Biden took office in January, there were estimated to be 17,000 SIV applications in the backlog.¹⁰⁵ On February 4,

2021, President Biden issued Executive Order 14013, “Rebuilding and Enhancing Programs to Resettle Refugees and Planning for the Impact of Climate Change on Migration.”¹⁰⁶ Section 3 of E.O. 14013 required a review of both the Afghan and Iraqi SIV programs by the Secretary of State to be completed within 180 days. When President Biden announced the withdrawal from Afghanistan, Secretary Blinken’s team would have been more than 75 days into the review of these SIV issues and should have had enough information to start making changes to improve the program. They had executive authority to make a number of changes, but chose to do nothing.

Pushing the Blame on Congress

At the same time, after the president’s announcement in April 2021, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) pressed the administration on the SIV program. During testimony before the committee on Afghanistan policy, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, the Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, promised “We understand the importance of this issue. We are working on a plan, and we will work with Congress to respond to it. I am sure many Afghans with skills would like to stay in their country and help the country develop, but we understand our responsibilities in this regard and will consult with you. A plan is being developed.”¹⁰⁷ As it became apparent that the Taliban was making significant gains across Afghanistan, President Biden stated during a press conference on July 8, with regard to the SIV program, that “We’re working closely with Congress to change the authorization language so that we can streamline the process of approving those visas.”¹⁰⁸

Based on President Biden’s comments, on July 14, SFRC minority staff reached out to State to ask what changes the president was seeking to the authorizing language. On July 16, State responded that the White House was working

directly with Representative Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) on possible amendments to the Afghan Allies Protection Act. That same day, SFRC minority staff responded and asked what additional legislative authorities were being sought and also asked for feedback on a Senate legislative proposal from Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.). State did not respond. Three days later, SFRC minority staff followed up again to understand the administration’s requests in the Hoyer proposal, given news reports it would pass the House of Representatives that week. State responded that day, confirming that only the White House was working directly with Representative Hoyer. SFRC minority responded on July 20 inquiring if State had provided feedback on the Leahy proposal. To this day, there has been no response from State.

This anecdote is indicative of decisions being made by the White House that cut the agencies out of the process and resulted in ineffective, and at times partisan, legislation on an issue where there was and still is strong bipartisan support. The administration’s preference to disregard strong bipartisan interest in trying to help improve the SIV process led to a legislative proposal that passed, but contained only negligible improvements allowing for medical screening to take place in the United States. The structural changes and improvements that were needed and supported by both parties were disregarded by the administration in the months leading up to the evacuation. It was a politically expedient decision, and missed an opportunity that could have helped save the lives of Afghans that fought alongside Americans.

Operation Allies Refuge

Simultaneously, on July 14, President Biden announced the launch of Operation Allies Refuge to support relocation flights for eligible Afghans in the SIV pipeline to leave Afghanistan. The original announcement revealed the intention to have these Afghans processed in third countries

before entering the United States. It did not include information on the timing or destination of the flights. On that date, SFRC minority staff requested a briefing on the countries with whom the U.S. government was negotiating and never received a response. An additional request on July 20 also went unanswered. On July 19, SFRC staff was informed that Fort Lee, Virginia would be the destination for 2,500 SIV applicants and their families for processing. The first flight with SIV applicants arrived at Fort Lee on July 30.¹⁰⁹ During the period between the first flight on July 30 and the last flight before Kabul fell on August 15, the United States brought in an estimated 2,000 Afghans who were SIV applicants.¹¹⁰

After the Taliban took over Kabul, the danger to SIV applicants who remained in country only increased. The National Security Council (NSC) Deputies Committee meeting on August 14 agreed that Afghan SIV applicants who are post-Chief of Mission approval and have approved I-360 petitions¹¹¹ should be prioritized. As of June 30, there were 1,052 SIV applicants who met this criteria of the 17,469 who were in the SIV pipeline.¹¹²

The fall of Kabul resulted in a large influx in SIV applications to be filed as U.S. partners feared for their safety under Taliban rule. The SIV pipeline in December 2021 had doubled since August 2021, with over 35,000 applicants. In September, State indicated that of the 60,000 evacuees from Afghanistan to America, only 3% were SIV holders.¹¹³ However, in December, State updated its assessment to indicate that of the 74,000 Afghans brought to the United States between August 29 and December 13, more than 40% were eligible for SIVs.¹¹⁴ It is unclear what part of the 14-step process these Afghans are in, and how long it will take for them to complete processing. Additionally, State has indicated there are over 32,000 SIVs within Afghanistan who have received Chief of Mission approval and are still in the pipeline for SIVs.¹¹⁵

Request for Investigation

Out of an abundance of concern regarding the administration of the SIV program, the ranking members of SFRC, the Senate Armed Services Committee, and the Senate Homeland Security Committee sent a letter to the Inspectors General of State, DoD, DHS, and the U.S. Agency for the International Development (USAID) requesting they launch a joint review and audit of the Afghan SIV program. The senators requested that “this investigation should thoroughly review each individual executive department that holds responsibilities for the SIV process, as well as their respective bureaus, offices, missions and the interagency processes in place to help facilitate communication and coordination between them.”¹¹⁶

Despite this request, State, DoD, DHS, and USAID are each conducting separate Inspectors General investigations into their respective roles in the U.S. withdrawal of Afghanistan and Afghan SIV program. While the separate Inspectors General intend to coordinate in monthly meetings, deep concern remains about the lack of coordination and duplication of efforts, which will likely lead to agencies not reaching the core of the problem. It is important that the SIV program be comprehensively reviewed and improved for the Afghans who have served the United States. Given the number of agencies involved in the SIV program and overall withdrawal, it is truly an interagency failure. Operating as independent entities will only reinforce the tunnel vision that contributed to the failures in the first place.

CONCLUSION

People will debate for years to come about the “why” and “when” of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. This report has looked at the “how,” and it is clear the senior leadership of the Biden Administration failed to effectively plan, coordinate, and execute an orderly withdrawal and evacuation. From the beginning, the interagency and specific departments ignored the warning signs of a Taliban takeover and wasted away precious days of planning and evacuation. Only hours before the Taliban captured Kabul did the interagency decide to start the evacuation. This failure of leadership cost U.S. military personnel lives and has left tens of thousands behind to an uncertain fate under Taliban control. The Biden Administration squandered precious time, ignored intelligence and recommendations from people on the ground, and refused bipartisan support to give them the resources to succeed. In the process, the botched withdrawal has tarnished America’s reputation and credibility. A healthy sense of humility should guide the lessons learned and help to better prepare for future evacuations. Additionally, the work is not done in Afghanistan. American citizens, as well as tens of thousands of Afghan partners, including Special Immigrant Visa applicants, still await evacuation from Afghanistan and third countries. The military mission inside of Afghanistan may be over, but America’s work is not finished.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The State Department (State) should develop a new system for accounting U.S. citizens overseas.

This system should not be as reliant on host country data and should feed into the F-77 reporting process. This system should focus on countries most likely to have evacuations.

State and the Department of Defense (DoD) should review their memorandum of agreement for noncombatant evacuation operations (NEOs).

This review should take lessons learned from the Afghanistan evacuation and evaluate if the agreement adequately addresses contingency planning for future NEOs.

State and DoD need to use an updated Synchronized Predeployment and Operational Tracker (SPOT) system to track Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) employment.

The inability to properly account for people who served alongside our military and diplomats is a stain on both departments. State and DoD need to develop an updated SPOT system to track employment of potential SIV applicants. This system should be proactive and allow for verification of employment after two years of service.

Improve transparency efforts with Congress.

State and DoD should establish a channel of communication with Congress to provide updates on relocation efforts and transparency on what went wrong in contingency planning and evacuation efforts to mitigate such pitfalls in the future. Given Congress's role in constituent services and the clear volume of people that reached out to the Hill, State should also consider a more formal way to bring Congress into evacuation planning and processing.

Properly resource consular services and immigration personnel.

State, along with DoD and the Department of Homeland Security, should provide adequate resources and personnel that are necessary to vet and interview SIV, Priority 1, and Priority 2 refugee applicants.

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ANDSF – Afghan National Defense and Security Forces

ASIV – Afghanistan Special Immigrant Visa

CRAF – Civil Reserve Air Fleet

DHS – Department of Homeland Security

DoD – Department of Defense

F-77 report – annual embassy/consulate report on the estimated number of Americans in its area of responsibility

FSO – Foreign Service Officer

GAO – Government Accountability Office

HKIA – Hamid Karzai International Airport

IPC – interagency policy coordination

ISAF – International Security Assistance Force

LES – locally employed staff

LPR – U.S. Legal Permanent Residents

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NSC – National Security Council

NSC DC – National Security Council Deputies Committee

NEO – noncombatant evacuation operation

OIG – Office of Inspector General

RFE/RL – Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

SFRC – Senate Foreign Relations Committee

SIGAR – Special Inspector General for Afghanistan

SIV – Special Immigrant Visa

SPOT – Department of Defense's Synchronized Predeployment and Operational Tracker

State – State Department

USAID – U.S. Agency for International Development

USAGM – U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM)

ANNEX 1

From: < >@state.gov
Sent: Sunday, August 15, 2021 3:16 PM
To: H Afghanistan Inquiries Shared Mailbox
Subject: DEPARTMENT OF STATE: Afghanistan - Update for Constituents

Colleagues,

The Department has consolidated all Afghanistan inquiries to: HAfghanInquiries@state.gov. The Consular Section of the U.S. Embassy in Kabul has closed. The security situation in Kabul is changing quickly and the situation at the airport is deteriorating rapidly. The U.S. Embassy released a security notice advising U.S. citizens to shelter in place after reports of the airport taking fire. U.S. citizens should not travel to the Embassy or the airport at this time.

U.S. citizens needing assistance to depart Afghanistan should register for any option that might be identified to return to the United States by completing this [Repatriation Assistance Request](#) for each traveler in their group as soon as possible, to facilitate travel when the situation permits. Spouses and minor children of U.S. citizens in Afghanistan who are awaiting immigrant visas should also complete this form if they wish to depart. Citizens must complete this form even if they've previously submitted their information to the U.S. Embassy in Kabul.

Applicants for Special Immigrant Visas notified of eligibility for travel to the United States through Operation Allies Refuge should wait for further instructions. Administrative processing of Special Immigrant Visas will continue, and applicants will continue to be notified about the status of their cases.

Visa and passport appointments at the Embassy have been canceled, and passports that were in the Embassy's possession have been destroyed. At this time, it is not possible to provide any further visa services in Afghanistan.

Regards,

Congressional Advisor
Bureau of Legislative Affairs
U.S. Department of State

ANNEX 2

To:
Subject: RE: (SBU//FOUO) TFAF01 - Afghanistan Task Force SitRep No. 36 08.18.2021 0700ET

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED

From: Afghan Coordination Task Force
Sent: Wednesday, August 18, 2021 7:10 AM
Subject: (SBU//FOUO) TFAF01 - Afghanistan Task Force SitRep No. 36 08.18.2021 0700ET

SITREP No. 36

August 18, 2021 - 0700 ET

EVACUATION OPERATIONS

- (SBU) CA emailed U.S. citizens in Kabul with instructions for airport departure. An additional message to 800 SIV applicants will be sent after all notifications to U.S. citizens are complete. These messages were delayed due to serious software limitations. (CA)
- (SBU) Embassy Riyadh reported a U.S. military flight landed at Prince Sultan Air Base with a group of 20 Afghans. The Saudi government has not been asked to serve as a transit point or to provide shelter for Afghans. The ACTF has reached out for additional information. (Embassy Riyadh)
- (SBU) Embassy Doha reports that half of the 3,000 available beds at Camp As Sayliyah are filled. In addition, U.S. citizens and TCNs total 1,100 at AUAB as of 0700 EDT. (Embassy Doha)
- (SBU) DoD representatives in Kabul reported C-17s landing in Kuwait are unable to deplane passengers if any Afghans are on board. (Embassy Kabul)
- (SBU) Kuwait Airways flight 5031 arrived at Washington Dulles International Airport with 288 passengers. (ACTF)
- (SBU) The Slovak Defense Minister called the U.S. Ambassador August 18 to express thanks for assistance in evacuating personnel and family members from Kabul. (Embassy Bratislava)
- (SBU) Japan's Charge d'Affaires and 11 other diplomats arrived safely in Dubai and thanked the United States for assistance arriving at the airport. (Embassy Kabul)
- (SBU) Kuwait diverted at least one Qatar Airways (AUAB-Kuwait City) flight transporting U.S. citizens and TCNs to Qatar yesterday. (ACTF)
- (SBU) We estimate the August 17-18 departure data shown below, but caution that these figures are estimates subject to subsequent revision. (ACTF)

August	Flights	Total Evacuees
17-18	23	1,292

SECURITY UPDATE

- (SBU) The East Gate is under Turkish security control. The 82nd Airborne has secured Camp Sullivan. *(ACTF)*
- (SBU) There are reports of violence among the crowds outside the gates of HKIA, including fistfights and one report of a person shot trying to climb the wall. *(ACTF)*

TASK FORCE OPERATIONS

- (U) The ACTF has received over 8,000 requests for assistance regarding Afghans at Risk *(ACTF)*

EMBASSY OPERATIONS

- (SBU) There are currently 99 U.S. personnel on the ground at HKIA, up from 96. Three consular officers arrived August 17. The number of consular officers is expected to increase by an additional 12 in the 24-48 hours. *(Embassy Kabul)*

STATUS UPDATE FOR FLIGHTS PENDING RESOLUTION

- (SBU) The manifesting and logistics team are actively working to complete manifest information for three flights that departed Kabul between Sunday evening and Monday morning. *(ACTF)*
- (SBU) Bahrain approved the landing and processing of flights out of Kabul. U.S. military aircraft will land at Isa Air Base and deplane a mix of Amcits, Afghan SIVs, and third country nationals. *(Embassy Manama)*

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

- (SBU) The joint H-ACTF Legislative Affairs Team received over 2,500 Hill inquiries to the HAfghanInquiries@state.gov inbox in three days. Each email has received a personalized response. Most Hill offices and members are forwarding information related to AMCITs, LPRs, SIVs, and other Afghan partners requesting evacuation and urgent assistance. *(H)*

Approved:

Afghanistan Coordination Task Force at _____ or _____

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED//FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY

ANNEX 3

From:
Sent: Monday, August 23, 2021 8:18 AM
To: H Afghanistan Inquiries Shared Mailbox <HAfghanInquiries@state.gov>
Cc:
Subject: Message to the Hill

Hill colleagues-- Thank you for all your work on behalf of our Afghan partners. We wanted to take a moment to explain our internal processing of cases to better assist your efforts to help your constituents.

First, as a reminder, the State Department has stood up the Afghanistan Task Force to support the evacuation operation in Kabul and around the world, as well as the relocation efforts in the United States. Please send all State Department inquiries related to American citizens and Legal Permanent Residents (LPR), case processing, visas, and other issues related to potential evacuees to HAfghanInquiries@state.gov. This email account is covered by staff around the clock

When reaching out to the HAfghanInquiries inbox, please include your office and the type of case that you are inquiring about in your subject line. In addition, if you have it, please include the following information in as concise and accessible a form as possible:

- Full legal name, age, citizenship, date of birth of the persons seeking to leave Afghanistan.
- Current status – are they an American citizen, a LPR (green card holder), an Afghan currently holding a SIV, an Afghan that is in the SIV process but does not yet have a SIV, or an Afghan that has been referred to the US refugee admissions program through a P1/P2 referral (if they were referred to the USRAP, please indicate what government agency or US Media/US NGO referred them).
- Connection to the United States (where applicable).
- Current location, mobility, and contact information (including email, messaging abilities, etc.).
- P1/P2s must be submitted by the US government agency that funded the program the Afghan worked on. For US media/US NGOs that were not funded by USG, but that would like to make a referral, they should complete the attached form and email it to _____ with a copy to HAfghanInquiries@state.gov

All congressional queries sent to the HAfghanInquiries inbox are routed to specific Department teams handling and processing SIV, P1, P2 referrals, and other cases. Please note that due to the high volume of requests coming in, the Department will get in touch once a case is reviewed and adjudicated, but please know that all emails are appropriately routed. Of course, you are always welcome to reach out to your congressional liaisons in the Bureau of Legislative Affairs to discuss your inquiry further at any point. As you are aware, American citizen and LPR cases are currently prioritized. If you have an emergency case that falls into this category or is imminently life-threatening, in addition to contacting your congressional liaisons, please contact Kabul American Citizen Services at KabulACS@state.gov.

For further assistance, the Department of Defense (DoD) has established an Afghanistan NEO Call Center (ANCC) to assist the State Department ACTF with NEO or SIV evacuation support. The ANCC can be reached at _____ & _____. If the ANCC receives a request for AMCIT/LPR/Green Card

holders, the ANCC provides an "AMCIT and Afghan Assistance Form" to the requester and forwards the information to CENTCOM. If the ANCC receives a request for an Afghan citizen, the ANCC attempts to verify SIV status. If the SIV application process has not begun, the request is forwarded to the State Department

Additionally, we have been receiving inquiries into chartered air flights. If you are seeking information on or coordination with commercial/chartered air into Hamid Karzai International Airport, please contact the Air Mobility Operations Squadron at: [REDACTED]; Alternate: [REDACTED]

Finally, State and DoD will continue to provide regular updates via email and briefings throughout the week. If you want to be included in email updates, please email: HCongressionalUpdate@state.gov with the subject line: INCLUDE IN EMAIL DISTRIBUTION.

As always, we greatly appreciate your patience, understanding, and work on behalf of constituents.

Thank you,
The Legislative Affairs Teams at the State Department and Defense Department

ANNEX 4

From: ConsularOnTheHill <ConsularOnTheHill@state.gov>
Sent: Wednesday, October 20, 2021 8:45 AM
To:
Subject: RE: [SIV family in need of EVAC] I

Thank you for your email. We are checking to make sure that we have responded to those messages that we received during the evacuation from Afghanistan. In review, we are not sure that you received an answer from us, for which we apologize. We do appreciate your sending us these inquiries. I note that this one went to the right office for consideration.

As the President and Secretary have said, our efforts to support Afghans at risk do not have an expiration date. This is especially true for Afghans with whom we worked for many years to improve the lives of millions of Afghans. The United States continues to engage governments to ensure the departure and safe passage of American citizens, lawful permanent residents, and vulnerable Afghans.

The situation is still fluid and complicated. The United States is pressing the Taliban to provide safe passage while engaging neighboring countries to accommodate the questions of Afghans who have departed but are not yet approved for resettlement in a third country. Additionally, we continue to refine our procedures to support the population of Afghans who have applied for immigrant visas and are waiting for the completion of their cases by the Department of State and Department of Homeland Security.

Please be advised that we are working on all possible means of providing assistance to Afghans at risk. Here is some additional information that I hope you find helpful.

U.S. Refugee Admissions Program: Afghans eligible for and referred to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) must be outside of Afghanistan in a third country for their cases to be processed. For more information on the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, please visit <https://www.state.gov/u-s-refugee-admissions-program-priority-2-designation-for-afghan-nationals/>

Asylum/Humanitarian Assistance: Afghans with safety concerns may contact the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) protection office, which can be reached via their Protection Hotline numbers or email address: 0790691746 and 0704996168 (available on all working days), and afgkaprt@unhcr.org. UNHCR's website provides information on asylum procedures abroad: <https://help.unhcr.org/>.

Sincerely,

Consular on The Hill

From:
Sent: Thursday, August 19, 2021 7:16 PM
To: H Afghanistan Inquiries Shared Mailbox <HAfghanInquiries@state.gov>
Cc: I (Foreign Relations) <
Subject: FW: [SIV family in need of EVAC]

Colleagues,

ANNEX 5

Entered into the Congressional Record on Behalf of Ranking Member Jim Risch (R-ID) October 28, 2021

TESTIMONIES ON THE NONCOMBATANT EVACUATION OPERATION

Since today's hearing is also about the state of the State Department, we must address the Department's role in the hazardous withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Despite the administration's efforts to put Afghanistan in the rearview mirror, it remains a pressing national security concern for the Senate and the American people.

On the issue of continued evacuations – in September, Secretary Blinken assured us that there were just one hundred Americans remaining in Afghanistan that wished to depart. One hundred.

Just last week, however, the team responsible for continued evacuations of Americans told us that they're working with over 170 Americans who wish to depart from more than 360 who remain there. And the list is growing.

I want to make note, and ask us to enter into the record, narratives my staff has collected from 25 Senate offices about the botched evacuations. It should be noted that this is a snapshot of just one quarter of the Senate's work to get people out.

Data on Afghanistan evacuation requests from August 2021- October 27, 2021 sent to the U.S. State Department from 25 Senate offices: Blackburn, Capito, Collins, Cotton, Crapo, Cruz, Daines, Fischer, Graham, Grassley, Hyde-Smith, Inhofe, Johnson, Lummis, Marshall, Risch, Romney, Rounds, Rubio, Sullivan, Thune, Tillis, Toomey, Wicker, and Young.

- The combined total of evacuation requests between the 25 offices is 16,688.
- Out of the 16,688 evacuees, we know of 110 who were successfully evacuated out of Afghanistan to the United States or to a regional third country.
- U.S. State Department was 99.3% non-responsive to these members' requests.

This is only a snapshot of the work Senate personal and committee offices have done to try to evacuate American citizens, lawful permanent residents (LPRs), Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders and applicants, and refugees from other at-risk groups such as local employees and contractors for the U.S. government, journalists, and human rights advocates.

We know that some offices bore an immense, lone responsibility to get Americans, SIV holders, LPRs, and Afghans at risk out of the country as it fell to the Taliban. One Senate office described the lack of responsiveness from State:

TESTIMONY #1

- From 25-30 August, I emailed HAFghanInquiries@state.gov and ATF-TF3@state.gov multiple times for assistance with a family outside of the gates of Hamid-Karzai International Airport. I never received a specific response from ATF-TF3@state.gov or HAFghanInquiries@state.gov about how to help those individuals, even after I reported that the family had been severely beaten by the Taliban, and even after I reported that one of the women in our bus convoy had gone into labor. Two weeks later, I was given the number to a State Department Afghan evacuation help desk and asked how our people (who were receiving death threats on their phones and being actively hunted by the Taliban) could seek evacuation. I was told they should “remain in place and await further instructions.” I have received no formal guidance on how Special Immigrant Visa applicants and Priority-1/Priority-2 applicants might seek evacuation and despite the State Department’s assurances that they are working to “identify” those who need evacuation, I have seen no guidance from them on evacuation opportunities, other than commercial flights for American citizens.

TESTIMONY #2:

- I submitted several American citizens, LPRs, and their immediate family members for manifest consideration this week with one group, and they were denied a place on the manifest. If it is this difficult for American citizens and LPRs to secure airlift, it will be impossible for SIV and P2 applicants. This means that they will remain in the country and either 1.) their American friends will support them as long as possible while they remain in hiding or 2.) they will attempt to return to work at the risk of their own lives.

The same Senate office describes the continued and arduous bureaucratic delays, resulting in life or death situations for American citizens and Afghans:

TESTIMONY #3:

- Meanwhile, flights have stalled due to diplomatic issues at our lily pad countries. Last I heard, the United Arab Emirates’ Humanitarian City, which is where most flights are going, contained approximately 9,000 refugees, and its capacity is 10,000. Some flights that have already been planned are not being allowed into the United Arab Emirates because they need to move people onward to the U.S. first, and this is not happening quickly enough due to lack of consular support. Another of our task forces, which sends its flights to Qatar, has had to halt its operation due to a diplomatic holdup there. We are always told that the State Department is working negotiations and there may be a breakthrough any day, but I have had a family in Mazar-i-Sharif waiting on a flight they are manifested for almost a month.

Another Senate office describes the grueling journey for American citizens through the streets of Kabul to the Airport, only to be turned away with no help from the United States government:

TESTIMONY #4:

- During the NEO, a Pennsylvanian constituent, American Citizen, and mother of two tried and failed to make it through the streets of Kabul to the Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA). She is an American Citizen who should have been given priority to enter the gates of HKIA and onto a C-17 for evacuation. While she was waiting outside the gates, she was teargassed, another time she nearly had her passport seized from her and destroyed by a member of the Taliban who did not want her to leave Afghanistan. On the day a suicide bomber made it within range of HKIA, she was blocks away from the blast. Ultimately, the only way she escaped Afghanistan was because a veterans' group operating on the ground found her, protected her, and put her on a private charter flight to Qatar on September 10.

TESTIMONY #5:

- During the noncombatant evacuation operation, a Pennsylvanian constituent, Legal Permanent Resident, tried to make it to the Pakistani Embassy in Afghanistan to get a visa prior to making the overland trip to Pakistan to escape. On his travels to the Embassy, he was questioned by the Taliban about his activity in the embassy, to which he replied honestly. In retaliation, the Taliban locked him in a dark room for several hours. After begging for his life and to be let out, the Taliban finally allowed him to leave to pray. Upon exiting the room, he was beaten with their guns and suffered injuries. Eventually, he was released to leave and received his visa from the Embassy. Despite having a current U.S. K-1 visa foil in his passport and an onward Pakistani visa, he had significant difficulties in getting on a U.S. evacuation plane. He finally paid \$1400 USD to get on a charter flight from Hamid Karzai International Airport to Islamabad, Pakistan on September 20, 2021.

Caseworkers in my Twin Falls office described continued bureaucratic obstacles to obtaining basic guidance on movements and documentation, fundamental to the safety and security of American citizens, LPRs, and Afghans in Kabul during the NEO:

TESTIMONY #6: Senator Risch

- After the fall of Kabul, the U.S. Embassy informed stakeholders that all pending visas, passports, and documentation for consular services had been destroyed. For a pending LPR married to an Idaho constituent, this would have a remarkable impact. On August 14, this refugee's visa to the U.S. was issued by Embassy Kabul. On August 27, an evacuation request was emailed after the notice of document disposal was issued. The casework team emailed again on August 31 and September 15 for further guidance but the State Department provided none. On September 30, the Department informed the casework team that the individuals would need to find a way out of Afghanistan and transfer their case to another consular section currently open. Again, the case was flagged for the Department on October 6. On October 13, the Department confirmed that the guidance had not changed and the

individual would need to find a way out of Afghanistan on their own, work with another U.S. Embassy to have boarding foils and further documentation issued, as well as the need to apply for a new passport which the United States government cannot issue.

An Idahoan details her harrowing journey to Afghanistan and her return home:

TESTIMONY #7: Senator Risch

- From Katija Stjepovic, “With Sen. Risch’s help, woman returns to Boise from Afghanistan,” *KTVB 7 News*, Sept. 2, 2021:
 - “Wahida Ivey is a U.S Citizen who was born in Afghanistan and left in 1981 when Russia invaded the country. With help from Senator Risch’s office, she returned to Idaho after visiting her family in Afghanistan for a week. She knew that American’s would soon evacuate the country, so she wanted to see her cousins and sister before.
 - “I kind of knew what was about to happen, but I also knew that if I didn’t go see my sister, I probably would’ve never got to see her again,” she said.
 - Ivey said what she saw were chaos and dysfunction. She added that there was no priority to get the U.S. citizens evacuated first. She made five attempts to get on a plane back to America. What she saw throughout the process was disturbing.
 - “Pushing shoving, Taliban are there at the gate, they are hitting people with the wires, and I have bruises [where] I took a couple of hits, they don’t see people they see them as this rush of animals standing at the doors, and these people are just desperate to make it through that gate,” she said.
 - Before her last attempt to get home, she called her husband to say her final goodbye if she did not make it home. Ivey said soldiers were not checking documents, just opening the gates for a few people at a time but that her cousin who is an active U.S embassy employee, was turned away.
 - “When the suicide bombing happened, you just see this river of blood, and I mean, you just can’t, not everybody has the stomach for it even after 45 years of war, you can’t stomach seeing people shoes, seeing peoples clothes, seeing their blood just running down that river, and pretend like it’s not there? You just can’t.”
 - Ivey said her older sister attempted to get on a plane with her but had to turn back because of a lack of food and water.
 - “Under Taliban in control of the country, women have no place you can’t be a lady at any age to go out and just get a grocery something as simple as that, unless you have a man accompany you or have a male escort with you to go out and do the basic everyday life,” said Ivey.
 - While Ivey is forever grateful that she was able to safely return home, she fears for those who were left behind.
 - “We must hold on to the promise we made, to the people that worked for us, to the people that held our hands when we needed our hands to be held, they deserve much better than that and we should not turn our back to them, it’s not okay,” she said. “These are also human beings, they have family, they have children, it is their home but it’s not a home safe for them to live in.”

- Another office elaborates on the lack of communication between the State Department and casework liaisons in various Senate offices:

TESTIMONY #8:

- During the noncombatant evacuation operation, caseworkers shared the following anecdotes about the continuing lack of guidance and information from the State Department:
 - The State Department took days [after the fall of Kabul and start of the NEO] to establish an email account for Congressional and Senate Staff to file inquiries.
 - The State Department failed to update their website in a timely manner yet were asking Congressional Staff to check it daily and provide the site to those seeking evacuation assistance information and updates.
 - State Department Liaisons appeared to be confused on their own agency process, uneducated on how to assist Congressional and Senate staff. This is a tough one because the blame is not on our Liaisons, but on the Administration.
 - Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Applicants waiting on guidance to Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) mimicking the same message said that Afghan Nationals were allowed entry into the airport holding invalidated or unsupportive documentation like energy bills, yet SIV applicants and even our Legal Permanent Resident was denied entry with paperwork in hand.

This Senate office describes the consequences they faced due to the lack of communication between the Department, other agencies, and congressional staff, including a child with severe injuries:

TESTIMONY #9:

- M.H. of Portland, Maine drove to the Augusta, Maine [immigration] office with her three children who have been in Portland for about five years going through the citizenship process. M, who speaks no English, and her 16-year old daughter who translated, advocated for assistance for her husband S.A.S.J., who has started the immigration process. He is in Kabul. M also is seeking assistance for S's sister Z.K. She is also in Kabul. She has two children, both boys. One is currently in the hospital in Kabul after being shot in the face outside of Hamid Karzai International Airport. They showed me a video of him in his hospital bed. She has not started the immigration process for herself or her boys. M is also seeking help for her parents in Kabul M.S.H. and his wife B.M., who also is seeking help for her brother G.H. and his family who live in Logar. We began an inquiry with the Department of State on Aug 23, 2021. While going through the intake process with Chuck and showing the video, M fainted after becoming distraught. Augusta Emergency Services was called and brought her to MaineGeneral. The State Department acknowledged receipt on Aug 23. The child was shot in the face at Hamid-Karzai International Airport. He was initially refused entry to hospital and suffered extreme pain and trauma. Through Senator Todd Young's office we were able to get the child to the Indira Ghandi Children's Hospital to see a doctor there, whom I was able to reach. The doctors there concluded that the child's injuries were too severe for them to operate. He requires first-world surgery. He is on pain meds and antibiotics. He is not intubated. He is now home with his family. The child is the

maternal nephew of an Afghan Legal Permanent Resident (and pending N400 applicant) in Portland Maine. Her spouse, who is in Afghanistan with the family, has an active I-130: Immediate Relative petition.

TESTIMONY #10:

- The American Citizen who reached out for help works at a Veteran's Affairs office in Virginia. The citizen's spouse had an approved immigration petition and an interview date in 2020 for KBL, but the U.S. Embassy in Kabul closed due to COVID-19 and was never reopened for interviews for her type. She had an electronic visa on 8/24/21 and could not get through the gates at Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA).
 - From the American Citizen: *"5 days ago my wife entered the Kabul airport and slept on the gravel awaiting her flight to the USA. She was told to get in a car by U.S. forces to conduct biometrics. Shortly after she was dropped off outside the airport with no explanation."*
- Senator Collins office has contacted multiple border consulates/embassies including Doha and even if she COULD get there, they have told us they are unable to process her case.

This Senate office explains that American citizens had to resort to evacuation on their own merits including through private charter planes:

TESTIMONY #11:

- This group of Afghans had been on the ground transportation and were at the airport in line and ready to be evacuated several times. They were told to go home. Several members of the group were injured in the airport blast. One member of the group was 9 months pregnant, due to give birth any day. Had she gone to the hospital to give birth the Taliban would have found them.

After four members of the group were evacuated through the airport, two families, a total of 10 people, made it to the Pakistan border where they found the borders closed.

The private party our office was coordinating with was a former military member who was in direct contact with this group helping to coordinate on the ground movements to help them evacuate. Our office was attempting to get in touch with folks at the airport to allow these people in the gate at Hamid-Karzai International Airport. We were stymied at every point and to this day still have no idea how any of them managed to evacuate which leads us to understand that the State Department had nothing to do with their successful evacuation. Our office has not heard further from the State Department on the status of this group since August 28.

The following testimony by an office highlights the peril the lack of guidance put Afghans and Americans in place, leaving some without communications:

TESTIMONY #12:

- Our initial inquiry regarding this SIV case was made to the State Department on 8/13/21. Follow up inquiries were made to the State Department on 8/15/21, 8/16/21, 8/21/21, 8/23/21, and 8/29/21. The 8/16/21 follow-up inquiry to the State Department was to provide notice of his departure from Mazar and arrival in Kabul (see below for details). The first non-auto response received from the State Department was 8/29/21, which provided notice that he needed to contact the National Visa Center about an issue with his application. He had contacted the National Visa Center for assistance and status updates on multiple occasions prior to my receiving notice of the error from the State Department but had not received a response.

The individual in question was in Mazar-i-Sharif when we initially became aware of his case from a constituent who served with him. We advised the individual to stay put until the State Department provided further instruction, and, at that time, Mazar also appeared to be the safest place for him since it had not yet fallen to the Taliban. Once it became clear that U.S. evacuation efforts would be confined to the Hamid-Karzai International Airport, we informed him, and he made the decision to travel to Kabul to better position himself in the event the State Department would clear him for evacuation. We are unsure if he is still alive, as our last communication with him was 8/29/21.

Finally, the last testimony highlights that even the upper echelons of the State Department were unable to even guarantee safe passage for American citizens, who put their lives at risk to board private charter flights when our government left them behind on August 31:

TESTIMONY #13:

- Our office began working on this case in 2019. We emailed U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services and the National Visa Center throughout the process leading up to Afghanistan falling.
- We inquired with the State Department Task Force on 8/17/21, the Task Force emailed that our inquiry was forwarded to the appropriate team for action on 8/18/21. The family we were trying to assist received their access passes and visas on 8/24/21 and began trying to get to Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA), but were turned away every day. On 8/23/21 and 8/24/21 we called the State Department four times and left voicemails.
- On 8/26/21, after HKIA was attacked, and it became clear only certain American citizens and SIV holders would be cleared to enter HKIA, we began coordinating with NGOs on ground transportation for a group of 13 (four separate families/cases) to Mazar-i-Sharif, where charter flights had been departing earlier in the week. On 8/30/21, we provided head of the Task Force with the information on our group of 13, as well as notice of other American citizens in Mazar. In addition, we provided the Task Force notice and additional information surrounding the situation with the grounded charter flights in Mazar.
- After becoming aware that the Department and Task Force had been denying requests from NGOs for assistance in resolving the issues with grounded flights, we escalated the matter to the Secretary of State's office on 8/31/21. We connected NGOs to Secretary of State's office on 9/1/21. On 9/4/21, we received confirmation from the Department that the charter flights had received approval from the Department to land at Al Udeid Air Base (AUAB). The Department also confirmed that the landing sites in Doha, Qatar were prepared to accept

- the flights, if and when the flights received approval from the Taliban.
- We remained in nearly daily contact with both the Department and NGOs from 9/4/21 to 9/16/21, assisting where/when needed, as well as pressuring the Department to resolve the situation with the flights as soon as possible. We received confirmation from the Department 9/16/21 that wheels up for would likely be occurring in the coming days, with the first flight set to take off being the one carrying our group of 13. We received confirmation from both the Department and NGOs that the first flight carrying our group of 13 had departed Mazar for AUAB on 9/17/21.

ANNEX 6

Scoop: Leaked document reveals Biden's Afghan failures

[Jonathan Swan](#), [Hans Nichols](#)

February 1, 2022

<https://www.axios.com/leaked-document-reveals-bidens-afghan-failures-c27d790c-3a50-4734-8543-7db710898bb2.html>

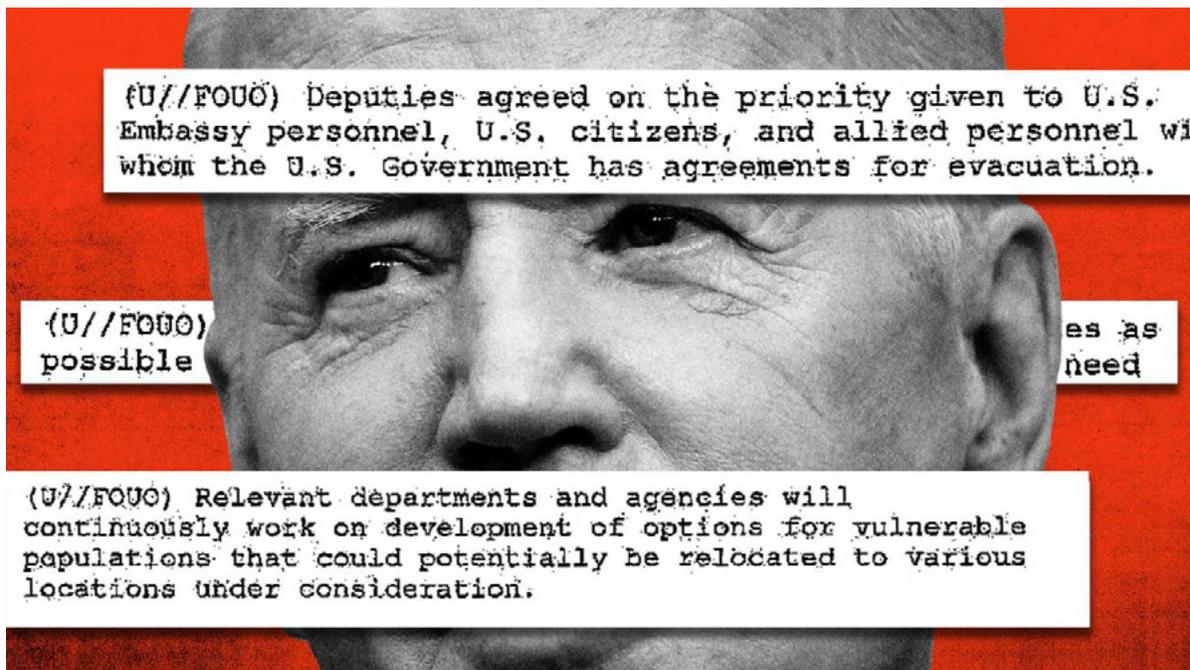


Photo illustration: Sarah Grillo/Axios. Photo: Drew Angerer/Getty Images

[Leaked notes](#) from a White House Situation Room meeting the day before Kabul fell shed new light on just how unprepared the Biden administration was to evacuate Afghan nationals who'd helped the United States in its 20-year war against the Taliban.

Why it matters: Hours before the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan's capital on Aug. 15, 2021, senior Biden administration officials were still discussing and assigning basic actions involved in a mass civilian evacuation.

- Outsiders were frustrated and suspicious the administration was having plenty of meetings but was stuck in bureaucratic inertia and lacked urgency until the last minute.

- While the word "immediately" peppers the document, it's clear officials were still scrambling to finalize their plans — on the afternoon of Aug. 14.
- For example, they'd just decided they needed to notify local Afghan staff "to begin to register their interest in relocation to the United States," the document says.
- And they were still determining which countries could serve as transit points for evacuees.

The big picture: President Biden was determined to end the country's involvement in its longest war, and last April he announced his plans to withdraw all U.S. forces from Afghanistan by Sept. 11, 2021.

President Trump had previously [cut a deal](#) for a U.S. withdrawal by May 2021.

- Biden's approval ratings still haven't recovered from the chaotic scenes of those final moments, with Afghans falling to their death from military transports and a suicide blast that killed 13 U.S. service members and scores of Afghans outside the gates of Hamid Karzai airport.
- The Atlantic reported this week that thousands of vulnerable Afghans remain [stuck in bureaucratic hell](#), terrified the Taliban they fought for years will hunt them down.
- Later this month, Congress will name members to a bipartisan, 12-person commission that will study the war and issue a report similar to the [9/11 Commission](#).

The details: Axios obtained the NSC's "[summary of conclusions](#)" for a meeting of the so-called Deputies Small Group.

It assembles top aides to various Cabinet members, and usually lays the groundwork for Deputies' or Principals' sessions, or works out practical details for executing decisions already made by their bosses.

- The document regarded "Relocations out of Afghanistan," and the meeting was held from 3:30-4:30pm on the afternoon of Aug. 14, Washington time.
- At that moment, Taliban fighters were descending upon Kabul.
- The meeting was chaired by National Security Council official Liz Sherwood-Randall and included senior officials across multiple agencies, including Gen. John Hyten, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Between the lines: The meeting notes highlight how many crucial actions the Biden administration was deciding at the last minute — just hours before Kabul would fall and former Afghan President Ashraf Ghani would flee his palace in a helicopter.

Action items decided in meeting included:

- "State will work to identify as many countries as possible to serve as transit points. Transit points need to be able to accommodate U.S. citizens, Afghan nationals, third country nationals, and other evacuees. **(Action: State, immediately)**"
- "Embassy Kabul will notify LES [locally employed staff] to begin to register their interest in relocation to the United States and begin to prepare immediately for departure... **(Action: Embassy Kabul, immediately)**"

What they're saying: "While we're not going to comment on leaked internal documents, cherry-picked notes from one meeting do not reflect the months of work that were already underway," NSC spokesperson Emily Horne told Axios.

- "Earlier that summer, we launched Operation Allies Refuge and had worked with Congress to pass legislation that gave us greater flexibility to quickly relocate Afghan partners," Horne said.
- "It was because of this type of planning and other efforts that we were able to facilitate the evacuation of more than 120,000 Americans, legal permanent residents, vulnerable Afghans and other partners."

Behind the scenes: By the time the Saturday afternoon meeting happened, senior Biden officials across the government had been meeting around the clock to deal with the high-speed unraveling of Afghanistan.

- The administration had taken some measures that would help them ultimately evacuate more than 120,000 people out of Kabul airport by Aug. 31 — the president's revised withdrawal deadline.
- Amid chaos and [death](#), the effort to remove both U.S. citizens and cooperative Afghan nationals was executed in partnership with allies and many desperate improvised efforts from the private sector and veterans groups.
- Troops were pre-positioned in the region so they could get quickly to Kabul airport to run the evacuation. The administration had accelerated the Special Immigrant Visa [SIV] approvals. And Biden officials had explored with other countries the possibilities of them serving as transit points for evacuees — which ultimately led to a network that hosted tens of thousands of Afghans waiting for processing.
- Nonetheless, many of the key decisions hadn't been made on the eve of Kabul's fall.

The president himself — and his intelligence community — overestimated the ability of the Afghan military to defend their territory against the Taliban.

- And complicating the situation further, Ghani had personally pleaded with Biden not to do mass evacuations of Afghans earlier in the year.
- He feared it would signal a loss of faith in his government.

The bottom line: Many outside advisers were sounding the alarm as the Taliban swept through provincial capitals heading into August.

- "I kept being told by people in the [White House] the thing they were most concerned about was the optics of a chaotic evacuation," said Matt Zeller, a former CIA officer who contacted administration officials in February 2021 about protecting Afghans who worked with the Americans. "They treated us like we were Chicken Little. They didn't believe the sky was falling."
- "On the 13th of July, we offered to work with them to help evacuate our partners," Zeller added. "We all saw this disaster coming before the inevitable occurred. They didn't get back to us until Aug 15, the day Kabul fell."

Mark Jacobson, deputy NATO representative in Afghanistan during the Obama administration, told Axios: "That so much planning, prioritizing and addressing of key questions had not been completed, even as Kabul was about to fall, underscores the absence of adequate interagency planning."

- "This is especially surprising given the depth of experience on Afghanistan and contingency operations at that table."

Read the document:

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NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20504

(U) Summary of Conclusions for
Meeting of the Deputies Small Group
DATE: August 14, 2021
LOCATION: White House Situation Room
TIME: 3:30 - 4:30 p.m.

SUBJECT: (U//FOUO) Summary of Conclusions for DSG Meeting on
Relocations out of Afghanistan

(U) Participants:

Chair
Liz Sherwood-Randall

DHS (SVTC)
[REDACTED]

OVP
[REDACTED]

CBP (SVTC)
[REDACTED]

State (SVTC)
[REDACTED]

TSA (SVTC)
[REDACTED]

Embassy Kabul (SVTC)
[REDACTED]

HSCIS (SVTC)
[REDACTED]

DOD (SVTC)
[REDACTED]

OMB (SVTC)
[REDACTED]

USDS
No Representative

DOJ (SVTC)
No Representative

USUN (SVTC)
[REDACTED]

DNI (SVTC)
[REDACTED]

HHS
No Representative

CDC
No Representative

CIA (SVTC)
[REDACTED]

ACF
No Representative

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JCS (SVTC)

[REDACTED]

USAID (SVTC)

[REDACTED]

NCTC (SVTC)

[REDACTED]

FBI (SVTC)

[REDACTED]

NSC Staff

[REDACTED]

NSC Staff (Continued)

[REDACTED]

(U) Summary of Conclusions(U) It was agreed that:

- (U//FOUO) Deputies agreed on the priority given to U.S. Embassy personnel, U.S. citizens, and allied personnel with whom the U.S. Government has agreements for evacuation.
- (U//FOUO) Deputies agreed that the following individuals and their families will be relocated as soon as possible directly to the United States via a transit point:
 - U.S. citizens living in Afghanistan and family members;
 - U.S. Government direct-hire and third country contract staff;
 - U.S. Embassy Locally Employed Staff (LES), regardless of length of employment;
 - Afghan contract staff of the U.S. Embassy;
 - Central Intelligence Agency priority partners;
 - Afghan Special Immigrant Visa applicants who are post-Chief of Mission (COM) and have approved I-360 petitions.
- (U) Pre-departure actions:
 - (U//FOUO) The Department of State will immediately stand up a communications/manifest team which will be responsible

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for notifying individuals from various priority lists of their travel eligibility and collect biographic information for all travelers to be manifested. Across all categories, Deputies agreed in the near term that we may begin relocating nuclear family units, as defined by the Immigration and Nationality Act. Deputies will consider whether additional family member categories should be included. State communications/manifest team will liaison with the Department of Defense (DOD) to ensure maximum occupancy for every available seat on all outbound flights. Eligible travelers will begin to depart Kabul on August 15, 2021. (Action: State, immediately)

- (U//FOUO) DOD, in coordination with the State Task Force, will seek to manifest at least 5,000 individuals for relocation per day from Afghanistan. (Action: DOD and State, immediately)
- (U//FOUO) All departments and agencies will transmit their lists of priority populations to be considered for relocation as P-1/P-2 referrals to the State Task Force. (Action: All, immediately)
- (U//FOUO) DOD will contact their partners who are eligible for P-1 and P-2 referral programs, many of whom are Afghan pilots and female service members, to notify them of their eligibility and advise them to be ready for a possible near-term evacuation. (Action: DOD, immediately)
- (U//FOUO) State will work to identify as many countries as possible to serve as transit points. Transit points need to be able to accommodate U.S. citizens, Afghan nationals, third country nationals, and other evacuees. U.S. citizens and third country nationals will be processed for immediate onwards travel to their final destination, preferably via commercial flights. Afghan allies at risk and other Afghan nationals may need to remain temporarily at a transit point for further screening and vetting and assignment to onward travel destination. (Action: State, immediately)
- (U//FOUO) The National Security Council (NSC) staff will convene a sub-Interagency Policy Committee on August 15, 2021, to address the question of whether foreign nationals who are immediate family members of U.S. citizens in Afghanistan can be brought to the continental United

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States, or will require additional screening and vetting.
(Action: NSC staff, by August 15, 2021)

- (U//FOUO) Embassy Kabul will notify LES to begin to register their interest in relocation to the United States and begin to prepare immediately for departure.
(Action: Embassy Kabul, immediately)
- (U) Post-Departure Actions:
 - (U//FOUO) State and DOD will begin planning transit processing for evacuees after departure from Kabul. Evacuees may require additional medical screening such as COVID-19, and additional screening and vetting before moving to their final destination. (Action: State, DOD, DHS, CDC, and others as needed by August 15, 2021)
 - (U//FOUO) State and DOD will coordinate manifests for onwards travel to the continental United States for Afghan evacuees to include newly added Camp McCoy, Fort Lee, Fort Bliss, Camp Roberts, and any other available location. DOD will assess current capacity and addition time needed to increase it. (Action: State, DOD, DHS, CDC, and others as needed by August 15, 2021)
 - (U//FOUO) The NSC staff will chair a small group discussion to explore ways to engage Canada and other third countries, such as North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies, to host Afghan allies at risk, such as journalists, women, human rights advocates and others who have received either not been vetted or have received limited vetting.
(Action: NSC Staff and State by August 15, 2021)
 - (U//FOUO) Relevant departments and agencies will continuously work on development of options for vulnerable populations that could potentially be relocated to various locations under consideration.

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- 2 SFRC minority staff conversations with State Department officials in November 2021.
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- 6 Ned Price, "Department Press Briefing – August 12, 2021," *U.S. Department of State*, August 12, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/briefings/departments-press-briefing-august-12-2021/>.
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- 11 James E. Risch, Questions for the Record Submitted to U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, September 14, 2021.
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- 15 See Austin, all senators, September 27, 2021.
- 16 See Annex 6.
- 17 See Annex 6.
- 18 U.S. Department of Transportation, *Flight Operations by Foreign Civil Aircraft Operators in Support of Certain Afghanistan Emergency Evacuation Operations (August 20, 2021-September 30, 2021)*, August 20, 2021, <https://www.regulations.gov/document/DOT-OST-2021-0097-0001>.
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- 23 Beth Jones (CARE) et al., unclassified congressional staff briefing, December 14, 2021.
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Minority Report
February 2022