



"There's going to be no circumstance where you see people being lifted off the roof of an embassy." - President Biden, July 8, 2021

House Republican Interim Report A “Strategic Failure:” Assessing the Administration’s Afghanistan Withdrawal

Congressman Michael McCaul, Ranking Member
U.S. House of Representatives
One Hundred and Seventeenth Congress

“And whatever happens in Afghanistan, if there is a significant deterioration in security, that could well happen – we have discussed this before. I do not think it is going to be something that happens from a Friday to a Monday. So, I would not necessarily equate the departure of forces in July, August, or by early September with some kind of immediate deterioration in the situation.”

- **Secretary of State Antony Blinken**, June 7, 2021

“The first meeting I had with him when he became president, the senior level meeting, it was clear where his head was—which was that this was a godforsaken country, Afghanistan, and that we were never going to fix it... his perspective was clear,”

- **Former U.S. Special Representative for Afghan Reconciliation Amb. Zalmay Khalilzad**, January 2022

“I do think that conditions are, more likely than not, to develop over the course of time that will allow for the reconstitution of al-Qaida and or ISIS. And that time varies depending on which analyst you're listening to, but sometime between say six to 12 and maybe 36 months.”

-**General Mark Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff**, October 2021

The Girls We Left Behind

A week into the evacuation, it was clear women and girls were at a distinct disadvantage in their attempts to get to safety. Women who attempted to get through the crowds at HKIA were beaten and shot at for not being accompanied by a male, sexually assaulted, trampled, and forced to stand in wastewater for hours — only to be turned away if they did not have the right piece of paper or had not been hand-selected because of a political connection.

In response, those involved in the rescue efforts for high-risk women turned to bus convoys to get them safely into the airport. These buses ferried women who had helped build Afghanistan's sturdiest democratic institutions and resources: members of parliament, senior ministry staff, judges, civil society leaders, university instructors and students, businesswomen, as well as those most at risk — victims of gender-based violence, journalists, and even an all-girl orchestra. The bus manifests were approved by the U.S. government and authorized to enter the airport.

In the waning days of the NEO, more than 1,000 women and girls waited more than 24 hours on dozens of buses, circling the airport and avoiding Taliban checkpoints, only to be told time and again they were not allowed to enter HKIA. Less than one third of those women have been able to escape since the evacuation ended.

The majority of those lucky few who were able to escape were not brought to the United States. Instead, they were resettled in third countries, such as the UK, Canada, Norway, Portugal, and Greece.

We now know through data from the Departments of State and Homeland Security that only approximately 25 percent of those evacuated during the NEO in Afghanistan were women or girls. To put this figure in context, historically, women and girls represent more than half of emergency refugee outflows.



Photo from Reuters

The rest remain under the Taliban's rule of terror, where they are forced to stay in their homes while they and their rights are stripped away from them. Every day brings a new draconian mandate, a new loss, a new darkness.

One year later, America remains closed to Afghan women and girls. The majority of women in Afghanistan who qualify to come to the U.S. are stuck in an Orwellian "Priority" or P1/P2 refugee process that requires them to escape Afghanistan on their own and live a perilous existence in an unwelcoming 3rd country — potentially for years — awaiting adjudication by a broken U.S. system.

This is the legacy of the Biden administration in Afghanistan: failing to listen to the Afghan women who warned that the Taliban still were the same monsters, and who instead partnered with those monsters on a botched evacuation that cost Afghan women everything and shamed our nation.

By Ambassador Kelley Currie, Former Ambassador-at-Large for the State Department's Office of Global Women's Issues

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On April 14, 2021, President Joe Biden announced his decision to unconditionally withdraw all U.S. military personnel from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021. Over the following four months, the administration repeatedly delayed critical action that was necessary to mitigate the likely consequences of the decision. The result of their inaction was a chaotic Non-combatant Evacuation Operation (NEO) where 13 U.S. servicemembers lost their lives and more than 800 Americans were abandoned behind enemy lines.

This report will examine the Biden administration's decisions and actions in detail, from the announcement of the president's decision to withdraw to the months following that decision, the resulting Taliban seizure of power, the chaotic and deadly evacuation, and the long-term impact the withdrawal has had on the United States and our allies.

Decision to Withdraw Based on Flawed Rationale

In his speech announcing America's unconditional withdrawal from Afghanistan, President Biden stated the decision was based on many factors, including:

- ▶ Consultations with and advice from both our allies and senior U.S. military advisors;
- ▶ A withdrawal was the only option if we did not want to go back to war with the Taliban;
- ▶ Afghan forces were capable of defending their country without any direct U.S. military support;
- ▶ The 2020 Doha agreement negotiated by the Trump administration forced the withdrawal; and
- ▶ The U.S. mission to kill Osama bin Laden and eradicate al Qaeda had been accomplished.

However, the Committee Minority now believes none of these claims were accurate. And worse, President Biden was likely aware they were not accurate when he made his case to the American people in April 2021.

There is ample evidence, including direct testimony from American military leaders and top NATO allies that they supported a continued conditions-based deployment in Afghanistan. They believed the best option was to keep an advisory and counterterrorism mission in place that consisted of 2,500 U.S. military personnel along with 6,000 mostly NATO forces.

Many of President Biden's diplomats agreed with the conditions-based approach favored by senior commanders and key allies. But the president opted to reject their advice, instead pursuing an unconditional withdrawal, and citing the need to deploy "tens of thousands" additional U.S. troops to pursue the conditions-based approach. However, the estimate provided by Biden is not the one shared by the U.S. military despite the president's claims to the contrary.

The Biden administration's own internal assessments understood that the Afghan military would be unable to defend the country from the Taliban without American air support, military advisors, and contractors, who they relied upon to enable the operation of the Afghan Air Force. The president was warned repeatedly that the return of the Taliban was a question of when, not if. And the resurgence of al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations was by far the most likely scenario in a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

The 2020 Doha Agreement negotiated by the former administration was predicated on conditions by the Taliban that were not being met – specifically cutting their close ties to terrorist entities like al Qaeda. Their failure to adhere to the agreement nullified the U.S. requirement to withdraw. In addition, President Biden has since admitted he would have withdrawn even without the Doha Agreement.

While al Qaeda had been somewhat degraded in Afghanistan by April 2021, they were still present in Afghanistan and operating freely in Taliban controlled areas. A U.N. Security Council report released shortly after the president's decision to withdraw found al Qaeda was present in at least 15 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces.

Failure to Plan

In the four months from when President Biden announced his plan to unconditionally withdraw until the fall of Kabul, the Committee Minority has found the State Department took very few substantive steps to prepare for the consequences that were expected.

During that time, the Biden administration failed to secure agreements with any of Afghanistan's neighbors that would allow the U.S. military to establish bases to allow for robust counterterrorism or intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) operations against a resurgent al Qaeda and ISIS-K. To this day, we still have no such basing agreements with neighboring countries.

The Committee Minority has also learned very little was done to prepare for a Taliban takeover of the country or a resulting NEO. Instead, the Biden administration waited until August 14, 2021, just hours before the Taliban seized Kabul, to begin making key decisions about evacuations, including the establishment of transit centers in third countries. This delay led to capacity issues during the evacuation which resulted in flights being suspended at various points and people being stranded in deteriorating humanitarian conditions. Military commanders have clearly stated there was an utter lack of urgency on the part of the White House, the National Security Council (NSC), and the State Department as it pertained to an evacuation, despite repeated dire warnings.

And, despite repeated warnings by Members of Congress, veterans' groups, and other volunteer organizations, the Biden administration made almost no effort to evacuate Afghan partners who fought side-by-side with our military. This includes failing to establish "lily pads" in the third countries that could serve as a safe haven while their paperwork continued to be processed. By the time the NEO began, only 1,962 SIV applicants and their families were evacuated from the country out of tens of thousands who were still waiting.

The Chaotic and Deadly Evacuation

The Committee Minority has also found the Biden administration's failure to plan – specifically the State Department – led to chaos and confusion throughout the NEO. The scenes were played out live on televisions all around the world of people desperately trying to find a way into the airport and onto a plane that would take them to safety.

The problems during the NEO were exacerbated by repeated mixed messages from the State Department to Americans and Afghan allies on the ground, a lack of proper equipment and personnel at the airport, and a desperate security situation with American troops penned into the airport while the Taliban "patrolled" the streets along the perimeter. Some of the Committee Minority's top findings of the administration's mistakes were:

- ▶ At the height of the evacuation, only 36 U.S. consular officers were on the ground in Kabul, despite needing to process more than one hundred thousand evacuees.
 - ▶ According to testimony from outside veterans groups, the evacuation was so disorganized that senior leaders in Vice President Kamala Harris' office and First Lady Jill Biden's office, as well as one of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, requested assistance evacuating people inside the country from these groups.
 - ▶ Some 1,450 Afghan children were evacuated without their parents, and efforts to reunite many of these separated children with their relatives are ongoing months after their arrival in the US.
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- Despite acknowledging for months that not evacuating them represented a significant security risk, the Biden administration has to this day failed to make any effort to prioritize the evacuation of U.S. trained Afghan commandos and other elite units who possess sensitive knowledge about U.S. military operations. Many of those personnel have been forced to seek refuge in Iran where they could be exploited for their information.
- The Biden administration repeatedly ignored warnings that it was moving too slow to evacuate former interpreters and other at-risk allies, ignoring an offer from Guam to serve as an interim processing facility for these SIV applicants. The administration similarly rejected an offer from Pakistan to have a facility there serve as a transit facility for evacuees during the NEO, despite other transit facilities in Qatar and Germany reaching capacity, thereby slowing the evacuation
- The Biden administration repeatedly misled the American people about the real situation on the ground in Kabul, issuing public statements that were in direct opposition to the internal reports being sent by the State Department and U.S. military
- Despite claiming a robust deliberation process on withdrawal, senior Biden administration officials acknowledge that the recommendations of senior military advisors, diplomats and allies were ignored

The Committee Minority also has compiled proof senior Biden administration political appointees repeatedly misled the American public about the situation on the ground in Kabul, issuing wildly Pollyannaish statements about progress at the airport and the Taliban's cooperation in carrying out the evacuation. Administration officials made these statements despite press reports showing an utterly chaotic situation on the ground in Afghanistan and at the hastily assembled transit locations around the world. Many of these public statements directly contradicted internal assessments, which were provided to the Committee Minority by whistleblowers.

In addition, as a result of the State Department's failure to plan, the Committee Minority has found they were unable to provide adequate assistance to U.S. citizens (AMCITs), lawful permanent residents (LPRs), Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders and applicants, and other at-risk Afghans who were attempting to evacuate the country during the NEO. Would be evacuees were sent conflicting messages, told they could not be helped, or left standing outside the gates of the airport desperate to get in with no assistance. Attempts by Members of Congress and their staff to help their constituents or other would be evacuees were often stymied by out of office replies to email requests and broken links to webpages meant to submit information.

One of the most tragic outcomes of the Biden administration's failure to plan was the August 26, 2021 bombing at Abbey Gate that resulted in the death of 13 U.S. servicemembers and 160 Afghans, and the wounding of 45 additional U.S. servicemembers. Several former officials told the Committee Minority they believe this tragedy could have possibly been prevented if the administration had accepted the Taliban's offer on August 15, 2021 that would have given the U.S. greater control of security in Kabul, thereby allowing U.S. forces to push out the security perimeter. The Committee Minority received ample proof the Taliban repeatedly failed to cooperate and often impeded the evacuation of Americans and at-risk Afghans. In addition, if U.S. troops had not been penned into the airport, the crowds outside the gate would not have been packed so closely together, a situation that contributed to the high death and injury count.

The Aftermath

Following the evacuation debacle, the Committee Minority believes America's standing in the world has been degraded, the U.S. is less safe than it was before, and those Afghans most at-risk of Taliban reprisals remain trapped in Afghanistan. That includes:

- Tens of thousands of former elite Afghan military personnel who could pose a security risk to the U.S. if coopted by America's adversaries;
 - Former interpreters and other Afghans who fought side-by-side with American troops;
 - Women leaders and soldiers who were promised sanctuary by the American government;
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One year after the last U.S. troops left Afghanistan, the Committee Minority has found the Biden administration still lacks a plan to help these at-risk Afghan allies who fought shoulder to shoulder with U.S. forces, despite the administration admitting these former battlefield allies have been subjected to killings and forced disappearances.

Following the unconditional withdrawal, the Committee Minority also believes Afghanistan has once again become a safe haven for terrorist entities. The unconditional military withdrawal and the simultaneous end of the American diplomatic presence in Kabul would leave the U.S. government without a counterterrorism partner in an Afghanistan now awash with militants and terrorists – many released from prison by the Taliban. These terrorists now have the ability to train freely and to potentially access the over \$7 billion of U.S. supplied weapons, ground vehicles, and aircraft they seized.

The American people have seen proof of al Qaeda's presence in Afghanistan: Ayman al Zawahiri was found living freely in downtown Kabul in a home reportedly owned by a member of the Haqqani network, the members of which occupy senior positions in the new Taliban regime. Thankfully al Zawahiri was killed in a U.S. drone strike last month but officials warn that al Qaeda and ISIS-K continue to grow their presence in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

The choices made in the corridors of power in D.C. led to tragic yet avoidable outcomes: 13 dead service members, American lives still at great risk, increased threats to our homeland security, tarnished standing abroad for years to come, and emboldened enemies across the globe. President Biden's own officials have described the end of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan as a "strategic failure" and "an ugly final phase." Yet, to date, no senior administration officials have been held accountable.

President Biden has also repeatedly attempted to claim that these outcomes were unavoidable, saying in August 2021, "The idea that somehow there's a way to have gotten out without chaos ensuing, I don't know how that happens." But those who have paid attention, especially those brave volunteers who stepped up and helped rescue thousands of vulnerable Afghans when the U.S. government was missing in action, know that this is not the truth.

*"They keep saying this was inevitable, but **there absolutely was a way to avoid this** — if that's not the definition of gaslighting, I don't what is."*

- Chris Purdy of Human Rights First, August, 2021

The Committee Minority believes a much more thorough examination is needed to find complete answers as to how this happened and how to ensure something like this does not happen again.

Attempts to receive requested documentation and transcribed interview requests with key officials of the decision to withdraw and the NEO have been ignored by the State Department. And to date, the House Foreign Affairs Committee has only held one open, full committee hearing with a senior Biden administration official on the Afghanistan withdrawal.

Therefore, the Committee Minority believes next steps should include:

- ▶ The State Department providing the committee with all previously requested documentation;
 - ▶ The State Department providing the requested officials for transcribed interviews; and
 - ▶ The House Foreign Affairs Committee setting a robust schedule of open hearings with senior Biden administration officials who were responsible for the withdrawal and the NEO.
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II. INTRODUCTION

a. Background

The U.S. military's involvement in Afghanistan began on October 7, 2001, part of a campaign aimed at retaliating against al Qaeda and the terror group's Taliban allies in the wake of the deadly September 11th attacks that killed nearly 3,000 Americans.

Backed by American airstrikes, U.S. Special Operations Forces fighting alongside local Afghan allies from the Northern Alliance were able to drive the Taliban from power, dismantle al Qaeda's training camps, and support the establishment of an internationally backed government in Kabul which oversaw dramatic gains in health, education and women's rights with the end of the Taliban's medieval style repression.

U.S. troop levels peaked at about 100,000, joined by some 40,000 NATO and non-NATO allies, during the height of the counterinsurgency campaign against a resurgent Taliban in 2011 but soon declined to about 10,000 in 2015 when U.S. forces shifted to a primarily supporting role, with Afghan National Army forces taking responsibility for securing the country. The new smaller NATO-led training and advisory mission was named Operation Resolute Support.

U.S. forces remained in an advisory and supporting role, being reduced to 8,600 in early 2020 as part of the Doha agreement, and then down to some 2,500 personnel by early 2021 – until President Biden ended the U.S. military mission later in 2021.

More than 775,000 U.S. troops served in Afghanistan during the 20-year mission there. Some 2,300 U.S. military personnel died serving in Afghanistan with another 20,000 being wounded.

The Department of Defense estimates that the U.S. government spent close to \$1 trillion on military operations and reconstruction costs.

b. Methodology

The Committee Minority conducted an extensive investigation in an effort to clarify why President Biden decided to fully withdraw from Afghanistan; what was done to prepare for the that complete withdrawal; how the noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO) went so badly; and what implications the withdrawal and the subsequent collapse of the Afghan government will have on the United States. The overall goal was to determine how we can ensure something like this does not happen again, and to hold any official found to be responsible for the failures accountable.

To gain more perspective from the administration, the Committee Minority submitted a request for transcribed interviews with 34 administration officials involved in the Afghanistan evacuation effort. In addition, the Committee Minority also sent multiple letters to State Department leaders asking a series of questions and requesting relevant documents, only to receive either paltry responses that appear cut and pasted from previous form letters or no response at all. Other congressional committees have sent similar requests for information, only to be similarly rebuffed by the administration.

Unfortunately, the Committee Minority's attempts to gain this critical information from the Biden administration have been met by significant resistance. To date, the State Department has provided none of the requested documents; none of the requested transcribed interviews; and no substantive answers to the requested questions.

Regrettably, the majority party in the House of Representatives has been unwilling to join in the aforementioned requests for information pertaining to Afghanistan. Similarly, in October 2021, an attempt to use a procedural move known as Resolutions of Inquiry (ROI) so that additional information pertaining to the withdrawal and evacuation from Afghanistan could be obtained was blocked by the Democrats on the House Rules Committee. They recently removed the indefinite hold on ROIs, and the Committee Minority has once again submitted an updated ROI in the hopes of getting the critical information that has been requested.

In order to fill in the gaps caused by the Biden administration's refusal to provide the Committee Minority with the requested information, much of this interim report is based off an examination of available material derived primarily from open-source documents, as well as interviews with U.S. officials and civilians involved in evacuating U.S. citizens and America's Afghan allies from Afghanistan. In addition, it also includes key evidence brought to the Committee Minority by whistleblowers. Many of these individuals agreed to speak to the Committee Minority's staff on the condition of anonymity. This interim report is also based on documents submitted by whistleblowers as well as a series of sworn statements made by U.S. military personnel that were part of the army investigation into the deadly August 26, 2021 bombing at Abbey Gate.

c. Glossary of Terms

AMCIT	This is an acronym used for American citizens.
Baron Hotel	The Baron Hotel is situated directly across the street from HKIA and was used as an operating base for the UK embassy and military.
CENTCOM	U.S. Central Command, oversees U.S. military operations in the Middle East and Central Asia, to include Afghanistan
HKIA	Hamid Karzai International Airport is Kabul's primarily airport. It includes both a civilian airfield and a military airfield.
ISIS-K	ISIS-Khorosan, ISIS' affiliate in Afghanistan
ISR	Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
LPR	A Legal Permanent Resident is someone who holds a U.S. green card.
NEO	A Non-combatant Evacuation Operations is ordered by the State Department and run by the Defense Department. It allows Americans and our allies to quickly leave a country if danger is present.
Serena Hotel	The Serena Hotel served as the Qatari's embassy in Afghanistan.
SIV	A Special Immigrant Visa is one that is granted specifically to people who have assisted the U.S. in military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.
USFOR-A	U.S. Forces Afghanistan

III. EVALUATING PRESIDENT BIDEN'S DECISION TO WITHDRAW

*"I felt like I had received a physical blow when he named that date, the **20 years after the horrors of 9/11 that we all witnessed**, that he would choose that date over all others for the final US evacuation. I think he realized it, too, eventually and changed the calendar."*

- Former U.S. Ambassador Ryan Crocker, May 2021

On April 14, 2021, President Biden announced the United States would completely withdraw all U.S. troops from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021. In his speech, he laid out why he believed the U.S. should withdraw all U.S. military personnel and the supposed steps he would take to ensure there would not be "a hasty rush to the exit." This section will examine the case President Biden made in defending his decision to withdraw the majority of U.S. troops and all direct military support to the Afghan government, analyzing the validity of these statements given the information that has since come to light. Newly disclosed information, to include testimony by top U.S. military leaders have demonstrated the administration made several misleading claims and incorrect statements in the course of defending its decision to unconditionally withdraw – statements they almost certainly knew were not true at the time.

a. President Biden's Argument to Withdraw

In his speech on April 14, 2021, and throughout the military's retrograde leading up to August 15, 2021, President Biden and his allies reiterated several reasons for making the decision to withdraw all U.S. military personnel.

First, the president claimed the decision to completely withdraw was made "after consulting closely with our allies and partners, with our military leaders and intelligence personnel, with our diplomats and our development experts, with Congress and the Vice President." He later reiterated this point saying the withdrawal would be done "in full coordination with our allies and partners." The implication was that our allies and the president's national security advisors had all agreed an unconditional withdrawal was the best course of action.

Second, the president made the argument the United States could not maintain our military presence in the country without a "return to war with the Taliban." He would use this argument repeatedly over the next four months, insisting a relatively small counterterrorism and advisory force of 2,500 U.S. personnel – alongside thousands of allied troops from other countries – could not maintain our military presence. He claimed the U.S. would need tens of thousands of additional U.S. troops in the country to rebuff a hypothetical Taliban assault on U.S. and international forces.

Third, he claimed the agreement forged between the Trump administration and the Taliban in Doha, Qatar in 2020 tied his hands and forced the withdrawal, stating, "I inherited a diplomatic agreement, duly negotiated between the government of the United States and the Taliban, that all U.S. forces would be out of Afghanistan by May 1, 2021...That's what we inherited — that commitment."

Fourth, the president similarly claimed the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan was no longer necessary because “the reason” the U.S. military intervened in the country in 2001 was “to ensure Afghanistan would not be used as a base from which to attack our homeland again. We did that. We accomplished that objective.” He later reiterated at the end of his speech, “We went to war with clear goals. We achieved those objectives...al Qaeda is degraded in Afghanistan.”

And finally, he claimed the Afghan military was well-trained and well-equipped and could handle the task of keeping the Taliban at bay without direct international support, stating the U.S. and our allies had “trained and equipped a standing force of over 300,000 Afghan personnel today and hundreds of thousands over the past two decades.”

b. Claim: Advisors and Allies Supported the Full Withdrawal

“Mr. Biden’s decision to pull out of Afghanistan was evidence of America’s decline as a constructive global power, a potentially catastrophic development for the EU that urgently required the bloc to take a more independent stance, an adviser to Ms. Merkel said.”

- The Wall Street Journal, September 22, 2021

Upon announcing his decision to withdraw American military advisors from Afghanistan, President Biden and members of his administration stressed that the decision had been the result of a lengthy consultative review process where all contingencies were examined. And throughout the four months after the president announced the withdrawal and even the fall of Kabul in mid-August, the president repeatedly said or implied our NATO allies, the intelligence community, and the president’s top military advisors supported this decision to completely withdraw.

However, this assertion was challenged almost immediately, including in a *Politico* article on April 14, 2021 that cited multiple sources claiming the decision to completely withdraw was made against the wishes of top Pentagon advisors. In response, White House NSC Spokesperson Emily Horne told the outlet the story was “completely inaccurate and poorly-informed.”

On August 19, 2021, as American citizens and America’s Afghan allies desperately tried to escape the country now controlled by the Taliban, President Biden once again told George Stephanopoulos that senior military commanders had not recommended keeping some 2,500 U.S. military personnel in Afghanistan. He and other members of his administration followed this up by claiming that leaving level of U.S. forces, in any event, was not feasible.

However, it’s clear now that was not accurate. In fact, top military advisors recommended the president keep a 2,500-strong U.S. contingent in the country that could conduct counterterrorism operations and support Afghan troops. As General Frank McKenzie, the then Commander of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), testified in October 2021, “My concern was that if we withdrew below 2,500 and went to zero, that the Afghan military and government would collapse.” Gen. Milley agreed with Gen. McKenzie, testifying to the Senate Armed Services Committee in September 2021, “My assessment was, back in the fall of '20 and it remained consistent throughout, that we should keep a steady state of 2,500.”

These approximately 2,500 U.S. troops would have been bolstered by some 7,000 non-U.S. military personnel from 35 NATO and non-NATO countries as well as supporting contractors which were critical to the Afghan National Army's continued operations. Military contractors, as well as NATO and other allied forces were required to withdraw once the drawdown was ordered due to the unique enabling capabilities possessed by the U.S. military.

The advice of President Biden's top generals was shared directly with the president – meaning he was very aware of their recommendations when he falsely claimed they favored the unconditional withdrawal and did not recommend a small, advisory and counterterrorism force remain. Gen. McKenzie told the Senate Armed Services Committee in September 2021, "I recommended that we maintain 2,500 troops in Afghanistan ...I am confident that the President heard all the recommendations."

America's Allies React to President Biden's Unconditional Withdrawal

"It is not a decision that we hoped for."

*"Withdrawal under these circumstances would be perceived as **a strategic victory for the Taliban**, which would weaken the Alliance and embolden extremists the world over."*

- Gen. Nick Carter, then UK Chief of the Defense Staff, 2021

"Whatever happened to 'America is back'?"

- Tobias Ellwood, Chair of the UK Parliament's Defence Committee, August 2021

*"The Biden government have just come in and, without looking at what is happening on the ground, have taken a unilateral decision, **throwing us and everybody else to the fire.**"*

- Khalid Mahmood, Former UK defence minister and current Labour Member of Parliament, August 2021

*"I say this with a heavy heart and with horror over what is happening, but **the early withdrawal was a serious and far-reaching miscalculation** by the current administration. This does fundamental damage to the political and moral credibility of the West."*

- Norbert Rottgen, chairman of the German parliament's foreign relations committee, August 2021

*"[T]he **greatest debacle that NATO has experienced** since its foundation."*

- Armin Laschet, a senior figure in the then-ruling Christian Democrat party of Germany

America's Allies React to President Biden's Unconditional Withdrawal

"The distrust towards NATO from a number of member countries will grow after this experience, because they will say - if you failed in Afghanistan, where is a guarantee that you won't fail in any other critical situation?"

- Milos Zeman, President of the Czech Republic, August 2021

"This kind of troop withdrawal caused chaos. Chaos causes additional suffering...Unfortunately, the west, and Europe in particular, are showing they are weaker globally."

- Artis Pabriks, Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister of Latvia, August 2021.

"[A] catastrophe for the Afghan people, for Western values and credibility and for the developing of international relations."

- Josep Borrell Fontelles, EU foreign affairs chief

*"The reason the United States pulled all of its forces out was that President Biden was following a political agenda to get them all out by the anniversary of 9/11 and **not that there was a strategic reason for it.**"*

- Report by Australia's Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, January 2022

At the time of Biden's April 14, 2021 unconditional withdrawal announcement, some 7,000 non-U.S. military personnel from 35 NATO and non-NATO countries supported the mission in Afghanistan. That was approximately twice the size of the American military contingent. In his defense of the decision to withdraw, President Biden told reporters: "I have seen no question of our credibility from our allies around the world."

But we now know many U.S. allies actually opposed President Biden's unconditional withdrawal, revealing major fissures in the Biden administration's relationship with America's closest allies.

The opinion that the unconditional withdrawal hurt U.S. credibility is not limited to America's closest allies. Gen. Milley told Congress "I think 'damaged' is one word that could be used, yes."

These international reactions notwithstanding, the Biden administration has pointed to NATO's eventual acceptance of the withdrawal decision as evidence that "NATO immediately and unanimously embraced it," according to Sec. Blinken in testimony to the House Foreign Affairs Committee in September 2021.

While NATO did issue a statement accepting the decision after it was announced, media reports indicate Sec. Blinken had been made fully aware of our allies' opposition to an unconditional withdrawal prior to its being announced. Reportedly, their opposition was so strong, it changed Sec. Blinken's position on the issue.

During a NATO summit in Brussels, Belgium in March 2021, Sec. Blinken reportedly phoned President Biden to tell him he had received "a jolt" from the other Alliance ministers "in quadrasonic sound," or surround sound. They believed the U.S. should leverage its departure to gain concrete steps toward a political settlement, as opposed to the non-conditions-based withdrawal avored by the president.

Special Envoy Khalilzad corroborated this story, telling the Committee Minority our allies, "avored [a conditions-based approach] but the President at the end did not."

In fact, allied countries such as the UK explored keeping military forces in Afghanistan even without the U.S. being present. They eventually deemed it logistically impossible, forcing them to accept the U.S. decision to withdraw after it was announced – even if they did not agree with it.

"We looked at this several times and there was no realistic possibility of staying without the Americans and it was clear the President had made that decision and he was going," Sir Stephen Lovegrove, the UK National Security Adviser, told the UK Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee.

Asked in September 2021 about opposition from NATO allies to the withdrawal decision prior to its being announced, Secretary Blinken would only say "in the discussions and conversations that we had throughout this time, including individual conversations, people brought various perspectives to the table." However, top administration officials have subsequently acknowledged allied dissatisfaction with the decision.

"I think the real issue is that many allies disagreed with the result of the decision," Biden's National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan told reporters in Belgium in October 2021. "And frankly, the reason it took until mid-April for the president to reach his final decision was in part because he was factoring in the feedback of allies, who indicated that they had differences of opinion about how to proceed with the troop presence in Afghanistan," Sullivan added.

NSA Sullivan's delayed honesty about allied views contrasts with his statements in August 2021 which downplayed and ignored that opposition, focusing exclusively instead on the statement NATO issued after President Biden announced his decision.

And the government of Afghanistan, a designated Major-non NATO ally of the United States, was similarly kept in the dark about the decision to withdraw. According to former Afghan National Security Adviser Hamdullah Mohib, the Afghan government was only given "a few hours" notice before the president announced he was withdrawing."

c. Claim: The U.S. Would Need "a Hell of a lot" More Troops to Keep a Presence in Afghanistan

"We were left with a simple decision: Either follow through on the commitment made by the last administration and leave Afghanistan, or say we weren't leaving and commit another tens of thousands more troops. Going back to war. That was the choice, the real choice."

- President Biden, August 2021

A significant part of the administration's argument centered around the notion that if the U.S. stayed in Afghanistan beyond August 31, then U.S. forces there would be subjected to Taliban attacks, necessitating additional deployments of American personnel to provide force protection.

Sec. Blinken pushed this same argument, saying in August 2021, saying a complete withdrawal was necessary because, "we would have been back at war with tens of thousands of troops having to go in because the 2,500 troops we had there and the air power would not have sufficed to deal with the situation."

Other administration officials also argued that the 2,500 US military advisors could not have stopped the Taliban offensive, with State Department Spokesman Ned Price saying on August 10, 2021, "the idea that a force of a couple thousand U.S. military service members either would have been able to remain in Afghanistan with the status quo, or frankly that a force of that size would have been able to stand in the way of what we are seeing now – both of those propositions are hollow." These assertions were based on several demonstrably false assumptions.

First, it ignored the fact that while the Biden administration had opted to remove American military advisors from Afghanistan, it still planned to keep some 650 U.S. troops in Afghanistan post August 31, 2021 a deployment with which the Taliban had not agreed. An additional undetermined number of military personnel from the UK and Turkey would join them. This residual American-led force would be tasked with guarding the U.S. Embassy as well as helping to secure Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul. The force would have been almost as large as the current U.S. military deployment to Syria and larger than the deployments to Yemen and Somalia.

In addition, as demonstrated above, top military officials have testified they believed the 2,500 U.S. troops who were in Afghanistan when the president announced his intention to fully withdraw could be sufficient to maintain a degree of stability and could protect themselves from any potential Taliban attacks.

“The assessment by General McKenzie and General Miller at the time was that 2,500 was sufficient to be able to deal with that,” Lieutenant General James Mingus, the Director for Operations for the Joint Staff, testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee in October 2021 when asked if the U.S. would have to surge thousands of new troops in to repel Taliban attacks.

Despite this clear statement from Lt. Gen. Mingus and similar statements from other senior military officials, President Biden continues to mischaracterize the advice he received. In February 2022, he told NBC News “there’s no good time to get out, but if we had not gotten out, they acknowledge that we would have had to put a hell of a lot more troops back in.”

And while there is no official military definition for the “a hell of a lot more troops” President Biden claimed his military advisors said would be needed, U.S. military commanders have repeatedly testified their military analysis as to what was needed was much closer to 2,500 than the numbers the president has said would be necessary.

Unfortunately, President Biden continued to lie about this, even months after the withdrawal was complete despite military officials testifying publicly that they did recommend keeping U.S. troop levels at the 2,000 to 4,000 level.

“It wasn’t just 2,000, 4,000. We would have had to significantly increase the number of troops, and then you’re back in this war of attrition.”

President Biden, February 2022

In the same vein, some members of the Biden administration have repeatedly argued the Taliban would have resumed their attacks on U.S. military forces had the U.S. military continued to stay beyond May 1st, the original deadline in the Doha agreement – thus necessitating the withdrawal.

“Had we remained in Afghanistan beyond May 1st, we would have been back at war with the Taliban not only firing on our forces, but also assaulting the cities,” Sec. Blinken told the House Foreign Affairs Committee in September.

Yet, the U.S. did wind up staying beyond May 1, 2021, initially pledging in April 2021 to remove about 75-80% of its troops by September 11th of that year, while keeping several hundred troops to guard the U.S. Embassy Kabul airport. The Taliban did not opt to resume major attacks after the May deadline had passed.

Additionally, U.S. officials were reportedly not told by the Taliban that such attacks would resume post May 1st, despite the certainty expressed by senior Biden administration officials.

“When Taliban negotiators observed that the Americans were talking about breaking the Doha accord, they did not directly threaten to renew attacks against U.S. and NATO forces,” people familiar with the discussions told The New Yorker.

The Taliban did warn about vague consequences following the passing of the May 1st deadline, however, there were no successful or effective Taliban attacks against US or NATO troops following the passing of the May deadline.

d. Claim: The Doha Agreement Force President Biden to Order the Complete Withdrawal

“I think it's a cop-out on the part of the Biden administration to say 'no they had no option but to implement the agreement given where things were.'”

-Special Envoy Khalilzad, January 2022

The Doha agreement is officially known as the “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America.” It was negotiated and signed by U.S. and Taliban representatives in Doha, Qatar on February 29, 2020.

While the Doha agreement has been met with a diverse array of criticism, including criticism from former Trump administration officials, the text of the agreement clearly states the complete withdrawal of U.S. troops by May 1, 2021 was contingent on the Taliban meeting a series of conditions outlined in the agreement.

The agreement stipulates that, in order for the U.S. to carry out the military withdrawal, “the Taliban will not allow any of its members, other individuals or groups, including al Qaeda, to use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies.”

It also says the Taliban must prevent terrorist groups that threaten the security of the U.S. and its allies “from recruiting, training, and fundraising,” and that the Taliban “will not host them in accordance with the commitments in this agreement.” In addition, it clearly states the Taliban would instruct its members to not “cooperate with groups or individuals threatening the security of the United States and its allies” and says the Taliban would “prevent any group or individual in Afghanistan from threatening the security of the United States and its allies, and will prevent them from recruiting, training, and fundraising and will not host them in accordance with the commitments in this agreement.”

“Originally under the Trump administration there were conditions. The conditions were supposed to help set the timetable (for withdrawal). If the conditions were not met, the timetable would slow up or speed up. The conditions were then removed by the new (Biden) administration, and that again changed the timetables.”

UK Defense Secretary Ben Wallace, October, 2021

Several current senior U.S. officials have been clear in their assessment that the Taliban had not met its obligations under the Doha agreement when President Biden announced our complete withdrawal. This includes Gen. Milley, who wrote in [testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee](#) in September 2021:

“Under the Doha Agreement, the U.S. would begin to withdraw its forces contingent upon the Taliban meeting certain conditions, which would lead to a political agreement between the Taliban and the Government of Afghanistan. There were seven conditions applicable to the Taliban, and eight to the U.S. While the Taliban did not attack U.S. forces, which was one of the conditions, it failed to fully honor any other commitments under the Doha Agreement. Perhaps most importantly for US national security, the Taliban has never renounced al Qaeda or broke its affiliation with them.”

Gen. Milley’s assessment of the Taliban’s lack of adherence to the agreement was shared by senior civilians at the Pentagon, with Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, Colin Kahl, [saying](#): “The only part of the agreement they stuck with was not attacking U.S. forces. The rest of the agreement, they did not stick with.”

This opinion was also shared by General Scott Miller, the commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, who [told](#) Politico in July 2021, before the U.S. withdrawal was complete, “As I sit here today, we see al Qaeda terrorists present today in Afghanistan among the Taliban fighters.” In addition, the Pentagon, the Treasury Department, and the UN all issued separate reports in 2021 saying the Taliban and al Qaeda continued to enjoy close ties and even conducted joint operations.

American allies agreed with U.S. assessments that the Taliban were not adhering to the conditions of the agreement and therefore a complete withdrawal was not needed under the agreement’s conditionality clauses. The United Nations issued a report in 2021. Then-UK Chief of Defence Staff, Gen. Carter, who [said](#) in November 2021 that he had told senior NATO defense chiefs back in January of that year, “It is obvious to everyone that the conditions specified in the 29 February agreement are not being met...Withdrawal under these circumstances would be perceived as a strategic victory for the Taliban, which would weaken the Alliance and embolden extremists the world over.”

Yet, despite all of this, when asked on August 10, 2021 – just days before the Taliban seized Kabul – whether the Taliban were violating the terms of the Doha agreement, State Dept. Spokesperson Price repeatedly [refused to directly answer](#).

Several former senior Trump administration officials with whom the Committee Minority spoke have acknowledged decisions by then-President Donald Trump to reduce U.S. force levels below 8,600 troops while the Taliban had not fulfilled the conditions of the agreement, undermined the conditionality of the agreement, damaged the morale of Afghan forces, and emboldened the Taliban. However, these officials noted President Trump did refrain from reducing troop levels below what his military advisors recommended would be the minimum amount necessary to achieve their mission and prevent a collapse of the Afghan state despite personally favoring such a withdrawal at the time. As mentioned previously, President Biden chose to ignore the same military advice when it was presented.

Additionally, large bipartisan majorities in Congress passed the 2021 NDAA, which limited the Secretary of Defense's ability to reduce U.S. troops in Afghanistan below 4,000.

Both the Trump administration and Biden administration opted to ignore this legal provision, taking advantage of the law's subjectivity to a waiver.

Several Biden administration officials and U.S. allies hoped to tie the continued presence of U.S. troops in Afghanistan to the conditionality clauses in the agreement, according to former Special Representative Khalilzad:

“I didn't support putting the agreement aside, I supported a conditions-based approach as the agreement I believe allowed us to do...I favored that and the Allies favored that but the President at the end did not...[Secretary of State] Tony Blinken and others were supportive [of a conditions based approach], I can say that, and I think the Pentagon would have supported it as well,” Khalilzad said of making the continued U.S. troop presence contingent upon whether the Taliban were living up to its commitments. I think it was probably the political people who did not, the White House, I would say...At the end, [President Biden] didn't tie it to anything. He just wanted to get out.”

A Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) report released in May 2022 found that “the single most important factor” in the collapse of the Afghan security forces “was the U.S. decision to withdraw U.S. military and contractors from Afghanistan through the signing of the U.S.-Taliban agreement in February 2020 under the Trump Administration, and President Biden's public address in April 2021.”

President Biden's insistence that he was bound by what he considered to be a flawed deal also ignores the fact that the Biden administration has shown no such similar reluctance while abandoning numerous other policies and diplomatic efforts initiated by the Trump administration. President Biden also kept Special Envoy Khalilzad – the official responsible for negotiating the Doha agreement – on his same role.

"I think it's a cop-out on the part of the Biden administration to say 'no they had no option but to implement the agreement given where things were' well for one thing they didn't implement the agreement, they asked for four more months of time and they asked me to go and negotiate with the Talibs to make sure they didn't attack the withdrawing forces, they could have put additional demands," Khalilzad told the Committee Minority.

President Biden's Intent to Withdraw with or without Doha

President Biden himself has said publicly that he would have withdrawn from Afghanistan regardless of whether the Doha Agreement had been put in place, thereby undercutting his administration's frequent references to the deal as the reason that a withdrawal had to take place.

STEPHANOPOULOS: So would you have withdrawn troops like this even if President Trump had not made that deal with the Taliban?

BIDEN: I would've tried to figure out how to withdraw those troops, yes.

All of this makes it clear that President Biden's claim he was forced into the withdrawal by the Doha agreement struck in the previous administration is baseless. The agreement was conditions-based and those conditions had not been met.

In addition, the president has admitted he would have withdrawn troops no matter what.

e. Claim: Al Qaeda is "Gone" from Afghanistan

In defending his decision to withdraw U.S. troops, President Biden opted to downplay the continued presence of al Qaeda in Afghanistan, claiming in August 2021 that the terrorist group was "gone" from Afghanistan – a statement that even members of his own administration acknowledged was incorrect. While it is true al Qaeda suffered significant setbacks since the original U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan following the September 11, 2001 attacks, including the death of its founder Osama bin Laden, analysts agree the terror group still maintains a presence in Afghanistan.

The UN Security Council released a report shortly after President Biden announced his decision to withdraw that stated al Qaeda had a presence in at least 15 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, "primarily in the eastern, southern and south-eastern regions."

Al Qaeda's presence in Afghanistan has grown even more robust in the wake of the withdrawal, with senior al Qaeda members advising Taliban leaders and maintaining a presence in Kabul, as demonstrated by the presence of al Qaeda's leader Ayman al Zawahiri in a villa in downtown Kabul, who was killed in a U.S. drone strike in Kabul July 2022.

f. Claim: Afghan Forces Are Capable of Defending the Country without American Troops

Prior to August 2021, President Biden repeatedly offered upbeat prognostications of the situation on the ground, claiming on July 8, 2021, "the likelihood there's going to be the Taliban overrunning everything and owning the whole country is highly unlikely." He claimed this was because Afghan forces included 300,000 "trained and equipped" personnel who were capable of holding the Taliban at bay.

The 300,000 number cited by President Biden included both Afghan soldiers and Defense Ministry personnel (which totaled roughly 182,000 as of April 2021), as well as police officers and Ministry of Interior personnel (which totaled roughly 118,000).

Yet President Biden and his administration officials continued to lump the two together, making that figure appear to constitute only military combat forces. On August 11, 2021 – just four days before Kabul would fall – State Dept. Spokesperson Price called them "300,000 trained soldiers," which is a clear mischaracterization.

It has since been revealed that at the same time the administration was making these optimistic statements publicly, they were receiving numerous intelligence assessments that a partial or total collapse of Afghan government forces was the most likely scenario once U.S. and NATO military advisors and U.S. air support were removed.

Gen. McKenzie testified in September 2021 he had told the Biden administration if the U.S. reduced its our military presence below 2,500 servicemembers, “we would probably witness a collapse of the Afghan government and the Afghan military.” Similarly, Gen. Milley told Congress in September 2021, “The consensus intelligence view estimated an [Afghan National Defense and Security Forces] fracture and provincial capitals captured with the exception of Kabul by early to late fall or at the latest December, assuming the last U.S. troops were out by 31 August 2021.”

Gen. Miller reportedly provided an even bleaker prediction as to the speed of the collapse, saying it would be “hard and fast” and could happen in October. He advised the U.S. to evacuate the embassy once the last U.S. troops leave due to that prediction.

Gen. Miller “was in favor of closing the Embassy faster,” Special Envoy Khalilzad told the Committee Minority, saying Gen. Miller wanted “American citizens and the embassy” to be evacuated “at a faster pace.”

This concern of a Taliban takeover of the country by America’s top military officials was shared by the Intelligence Community (IC). In June 2021, they concluded Afghanistan and its government would collapse in as early as six months, according to the *Wall Street Journal*. And on July 6, 2021, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) told the Pentagon’s Inspector General the Afghan National Army “likely lacks the capability to carry out its missions without coalition support.”

Yet, just two days later, President Biden continued to claim a complete collapse was “highly unlikely.” This assessment was clearly at odds with those being conducted by the subject matter experts within his administration. It appears President Biden was either purposefully misleading the American public or had simply rejected the opinion of his expert advisors.

In August 2021, President Biden finally admitted the intelligence community had reported a Taliban takeover was “more likely to be sometime by the end of the year.” This was a far cry from the “highly unlikely” claim he made just one month earlier and evidence that he was, in fact, aware that a complete collapse was not actually “highly unlikely.”

The more realistic assessments were also shared by U.S. personnel on the ground in Afghanistan. On July 13, 2021, 23 U.S. personnel assigned to the Embassy in Kabul sent a cable via the State Department’s confidential dissent channel that reportedly contained a stark warning about the potential collapse of the Afghan state and urging the State Department to respond more urgently to the Taliban’s offensive. The cable was reportedly sent to Sec. Blinken and Director of Policy Planning Salman Ahmed. Sec. Blinken admitted receiving the dissent cable, saying “it did express real concerns about the durability of that government in force after our departure, and it focused on the efforts that we were making, particularly on the SIV front to try to expedite moving them out.”

Sec. Blinken has refused to share the cable with congressional committees of jurisdiction, including the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and has refused to share his response to the cable, citing the need to “protect” the integrity of the dissent channel, though he has been willing to characterize its content.

The assessment that a Taliban takeover was likely was also shared by America's closest allies. On July 5, 2021, two days before President Biden's "highly unlikely" Taliban takeover public comments, UK Defence Secretary Ben Wallace told a closed meeting of the UK National Security Council that "the game was up" in Afghanistan and that the evacuation planning should move forward.

Other top UK national security officials agreed. Sir Philip Barton, permanent under-secretary in the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, told the UK Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee in December 2021 he "had seen the eventual Taliban takeover of Afghanistan as the most likely outcome of the NATO withdrawal. That was our central assessment."

The Afghan government was also aware of their own vulnerability, sending a memo to the White House in July 2021 urgently requesting additional aircraft and imploring the U.S. continue to fund critical contractors. There were 16,832 Defense Department contractors in Afghanistan around the time President Biden announced the withdrawal, including 6,147 U.S. citizens. That number fell to 7,795, including 2,656 U.S. citizens, in the third quarter of 2021 before falling to zero by the end of the military evacuation. These contractors were critical in providing maintenance and other functions that enabled the Afghan air force to carry out airstrikes against the Taliban. And without Afghan Airforce air strikes, air support, and aerial resupply to besieged bases – all of which were enabled by these critical contractors – the Afghan military holding the Taliban at bay for any major length of time was not a realistic scenario.

According to former Afghan National Security Adviser Mohib, the United States was "providing fuel. They were providing ammunition. They were providing, in some cases, food supplies and uniforms. A whole lot that the security forces needed. Even the software that was being managed to pay the Afghan security forces was run by a contracting company."

The Afghan Air Force's reliance on contractor support was well known. A Pentagon report published in April 2021, just days after President Biden made his withdrawal announcement, warned the Afghan military would be reliant on contractors for logistical support "for the foreseeable future." These warnings replicate a SIGAR report from January 2021, which said the Afghan air force would not "have the ability to sustain themselves without continued U.S. and Coalition assistance."

At a Senate Armed Services Hearing in September 2021, Gen. Milley drove this point home, saying, "When you pull contractors, you pull troops, that, I think, is one of many contributing factors to the rapid collapse."

But the Biden administration unfortunately did not ensure this critical support continued – even though President Biden promised on August 10, 2021 to continue supporting the Afghan army and air force saying:

"I'll insist we continue to keep the commitments we made of providing close air support, making sure that their air force functions and is operable."

At the same time, the Pentagon reportedly stopped delivering critical munitions to Afghan troops, such as the laser guided bombs that the Afghan Air Force used in its strikes against the Taliban. The Pentagon told *Reuters* in a [statement](#) that it had “halted a delivery of GBU-58 laser-guided bombs prior to the collapse of Afghanistan but did not elaborate” as to why it had done so. These bombs were one of the Afghan government’s main advantages in its battle with the insurgents. The Biden administration also repeatedly sent mixed messages about whether the U.S. military would continue to provide air support to Afghan troops, with President Biden [saying](#) that such “close air support” would continue. However, U.S. military commanders repeatedly refused to say whether such air support would extend beyond August 31.

Foreign policy experts credit these decisions as one of the key factors in the collapse of Afghanistan. Mike Breen, of Human Rights First, [told The Atlantic](#), “What they thought they were going to do was pull all the U.S. assets out, and the Afghan government would hold on long enough so that, when it collapsed, there would be no photographs of the evacuation...[the Biden administration] thought the Afghan military was going to die in place to buy them time.”

President Biden and some in his administration have criticized the willingness of Afghan forces to fight, [saying](#) on August 16, 2021 “Afghan forces are not willing to fight for themselves.” He claimed this was why the country fell so quickly.

However, U.S. military officials have struck a different tone. And newly reported data shows Afghan troops did take heavy casualties during the final days of the campaign, with [The Washington Post reporting](#) in December 2021, “The Taliban’s complete military takeover of Afghanistan left about 4,000 members of the country’s security forces dead and another 1,000 missing, according to Afghanistan’s former army chief of staff, Gen. Yasin Zia, citing data he collected from former military commanders from July 1 to Aug. 15.”

IV. MONTHS OF INACTION

“There was no need for children to be trampled to death outside the gates of the airport. There was no need for U.S. Marines to be blown up by a suicide bomber as they tried to pull people out of sewage canals. All of that was a result of the failure to plan and to carry out evacuations when there was time.”

- George Packer, January 31, 2022

Once the decision was made to unconditionally withdraw American military advisers from Afghanistan, the Biden administration – despite its claims to the contrary – did not take adequate steps to mitigate the fallout from its decision nor did it plan for the contingencies many predicted were likely to take place as a result. Many senior leaders in the Biden administration failed to recognize or adapt to worsening conditions on the ground despite being presented with several opportunities to adjust to a rapidly deteriorating situation. The result was many missed opportunities to plan for a post U.S.-Afghanistan, despite having 150 days in which to do so from the announcement in April 2021 to the original self-imposed deadline of September 11, 2021.

a. Stalled Replacement of Counterterrorism Efforts

“In my opinion, the NSC was not seriously planning for evacuation.”

- Brigadier General John Sullivan, Joint Task Force-Crisis Response Commander in Kabul, September 24, 2021

The Biden administration defended its decision to withdraw the majority of U.S. military forces from Afghanistan, saying it would continue to conduct counterterrorism operations using an “over the horizon” strategy. However, once the decision to withdraw unconditionally was announced, the administration failed to secure bases for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) or counterterrorism operations in countries bordering Afghanistan.

This failure combined with the withdrawal of U.S. troops and subsequent collapse of local partners in Afghanistan has resulted in a major degradation of U.S. intelligence collection ability. It’s also created a setback that coincides with the resurgence of al Qaeda and ISIS in Afghanistan, and virtually puts the United States and our allies back to a pre-9/11 posture.

Al Qaeda has already dramatically boosted its presence in Afghanistan since President Biden ordered the unilateral withdrawal of U.S. troops, thereby effectively ceding the country to the terror group’s allies in the Taliban. That was made clear in July 2022 when Ayman al Zawahiri, the leader of al Qaeda and one of the people responsible for planning the 9/11 attacks, was discovered living in Kabul.

The fact that al Qaeda’s leader was living in a villa in downtown Kabul – in a house once home to a USAID contractor and now reportedly linked to leaders of the Taliban’s Haqqani network – underscores the increased al Qaeda presence. Al Zawahiri was reportedly able to increase his level of communication with his terrorist allies while being hosted in comfort by the Taliban in Kabul, also producing multiple videos for propaganda and terror inspiring purposes.

Thankfully, al Zawahiri was successfully killed in a drone strike in July 2022, the only reported U.S. strike in Afghanistan since August 2021.

b. The Embassy Evacuation That Never Came

On April 8, 2021, six days before President Biden announced his decision to withdraw U.S. military advisers from Afghanistan, the U.S. Mission Afghanistan certified its Emergency Action Plan update. The plan was apparently not updated after this date, despite the major change in the security situation brought about by the drawdown of U.S. troops and subsequent significant Taliban battlefield gains.

Two days later and four days before the president would announce the full withdrawal, the U.S. military was ordered to begin developing plans for a non-combatant evacuation operation (NEO) and to provide those plans to Gen. McKenzie on April 27, 2021.

The same day the plans were due to Gen. McKenzie, the U.S. Embassy in Kabul begins relocating diplomats and other personnel "whose functions can be performed elsewhere" due to "increasing violence and threat reports in Kabul."

The day after plans for a NEO were due, on April 28, 2021, the U.S. government conducted an "Afghanistan Retrograde Rehearsal," which was attended by leaders from across the Defense Department, including Sec. Austin, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl, the Joint Chiefs, Gen. Miller, Gen. McKenzie, General Tod Wolters, then-Commander of the U.S. European Command (EUROCOM), General Stephen Lyons, Commander of U.S. Transportation Command (TRANSCOM), General Richard Clarke, Commander of U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM), and General Paul Nakasone, Commander of U.S. Cyber Command (CYBERCOM). According to Gen. Milley, "The main purpose of this rehearsal was to ensure shared understanding of President Biden's decision to leave Afghanistan and coordinate and synchronize the efforts of DoD, our allies, and partners."

The behind-the-scenes planning continued throughout the Spring of 2021. On May 4, 2021, the Committee on Overseas Risk Evaluation "completed its annual review of U.S. Mission to Afghanistan's Decision Points" that typically lay out scenarios in which U.S. officials should consider moves to increase protection of U.S. diplomats. These decision points appear to not have been updated or altered to reflect the Taliban's dramatic battlefield victories over the summer, which had them in control of 50% of Afghanistan's districts by July.

On May 8, 2021, the Pentagon hosted a "Rehearsal of Concept" (ROC) drill to help coordinate the State and Defense Departments' strategies ahead of the withdrawal. Gen. Milley told Congress in September 2021, "This event covered a rehearsal of concept for the complete withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan and covered various branch plans and sequels. It was to ensure that the US Government, Interagency, and partners and allies had a shared vision of our withdrawal timeline, the plan itself, and to ensure it was synchronized."

The Defense Department reportedly wanted to include a discussion on an emergency evacuation of the embassy and how to plan to evacuate vulnerable Afghans, "but White House officials asked that those issues be removed from the agenda, saying they should be discussed separately. "

Most of the senior national security officials attended the ROC drill, including NSA Sullivan and Deputy Secretary of State for Management Brian McKeon. One of the few top national security advisers absent was Sec. Blinken.

An exchange with Sec. Blinken in a House Foreign Affairs Committee on June 7, 2021, demonstrated the Biden administration's serious lack of urgency on the issue. When pressed by Ranking Member Michael McCaul (R-TX) about the urgent need to evacuate Afghan allies, the secretary downplayed the situation on the ground, saying the fall of the country wouldn't "be something that happens from a Friday to a Monday. So, I wouldn't necessarily equate the departure of our forces in July, August, or by early September with some kind of immediate deterioration in the--in the situation."

His words would come back to haunt him as the world watched the Taliban surround Kabul on Friday, August 13th and completely take over the country by Monday, August 16th.

On June 25, 2021, Afghan President Ghani, accompanied by then-acting U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ross Wilson, visited the White House for meetings with President Biden, who promised President Ghani: "We're going to stick with you and we're going to do our best to see to it you have the tools you need."

Amb. Wilson reportedly went on vacation for two weeks in the U.S. after accompanying Ghani to this White House meeting.

"There were no decisions made in the Embassy until he returned in mid-July. This made action impossible," a U.S. military officer told Army investigators, adding "Ground could have been gained at this time if the Embassy had been able to do anything."

Three days later, the U.S. Embassy in Kabul held an Operational Planning Team (OPT) meeting with members of the US military and US diplomats focused on pre-NEO planning. The meeting was described by one U.S. military officer involved as "the first time" the embassy began "looking at the possibility of NEO." However, the officer said that while the Embassy was "willing to entertain the idea," Embassy personnel would "not make any decision or take any actions."

On July 8, 2021, amid a deteriorating security situation, President Biden announced for the first time that the withdrawal deadline would be moved from September 11 to August 31, offering no explanation as to why he chose to do so.

Four days later Gen. Miller stepped down as commander of U.S. Forces-Afghanistan (USFOR-A), transferring his authority to Gen. McKenzie at CENTCOM and Rear Adm. Peter Vasely, the new commander of U.S. Forces-Afghanistan-Forward, the recently rebranded name for the reduced U.S. military presence in Afghanistan.

Soon after arriving in Afghanistan in the middle of July 2021, Rear Adm. Vasely, and his team created a matrix of indicators and warning signs with regards to the deteriorating security situation that could trigger U.S. actions, including a potential NEO. The U.S. Embassy developed its own list of 17 trigger points, but U.S. military officials said they were largely ignored.

“The Embassy had 17 indicators that were supposed to initiate action when tripped. The Embassy allowed them to trip with no action. If an indicator was met, there was no action other than pushing it to the next meeting,” a U.S. military officer told Army investigators.

“[Rear Adm.] Vasely tried to get the trigger assessment tool before the ambassador from mid-July [2021] to early-August [2021]. The challenge was trying to get the embassy to even consider NEO planning,” Brig. Gen. Sullivan said, adding: “The triggers were clear and all constituted some form of action from the embassy if the triggers were tripped.”

As the security situation deteriorated in the country, on July 20, 2021, the U.S. “deployed 45 Marines into [Hamid Karzai International Airport] to assist in more detailed coordination and planning for the NEO as well as providing a small capability to assist the embassy in processing/screening SIV applicants. We still had very little traction with the embassy on NEO planning. The embassy didn’t fully participate in NEO planning until a week prior to the fall,” Brig. Gen. Sullivan told Army investigators.

Throughout this period, senior Biden administration officials continued to stress the U.S. would maintain a diplomatic presence in the country, despite the increasingly dire internal intelligence assessments that warned of a total Taliban takeover.

“POTUS was publicly making it clear that this was a priority. Ambassador Wilson began stating that ‘I am maniacal about the Embassy remaining in Kabul,’” one military officer told Army investigators.

“RADM Vasely was trying to get the Ambassador to see the security threat for what it really was. There were as many as 10 districts falling every day, getting closer and closer to Kabul. The embassy needed to position for withdrawal, and the Ambassador didn’t get it,” another military officer told the Army investigation.

Yet the State Department continued to delay planning.

The same day the Taliban captured its first provincial capital on August 6, 2021, and just one week before the Taliban’s seizure of Kabul, “another senior interagency Non-Combatant Evacuation tabletop exercise” took place. This second exercise focused on both “a semi-permissive NEO and a non-permissive NEO with a rapidly deteriorating security situation,” according to Gen. Milley.

Other military officials subsequently confirmed that there was a lack of urgency at this meeting among non-US military personnel.

“The [Department of State] folks briefed a plan that was vague on the priority of evacuees and the temporary safe haven plan. This discussion during their ROC Drill was concerning as there seemed to be a disconnect between what we were seeing on the ground and the urgency they were displaying,” Brig. Gen. Sullivan told Army investigators about the meeting.

While the U.S. military had put assets in place to execute a potential NEO as early as July 2021 and said U.S. Central Command had been ordered to prepare for a potential NEO in mid-May 2021, the level of State Department planning that went into this effort appears to have been insufficient.

Who Is Responsible for Embassy Evacuations?

The State Department is the agency required by law to “develop and implement policies and programs to provide for the safe and efficient evacuation of United States Government personnel, dependents, and private United States citizens when their lives are endangered” and to “develop a model contingency plan for evacuation of personnel, dependents, and United States citizens from foreign countries.”

Once ordered, the evacuations – commonly referred to as noncombatant evacuation operations (NEOs) in the government – are conducted by the Defense Department and involve the evacuation of U.S. citizens and nationals, civilian personnel, and other designated persons whose lives are in danger, from a foreign country to an appropriate safe haven, when directed by the State Department.

During a NEO, the U.S. embassy’s Chief of Mission – not the U.S. military commander – “is the senior United States Government (USG) authority for the evacuation and, as such, is ultimately responsible for the successful completion of the NEO and the safety of the evacuees.”

As Gen. McKenzie explained to Congress on September 29, 2021, “The decision to conduct a NEO rested with the Department of State and they made that decision on 14 August.”

This means that while it was U.S. military planes and personnel flying people out of Kabul in August 2021, it was the State Department’s responsibility to have ordered that event.

Another aspect of the planning process that was found sadly wanting was the Biden administration’s ability to accurately gauge how many AMCITs were actually in Afghanistan. This is despite the fact that the Embassy Kabul’s “F-77” form was reportedly updated on June 17, 2021, according to Sec. Blinken.

As Deputy Sec. McKeon admitted in October 2021, “It would have been helpful to know with greater precision how many Americans were there.”

While the Taliban continued the march across Afghanistan in August 2021, a U.S. military officer involved in the evacuation told Army investigators the embassy was still in denial. “We had ad hoc meetings with the embassy, but they didn’t want to talk about the NEO...they really didn’t want to talk about it...It wasn’t until 11 August, the assistant chief of mission changed his posture, and they [started] asking for help...We essentially planned the NEO with [Department of State] and Partner input in about 5 days.”

“Trying to get the embassy to discuss the NEO was like pulling teeth until early August. After that it became more collaborative.”

- Brig. Gen. Sullivan, September 24, 2021

It’s possible the evacuation was suddenly taken seriously because on that same date, August 11th, U.S. and UK officials begin to conclude Kabul was at risk of a Taliban assault, with Gen. McKenzie telling Congress in September 2021, “[b]y August 11th, it was evident to me that Kabul was at risk, and I requested the deployment of a brigade of the 82nd Airborne division and other elements of our own

alert pre-planned force package.”

Yet despite these internal U.S. and allied assessments and the fact that Embassy staff finally began requesting assistance with planning an evacuation, that same day State Department Spokesperson Ned Price told reporters, “this is not a foregone conclusion, as many people seem to think, that this will be an inexorable march forward for the Taliban.”

One day later, as the violence in the country surged and the Taliban took even more territory moving closer to Kabul, State Dept. Spokesperson Price claimed, “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.”

However, as evidenced above that was clearly not the case. An Army report released several months afterwards revealed that “Despite the Taliban’s rapid advance towards Kabul, on 12 August [U.S. Embassy Kabul] only planned to evacuate 250 personnel by 31 August.”

It wasn’t until August 13, 2021 – the day the Taliban arrived at the gates of Kabul – that U.S. Embassy personnel were reportedly instructed to begin reducing “the amount of sensitive material on the property” and to destroy anything with U.S. logos, flags “or items which could be misused in propaganda efforts.” At this point, the U.S. embassy personnel began burning documents, including “the passports of Afghan visa hopefuls, who would now have to try to escape without them.”

Yet, shockingly, then-Defense Department Spokesperson John Kirby told reporters that same day, “Kabul is not right now in an imminent threat environment.”

POLITICO Playbook: Joe Biden’s ‘fall of Saigon’

By RACHAEL BADE, EUGENE DANIELS, RYAN LIZZA and TARA PALMERI | 08/13/2021 06:20 AM EDT

Los Angeles Times

WORLD & NATION

Taliban captures four more key Afghan cities on its way to encircling Kabul

Defense Dept. Spokesperson Kirby’s public statements drastically conflict with the internal conversations we now know were happening at the Pentagon. That same day, Sec. Austin reportedly told aides there was a need for the immediate relocation of all U.S. Embassy personnel to the Kabul airport, despite the fact that embassy personnel were continuing to destroy sensitive documents and other materials at the embassy compound.

All the while as the Pentagon was privately sounding the alarm and the U.S. Embassy in Kabul was scrambling to destroy sensitive material, senior administration officials were reportedly on vacation, with President Biden at Camp David and Sec. Blinken in the Hamptons. There was similar complacency demonstrated by some U.S. Embassy Kabul personnel, with one U.S. military officer saying, “as late as 13 August the embassy staff was still planning to be evacuated around 31 August.”

Despite Biden administration officials coming to the realization that the capital city was in fact at risk on August 11, 2021, it still took several additional days before the U.S. embassy was ordered closed, its operations were relocated to the airport, and a NEO was announced.

On August 14, 2021 – one day after the Taliban had encircled Kabul – Amb. Wilson “came to accept that we didn’t have time and needed to move, and we began evacuating to HKIA,” Rear Adm. Peter Vasely told Army investigators.

Yet, U.S. military commanders have testified that the military assets necessary to carry out a NEO had been put into place about one month earlier, suggesting that the evacuation could have been carried out at a significantly earlier date.

The Defense Department “began planning for the possibility of a noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO) two weeks after the President’s decision in April to withdraw from Afghanistan by early September, at which point military planners had crafted a number of evacuation scenarios,” Sec. Austin wrote to the House Armed Services Committee. He added that in mid-May he had ordered U.S. CENTCOM “to prepare for a potential NEO” and the Defense Department “began prepositioning forces in the region, including three infantry battalions.”

“On July the 9th, I requested that our base NEO force, the core package that would go in, we put on 96 hour prepare to deploy orders,” Gen. McKenzie said.

Some senior military officials, including Gen. Milley, reportedly said the State Department “waited too long” and should have ordered the NEO earlier, a delay that liked had had serious consequences.

“On the issue of why we didn't bring our civilians and SIVs sooner, again, the call on how to do that and when to do it is really a State Department call,” Sec. Austin testified in September 2021. “But again, we provided our input and we certainly would have liked to seen it go faster or sooner [sic],” Austin added.

Even during the evacuation itself, there was a lack of urgency among U.S. embassy personnel according to U.S. military officers involved in the evacuation.

“So early morning on the 14th we quickly moved 1400 people off the embassy compound and frankly not much leadership came from within the DoS personnel at all, especially the senior ones,” an Army officer involved told the Defense Department investigation.

“We ended up going room to room and pulling out individuals to make the deadlines. DoS people were intoxicated and cowering in rooms. People were still operating like it was day to day operations

with absolutely no sense of urgency or recognition of the situation. The junior leadership were dialed in, but the more senior leadership did not understand the gravity of the situation or didn't think it was real," the officer added. "The embassy team was not postured for an evacuation whatsoever, not planned, not resourced, not rehearsed – it was beyond them," he said.

c. The SIV Evacuation That Never Happened

“It's my view that the evacuations should have started right after the announcement of our withdrawal. That evacuation started too late.”

- Rep. Jason Crow (D-CO), July 30, 2021

Four days after the president's announcement that the U.S. would withdraw, Gen. McKenzie told Congress, "the Department of State is looking at a variety of venues, the Special Immigrant Visa Program, among others, you know, to potentially bring people out. We have the capability to do that if so directed." But many people – including Republicans and Democrats on Capitol Hill – warned the administration that it must act quickly to evacuate America's Afghan allies, such as those eligible for the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV), as reprisal killings by the Taliban became more frequent.

What Is a Special Immigrant Visa (SIV)?

The Afghanistan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program was specifically designed to assist Afghans who had worked for the U.S. military, the U.S. diplomatic mission, or the U.S.-led International Security Assistance Force. Those intended to apply for the program included interpreters, translators, and other support positions whose association with the U.S. mission made them vulnerable to attack by the Taliban or other extremists.

Unfortunately, the SIV program has been marred with delays and administrative issues since its inception in 2009. Over its 12-year history, "the backlog of applications only increased, while resources remained steady or decreased." When President Biden took office in January, there were estimated to be 17,000 SIV applications in the backlog.

The issues with the SIV program processing times pre-date the Biden administration. In June of 2020, during the Trump administration, the Afghan SIV unit at the State Department "admitted it would need at least 50 employees to address its current backlogs within the nine month timeframe required by law."

Similarly, Embassy Kabul experienced its own unique staffing challenges during this period. In October 2019, 30% of Kabul's consular section was vacant and the State Department subsequently cut additional consular positions.

But while these SIV processing issues pre-date the Biden administration, the decision to withdraw U.S. military forces was made by President Biden, despite advice from his military commanders that such a move could lead to Taliban battlefield gains, advances that would place the lives of former interpreters and others who had worked with the US military at much greater risk. And despite multiple bipartisan appeals from Members of Congress and outside veterans' groups, the Biden administration demonstrated no urgency in evacuating America's Afghan partners so that they could finish their SIV processing in a safe location.

In just one example – on May 12, 2021, the Taliban reportedly ambushed, shot, and beheaded a 32-year-old former interpreter who had worked for the U.S. military. This tragic event underscored the active threat faced by SIV applicants.

In response to these reports, the Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Rep. Gregory Meeks (D-NY), and the committee’s ranking member, Rep. Michael McCaul (R-TX), wrote a letter to Sec. Blinken in May 2021 telling him, “No one who qualifies for a SIV should be left behind—and potentially at risk—after U.S. forces exit.” The written response from the State Department’s Naz Durakoglu, the Acting Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Legislative Affairs finally came on June 5, 2021 – almost one month later despite the emergency nature of the situation. The canned response made no mention of the impending departure of U.S. military forces and the impact that would likely have on the security situation and the fate of SIV applicants.

The U.S. military appeared to better understand the gravity of the threat posed to their current and former interpreters and Afghan allies. On May 26, 2021, Gen. Mark Milley told reporters “We recognize that there are a significant amount of Afghans that supported the United States, supported the coalition. And that they could be at risk, their safety could be at risk...We recognize that a very important task is to ensure that we remain faithful to them, and that we do what’s necessary to ensure their protection, and if necessary, get them out of the country, if that’s what they want to do.”

Due to the seriousness of the threat, Gen. Milley said the Department of Defense had begun developing plans “very, very rapidly” to evacuate “not just interpreters but a lot of other people that have worked with the United States.”

But a White House spokesperson later that day issued a statement pushing back on Gen. Milley’s comments, saying, “I can tell you we have no plans for evacuations at this time.” This statement confirmed an utter absence of urgency at the White House with regards to evacuating Afghan allies.

SIV Holder Trapped

A former Afghan interpreter for the U.S. Army who qualified for a Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) last year, was scheduled to fly out of Afghanistan on August 14. But the flight was canceled as the Taliban took over Kabul. His passport was at the American embassy and destroyed as part of evacuation procedures. As of May 2022, he had not been able to make it to the U.S.

The Defense Department is not the lead agency responsible for evacuating SIV applicants or ACMITS from other countries. Gen. Milley reminded the Senate Appropriations Committee later in June 2021, “The Department of State is the lead agency to work with any host nation on the evacuation of citizens who desire that. In that case--in the case of Afghanistan, there's a Special Immigrant Visa program. The State Department's running that...We, the military, are capable of doing basically whatever is directed and we're very confident we can do whatever is required.”

The Biden administration's hesitancy to act to evacuate at risk Afghans who worked directly with the U.S. military was reportedly due to domestic political concerns pertaining to immigration policy.

"In the spring there was wall-to-wall coverage of the border—'Who are these people coming into our country?'—and at the same time we're contemplating bringing in tens of thousands of Afghans. I feel passionately about it, but politically it could be risky," a senior Biden administration official told The Atlantic.

After months of mounting bipartisan pressure, the Biden administration announced the launch of Operation Allies Refuge "to support relocation flights for interested and eligible Afghan nationals and their families who have supported the United States and our partners in Afghanistan, and are in the SIV application pipeline" on July 14, 2021 – three months after announcing its intent to withdraw U.S. forces, an action that was nearly universally assessed as likely placing Afghan allies at greater risk.

"Our objective is to get individuals who are eligible relocated out of the country in advance of the removal — of the withdrawal of troops at the end of August," then White House Spokesperson Jen Psaki said on July 14, 2021.

But contrary to her statement, the vast majority of those who were eligible to be relocated were not evacuated prior to the withdrawal of U.S. troops at the end of August 2021.

The belated White House efforts came much too late for the overwhelming vast majority of SIV applicants still in Afghanistan. In addition, the administration would later admit they "lack the capacity to bring people to Kabul from other parts of the country or to house them in Kabul itself." The first flight would not depart until July 29, 2021. This first tranche of SIV evacuees included some 700 applicants who were furthest along in their applications, as well as their families.

A second flight of SIV evacuees departed on August 1, 2021, and a third flight left on August 4, 2021. The Biden administration did not begin daily evacuation flights for SIV holders and applicants until August 12, 2021 – just one day before the Taliban was at the gates of Kabul.

Between July 14, 2021 when the program was announced and August 15, 2021 when Kabul officially fell to the Taliban, only "1,962 SIV applicants and their families," were evacuated according to the State Department in January 2022. This was an infinitesimally small fraction of American's Afghan allies.

The decision to not fly out a greater number of SIV applicants, including those with Chief of Mission approval, resulted in tens of thousands of America's allies being left behind in Taliban occupied Afghanistan on August 31, 2021, and subject to Taliban reprisal attacks.

And while Biden political appointees had previously said they resisted evacuating Afghan allies due to concerns it would undermine the U.S.-backed Afghan government, they showed no hesitation in widely broadcasting this limited effort to evacuate those furthest in the process. They issued several press releases and conducted briefings associated with the effort – all while Afghan troops were facing a withering Taliban assault in late July. This public relations campaign was actively waged

In late May, a group of bipartisan senators met with White House officials to urge the Biden administration to expedite the evacuation of America's Afghan allies. Senator Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) recalls the group "expressing the sense very directly that there had to be an evacuation, beginning right then, of thousands of our Afghan partners to Guam. The response basically was 'We're on it. Don't worry. We know what we're doing.'"

However, no such action was taken despite continued pressure on the administration from Members of Congress and outside veteran groups continued as the threat against Afghan allies and partners still in the country grew.

Testifying about the SIV program before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on June 7, 2021, Sec. Blinken said "we are looking very actively at every possible contingency to make sure that we can accommodate and care for those who are seeking--who've helped us and are seeking to leave."

Asked specifically by Ranking Member McCaul (R-TX) whether the State Department was planning to relocate SIV applicants out of Afghanistan prior to the U.S. military's departure, Sec. Blinken claimed they were "considering every option." But despite this purported consideration, no specifics were provided as to what those options would entail.

Sec. Blinken did say the State Department planned to add some 50 personnel to help expedite SIV application processing. But, he added the important caveat that those additional staff would not be in place until "the end of July." With the U.S. military ending its presence only one month later, this demonstrated a clear lack of urgency by the administration to address this critical situation.

Although U.S. military commanders, the intelligence community, and American allies had all been privately briefed in June 2021 that the most likely outcome of the withdrawal of American military support was a national collapse, the Biden administration delayed flying any Afghan allies out of the country until the end of July 2021. And right about the same time that intelligence assessment was reportedly presented, NSA Jake Sullivan told ABC News "We are doing the kind of extensive planning for potential evacuation should that become necessary. We will take all these steps to ensure that we do right by the people who did right by us," with regard to America's Afghan allies, a statement that was belied by the facts in the months to come.

No one personified the indifference and lack of urgency regarding the dire situation facing SIV applicants more than President Biden. On July 8, 2021, the president claimed "fewer than half" of SIV holders wanted to leave the country. That claim was rejected by veterans' organizations and other outside organizations who worked directly with those at-risk Afghans.

"This became a persistent talking point, and a false one: Almost all of the remaining Afghans with visas were in official limbo, waiting for the United Nations to put them on flights to the U.S., or for family members to receive passports and visas. The president, echoed by his officials, was trying to blame the Afghans for their own entrapment."

- The Atlantic, January 2022

And while Biden political appointees had previously said they resisted evacuating Afghan allies due to concerns it would undermine the U.S.-backed Afghan government, they showed no hesitation in widely broadcasting this limited effort to evacuate those furthest in the process. They issued several press releases and conducted briefings associated with the effort – all while Afghan troops were facing a withering Taliban assault in late July. This public relations campaign was actively waged despite the paltry number of Afghan allies evacuated during this period.

In mid-July 2021, the State Department would take some additional steps to expedite SIV application processing, including establishing an interagency Afghanistan Task Force. But, in what would become a pattern of repeated administrative failures in the State Department’s last minute attempts to help people in the country, several State Department officials told the Committee Minority the link to sign up as a volunteer for the task force did not function as intended for several days after it was sent out.

Just days before the embassy was to close, the U.S. Embassy in Kabul began issuing electronic SIVs to approved applicants “to speed up visa delivery for recipients slated to travel on U.S. government-chartered flights out of Afghanistan.” It is unclear why this step was not taken much earlier.

Similarly, it was only on August 12, 2021 – just 72 hours before the fall of Kabul – that “the Secretaries of State and Homeland Security exercised their authority to waive the required panel physician exam for SIV applicants in Afghanistan who had completed all other steps of the application process and receive conditional visas for admission into the United States.”

The fact that such a small percentage of SIV applicants were evacuated prior to the withdrawal’s completion combined with the U.S. government waiting until August 12, 2021 to waive medical screenings suggests the evacuation of America’s Afghan allies was not a high priority for the Biden administration.

d. A Timeline: As the U.S. Military Withdraws, the Taliban Goes on the Offensive

As the U.S. and its allies withdrew from key bases and removed service personnel, contractors, and critical equipment, the Taliban ramped up its offensive across the country. All while the Biden administration dithered on replacing critical counterterrorism capacity and evacuating Americans and Afghan allies.

May 2nd

The U.S. military transferred New Antonik base in Helmand Province to Afghan troops, the first U.S. military installation to be withdrawn from since President Biden's unconditional withdrawal announcement in April 2021.

Only two days later, the Taliban launch a major offensive in southern Helmand Province, attacks that are only repelled by U.S. airstrikes.

- Gen. Miller "was extremely worried from that day onward, especially as he was seeing key districts fall," a U.S. military officer told Army investigators.

Mid-May

By May 13, 2021, the U.S. had transferred Kandahar Airfield, the U.S. military's largest airfield in southern Afghanistan that was once home to some 30,000 international troops, to the command of the Afghan forces. A spokesman for the local Afghan army unit told a reporter that the departure of U.S. forces from the base came as a surprise and without coordination.

By May 18, 2021, U.S. CENTCOM said the "the U.S. has officially handed over five facilities to the Afghan Ministry of Defense" and that between 13-20% of the withdrawal process had been completed.

Mid-June

By the middle of June 2021, the Taliban had capture more than 100 of Afghanistan's 419 governing districts.

As the security situation in Afghanistan deteriorated, senior officials in the Biden administration reportedly became concerned about the speed and the pace of the withdrawal, particularly as it pertained to the closure of Bagram Air Base.

June 15

U.S. CENTCOM issued a statement saying it had "completed more than 50% of the entire retrograde process."

- Dep. Sec. McKeon would later testify to the House Foreign Affairs Committee in November 2021, "In the spring as the withdrawal was moving, I think a little more quickly than we expected, the rest of the government talked to the DoD and asked for more information on the timeline." This indicated a concerning lack of coordination between the Defense Department and the State Department at a critical phase of the withdrawal.

“I felt that by nature, the Department of Defense can move very fast on issues like this. I felt that we were not completely aligned with the State on that, there were still some things they could do faster.”

- Gen. McKenzie, September 2021

June 18

The U.S. military “paused the shutdown...so the White House could ponder the ramifications of giving up the U.S.’s premier air base in the country.”

Gen. Miller also reportedly advised the U.S. government to shutter its embassy in Kabul due to the inability to safeguard that facility without the presence of U.S. military advisers.

June 22

President Biden, equipped with the intelligence assessment that Kabul could fall in six months, reportedly “signed off on the plan to close [Bagram Air Base] on July 2 and keep only a limited military presence on the ground,” mostly in Kabul.

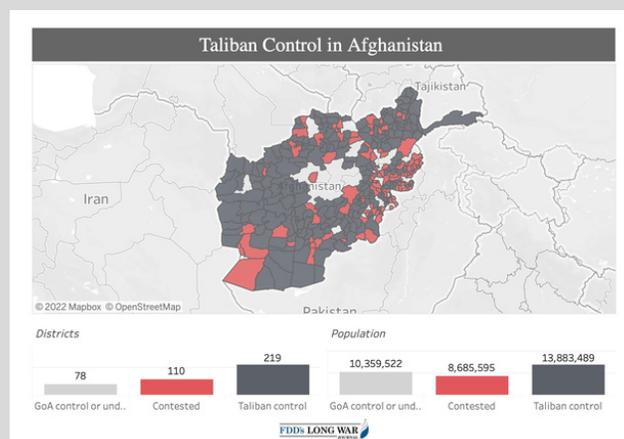
June 23

Gen. Miller warns of a major deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan: “You look at the security situation, it's not good. The Afghans recognize it's not good. The Taliban are on the move. We're starting to create conditions here that won't look good for Afghanistan in the future if there's a push for a military takeover.”

June 24

Following a meeting with President Ghani, Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY) called on President Biden to course correct and slow down the withdrawal of U.S. forces. He said there were “increasing indications” the collapse of the Afghan government “could come soon after U.S. withdrawal is complete,” calling such outcomes “as tragic as they are avoidable.”

June 29



Gen. Miller tells a press conference in Kabul, ***“What we’re seeing is the rapid loss of district centers.”***

The U.S. military abandoned Bagram Air Base. According to multiple reports, the U.S. did not forewarn some key Afghan military or Afghan leaders, appearing to depart the installation in the middle of the night. This manner of departure reportedly left some Afghan soldiers “rattled,” according to The Wall Street Journal.

[Abandoning the Crown Jewel of U.S. Intelligence Operations in the Region](#)



The decision to abandon Bagram Air Base reduced critical U.S. intelligence and strike capabilities in Afghanistan and in the wider region. As a senior military official told The Wall Street Journal, Bagram “would provide a staging area for drones, other aircraft and special-operations forces to conduct counterterrorism operations in case terrorist and other dangers grew.”

Bagram Air Base also known as Bagram Airfield, is situated approximately 25 miles north of Kabul and was at one time the largest U.S. military installation in Afghanistan capable of housing some 10,000 personnel in addition to manned and unmanned military aircraft.

U.S. Defense Department personnel agreed with the strategic importance of Bagram:

“Bagram was a key hub for air support for everything that we were doing over there for the last 20 years,” Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said on July 2nd -the same day Bagram was abandoned.

“The Bagram option went away when we were ordered to reduce our presence to the 650 personnel in Kabul...I recommended a [U.S. troop] level of 2,500. A level that would have allowed us to hold Bagram and other airfields as well. Once you go below that level and make a decision to go to zero, it is no longer feasible to hold Bagram,” Gen. McKenzie testified on September 29, 2021.

The U.S. also lacked any similarly capable bases in the region, with the nearest comparable bases being more than one thousand miles away in the Gulf. But despite its value as an intelligence collection and counterterrorism installation, President Biden made the decision to abandon Bagram when he ordered the U.S. military to unconditionally withdraw from Afghanistan.

In testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee on September 28, 2021, Gen. Milley said the U.S. military had presented President Biden with options for keeping Bagram open beyond July 2. At the same time, senior administration officials such as NSA Sullivan claimed it was U.S. military advice that led to Bagram’s closure. But, U.S. military officials testified the president’s insistence of reducing U.S. troops to the 650 figure necessitated the departure because the base could not be secured with so few forces.

July 5

U.S. CENTCOM issued a statement saying more than 90% of the military withdrawal was complete.

Mid-July

By the middle of July, the Taliban was on the march, “with fighting occurring on the outskirts of 15 provincial capitals.”

August 1

Taliban representatives in Doha, Qatar reportedly state, “total victory is more important than legitimacy.”

- “It was apparent when we heard that, that it was game on. They were going full speed, winning militarily, and were coming for Kabul,” a US military official with US Forces-Afghanistan Forward told Army investigators.

August 6

Zaranj, the capital of Nimroz Province in western Afghanistan, becomes the first provincial capital to fall to the Taliban.

At the same time, a “rehearsal of concept” (ROC) tabletop exercise is held involving commanders on the ground in Afghanistan, the leadership of the Embassy in Kabul, and elements of the White House NSC. The State Department “briefed a plan that was vague on the priority of of evacuees and the temporary safe haven plan. This discussion during their ROC Drill was concerning as there seemed to be a disconnect between what we were seeing on the ground and the urgency they were displaying,” Brig. Gen. Sullivan told Army investigators about the drill.

- Multiple military officers involved in the exercise later revealed a representative from the NSC staff said something to the effect of “if we execute NEO we have failed.”

August 8

Kunduz, the largest city in northeastern Afghanistan and a longtime target of the insurgency is captured by the Taliban.

Gen. McKenzie tells his chain of command in his last formal intelligence assessment before the Taliban capture the capital, “It is my judgment that Kabul is going to fall.”

August 10

The Washington Post reports on a new U.S. intelligence assessment estimate that the Afghan government could collapse within 30 to 90 days in the face of a continued Taliban onslaught.

- ▶ That same day, State Dept. Spokesman Price tells reporters: “the idea that the Taliban advance – continued Taliban advance is unstoppable, that there’s nothing that can stand in the way, that we’ll just have to watch it unfold, that is not the reality on the ground.” However, an after action report produced by the U.S. military’s Central Command confirmed that an inter-agency meeting on August 10, 2021 did in fact identify “the deteriorating situation which predicted the full isolation of Kabul within the next 30 days.”

August 12

By August 12, 2021, the Taliban had captured 10 provincial capitals. In addition, after weeks of heavy fighting, the Taliban overran the city of Kandahar. Until May 13, 2021, Kandahar was home to the U.S. military’s largest airfield in southern Afghanistan and was once home to some 30,000 international troops.

August 14

By August 14, 2021, the Taliban had captured 24 of 34 provincial capitals, including the strategically important cities of Herat in the west and Mazar-i-Sharif in the north. The only major cities that remained not under Taliban control were Kabul and Jalalabad. The Taliban were now mere kilometers from the gates of Kabul and had the city surrounded.

- ▶ The U.S. government finally orders the noncombatant evacuation order (NEO).

August 15

The Taliban capture the city of Jalalabad, which had once been home to Forward Operating Base Fenty. The base at one point had been NATO’s third largest base.

e. Conclusion

The run up to the fall of Kabul saw Biden administration political appointees repeatedly make overly optimistic public statements that contrasted dramatically with what U.S. military commanders and other U.S. government personnel were reporting from the ground. Unfortunately, it was not just their public statements that were overly optimistic. They repeatedly refused to take any substantive action to prepare for the inevitable fall of the country, failing to plan a safe evacuation for both American personnel on the ground as well as Afghan allies who had been promised safe passage out of the country.

“I think we could have been much better prepared to conduct a more orderly NEO if policy makers had paid attention to the indicators of what was happening on the ground, and the timelines associated with the [Taliban] advance, and the [Taliban] intent to conduct a military takeover.”

- Adm. Peter Vasely, September 2021

V. THE EVACUATION

“There's going to be no circumstance where you see people being lifted off the roof of an embassy.”

- President Biden, July 8, 2021



While senior Biden administration officials have repeatedly claimed they had done extensive planning for a noncombatant evacuation (NEO) of American citizens and others, U.S. military officials have since made it clear there was a lack of seriousness and urgency among NSC and State Department officials when it came to such planning efforts.

One U.S. military officer told Defense Department investigators State Department officials were repeatedly saying during planning meetings “don’t

say NEO” and “This is not a NEO for Afghanistan.” The same officer said during planning meetings, the U.S. Embassy personnel “provided an estimate that 40,000 evacuees would be the requirement,” for the evacuation “which was clearly very low.”

By August 15, 2021, the Taliban had gained control of Kabul – and effectively the entire country. U.S. Embassy personnel, local employed staff (LES), American contractors, allied foreign nationals and military personnel, and hundreds of thousands of Afghans who assisted the United States’ efforts to rebuild the country were now in danger and needed to be evacuated. But the Biden administration had largely wasted the four months since the president announced the full withdrawal, failing to adequately plan for the anticipated Taliban takeover.

What would take place in this country where so many Americans served and bled for almost 20 years, would shock and horrify the world. The images of people falling from planes, handing their children over barbed wired walls to American soldiers, and the aftermath of the Abbey Gate bombing will forever be etched into the minds of anyone who saw them. In this chapter, the Committee Minority will outline the systemic failures that turned what was always going to be a chaotic situation into an extremely dangerous and deadly one, forcing U.S. personnel on the ground to exhibit herculean efforts to carry out their assigned mission.

a. The Lead Up to the Evacuation

By August 14, 2021, with the Taliban a few kilometers from Kabul, the city was in chaos as thousands of Afghans and Americans were seeking to escape the Taliban’s brutality. Yet the U.S. government was still wholly unprepared for what was to come.

On the morning of August 14, 2021, Rear Adm. Vasely briefed America's allies, saying, "he now assessed that the Taliban would launch an attack on Kabul within the next 24–48 hours."

At 3:30pmET, just hours before the Taliban entered Kabul, the White House NSC hosted a meeting in Washington, DC of the Deputies Small Group where, according to press reports, "senior Biden administration officials were still discussing and assigning basic actions involved in a mass civilian evacuation."

The meeting was chaired by White House NSC Homeland Security Adviser Liz Sherwood-Randall and included representatives from the Defense Department, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Intelligence Community.

The NSC's "summary of conclusions" said the meeting determined that evacuation priority be "given to U.S. Embassy personnel, U.S. citizens, and allied personnel with whom the U.S. Government has agreements for evacuation." It also formally tasked the State Department to "immediately stand up a communications / manifest team responsible for notifying individuals from various priority lists."

The summary also highlighted that transit points for evacuees, more commonly known as "lily pads," had yet to be formally established. In response, it directed the State Department "to identify as many countries as possible to serve as transit points," saying such "transit points need to be able to accommodate U.S. citizens, Afghan nationals, third country nationals, and other evacuees."

The document said "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 [sic] either not been vetted or have received limited vetting," underscoring there was no established plan for what to do with this population if they were able to be evacuated.

The memo's call for substantive planning that had clearly not already occurred when the Taliban were at the gates of Kabul demonstrated a clear lack of urgency given the imminence of Kabul's fall. At one point, it called for scheduling future meetings in the coming days to determine whether foreign nationals who are immediate family members of U.S. citizens could be evacuated to the U.S., saying the U.S. Embassy in Kabul "will notify [locally employed staff] to begin to register their interest in relocation to the United States and begin to prepare immediately for departure."

Despite an increasingly dire security situation and multiple warnings from U.S. military commanders and the intelligence community, there is no record provided that the NSC Deputies Committee met any time before August 14, 2021 to begin discussions on safe and orderly relocations out of Afghanistan.

It is unclear why the Deputies Committee waited so long to meet, only doing so at the eleventh hour, after embassy personnel were directed to burn documents and destroy items that could be used by the Taliban for propaganda purposes.

The State Department also waited until August 14th to expand the aforementioned Afghanistan Coordination Task Force “to include the evacuation of private U.S. citizens and Embassy Kabul personnel, according to an internal State Department memo dated 11:00pm EST on August 14th, which was 7:30am on August 15, 2021, local Kabul time.

That same memo, dated six hours after the August 14th NSC meeting, said Qatar agreed to serve as a transit point but only for “for arriving U.S. citizens and personnel for transit enroute to” the United States. No such agreement was reached for at-risk Afghans like SIV holders or applicants.

While the order to evacuate had been given the day prior, on August 15, 2021 there were still 2,000 U.S. personnel at the embassy in need of evacuation according to Rear Adm. Vasely.

At 11:20am local time on August 15, the embassy’s consular efforts ceased operations and was moved to Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA), according to an internal State Department memo. Amb. Wilson also left the embassy and relocated to the airport at 2:40pm local time, leaving only U.S. security and Defense Department personnel at the Embassy in Kabul.

The U.S. military helicopters evacuating U.S. embassy equipment and personnel from the embassy’s roof made the flight to Kabul airport “while evading constant” enemy fire, according to a citation awarded to the American soldiers involved.

At 9:30pm local time on August 15, 2021, “Embassy Kabul was closed and the flag lowered,” according to an internal State Department memo.



President Biden has repeatedly cited President Ghani fleeing the country as a reason for much of the chaos surrounding the evacuation from Kabul, yet testimony from a former senior administration official indicates the president’s own actions may have led to that happening.

Special Envoy Khalilzad told the Minority Committee the decision to evacuate the embassy and not communicate that move to President Ghani likely increased the sense of fear and uncertainty at the presidential palace, and possibly contributed to his decision to leave the country quickly.

The same day the U.S. flag was lowered from our embassy, Special Envoy Khalilzad and Gen. McKenzie met with Taliban representatives in Doha to discuss the evacuation. The Taliban offered the U.S. the chance to secure Kabul, an offer that was not accepted. That offer will be discussed in detail later in this report.

b. The Crush of Humanity: August 15 – 16, 2021

“At this time, out of an abundance of caution, there are no flights coming or going, military or civilian, and this is because of large crowds that are still on the tarmac on the southern side of the field, the civilian side of the field.”

- Defense Dept. Spokesperson Kirby, August 16, 2021



The failure to anticipate a surge of refugees at the Kabul airport, often referred to as Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA), despite the military assessing Kabul to be at risk of falling to the Taliban, combined with an inadequate number of U.S. personnel initially deployed, created the powder keg that exploded with the chaotic scenes that reverberated around the world, including images of Afghans falling to their deaths.

On August 15, 2021, the Kabul airport’s “civilian terminal had been breached by thousands of local civilians and potentially Taliban forces, which overran Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, among other allied security forces,” the Air Force said in a press release, citing personnel who had been on the ground.

The number of U.S. troops initially deployed to the Kabul airport by the Biden administration to conduct the NEO proved inadequate. Forces there were soon overrun late on August 15th, Kabul time, and into the morning of August 16th, with desperate Afghans rushing the flight line and clinging to the landing gear of U.S. military aircraft in an effort to escape the Taliban, with several of them falling to their deaths, a series of events that were captured in haunting images that shook the world.

An internal State Department memo later confirmed three Afghans “fatally fell” to their death on August 15, 2021 during the initial chaos. Other deceased Afghans were later discovered in the landing gear of a U.S. Air Force C-17, prompting an official investigation. These events led to a suspension of evacuation flights, delaying the U.S. government’s ability to get more Americans and allies out of the country and to safety.

State Dept. Spokesperson Price admitted the “images that we have all seen emanating from the international airport in Kabul, HKIA, they’re searing. They are painful. They are difficult to see. They are difficult to watch.”

But President Biden soon downplayed the images, incorrectly telling *ABC News* on August 18, 2021, what was depicted in the images “was four or five days ago,” – instead of two to three days prior – in what appeared to be an attempt to suggest they were no longer relevant.

According to interviews with U.S. military service personnel who had participated in the NEO, the chaos in the initial days was due to an inadequate number of troops deployed to HKIA. “Our folks saw a lot of things they were not prepared for,” U.S. Air Force Colonel Colin McClaskey, who was dispatched to Kabul to get the airport back up and running, told *The Washington Post*.

"I'll never forget that feeling or sensation that we felt, like we were launching aircraft to save our lives."

- Lt. Col. Brian Desautels, 71st Rescue Squadron and Commander of Personnel Recovery Task Force,
Published October 2021

Internal State Department memos dated August 16, 2021, described the utter chaos at the airport, with one stating “hundreds approached HKIA’s flight line and forced themselves onto a U.S. government aircraft. Further breaches at HKIA cannot be fully prevented at current force levels.” A second memo from later that day stated “thousands of people are gathered around” the airport, “including on the tarmac, making it difficult for aircraft to take off of land,” saying the U.S. military “continues to fly helicopters at low levels to keep crowds away.”

In addition to desperate would-be refugees, U.S. personnel at the airport also found themselves coming under attack by small arms fire. Defense Dept. Spokesperson Kirby confirmed on August 16, 2021, “[t]here have been security incidents -- incidents at the field involving armed individuals shooting at U.S. forces...in two separate incidents, U.S. forces did respond to hostile threats, and that resulted in the death of two armed individuals.” In addition, a State Department memo from that day said that the guard towers at Hamid Karzai International airport “received small arms fire throughout the day.”

While the Pentagon spokesperson did not assign responsibility for the attacks, personnel on the ground attributed some of the incoming fire to the Taliban, with Lt. Col. Desautels saying, “I crossed the runway with a small security detail, about 100 yards from the Taliban with gunfire going off.”

"My heart is broken. My mind is blowing. Unbelievable things happened. The Taliban killed 20 people in front of me in the airport yesterday."

- Naheed Farid, a former Afghan Member of Parliament, August 16, 2021

The security situation was so desperate in those initial days that U.S. Air Force pilots and maintenance personnel, typically tasked with flying and maintaining multi-million-dollar aircraft, were pressed into guard duty, kitted out with body armor and rifles in order to safeguard against attack as the facility was locked down. Similarly, most of the officers working at the Joint Operations Center were also pressed into security duties as the mob got within 150 meters of that key command center.

This chaos at HKIA led to unsafe flights out of the airport.

“When the crowd saw that there were no flights, people started going wild, seizing any piece of the airport they could grab — mattresses, buckets, even empty water bottles,” *The New York Times* reported. “Nearly everything needed to run the airport effectively — airfield lighting, radars, weather systems — had been damaged or destroyed by crowds as they climbed over sensitive electronics and power supplies,” *The Washington Post* reported.

During the chaos, at least two C-17 aircraft took off “with unknown personnel/portions of the desperate crowd on board.”

The desperate situation at the airport led to U.S. military aircraft having to fly out an unsafe number of evacuees, as C-17 transport planes were filled to beyond their capacity with Afghans seeking escape. One aircraft was “swarmed by Afghans” late on August 15th, and the would-be evacuees “began pulling themselves into the plane and then pulling others up behind them.”



“We have women and children and people's lives at stake, it's not about capacity or rules and regulations,” said Lt. Col. Eric Kut, mission commander for the flight, defending his decision to fly with more passengers than is technically permitted.

By August 17, 2021, reinforcements from the U.S. Marine Corps 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit, the U.S. Army's 82nd Airborne Division, and several National Guard units eventually arrive at HKIA between August 17 to 19, 2021, “bringing the number of U.S. forces from less than 1,000 to almost 6,000.”

Airport flight operations resume very early on August 17, 2021, after these reinforcements arrived. Four days after the NEO was formally ordered, the significant increase in the number of troops on the ground at HKIA allowed for some basic semblance of security at the airport.

The problem, however, was that the approximately 5,000 plus military personnel

were then penned in at the airport by Taliban fighters, making them particularly vulnerable to any kind of Taliban or ISIS-K attack, and depriving them of the ability to extend the perimeter to ease processing of evacuees.

This situation was one that could have been made less challenging had the Biden administration accepted the Taliban's offer, allowing the U.S. to maintain control of Kabul during the evacuation.

c. Mixed Messages Create Confusion on the Ground: August 17 – August 19, 2021

“People are talking about the greatest airlift in history...when in reality it was a complete clusterfuck and a lot of people died that didn't need to.”

- U.S. military servicemember involved in the evacuation, Published January 21, 2021

While U.S. military and State Department personnel on the ground were performing herculean feats to secure the airport and process evacuees, the Taliban's control of the city created further chaos. Harassment at Taliban checkpoints, unruly crowds, violence, and other obstacles made it impossible for many Americans, green card holders, U.S. embassy personnel, and at-risk Afghans to reach the airport.

Yet instead of acknowledging the challenging situation, Biden administration political appointees repeatedly offered rosy and even Pollyannaish assessments of the situation, touting successes and ignoring the reality on the ground. These administration officials continued to make these statements despite the administration's own internal assessments painting a much more dire picture.

Once the airport was finally secured and flights resumed on August 17, 2021, a message was sent at 6:15am local time to approximately 1,200 registered email addresses encompassing 3,000 U.S. citizens and their accompanying family members who requested repatriation, inviting them to report to the airport's North Gate for evacuation assistance.

Where Were the Planes?

One of the reasons there were insufficient U.S. military personnel at the airport to secure it on August 15, 2021 was an absence of available military aircraft to fly them into position, according to an After Action Report prepared by U.S. Central Command.

Only three of the six “in theater” C-17 aircraft were available for use as the remainder were in maintenance. Similarly, two of the three “in theater” C-130 aircraft were having maintenance issues.

“This impacted our ability to move in-theater forces rapidly,” the report said.

But with the U.S. military and diplomatic personnel trapped inside HKIA, as tens of thousands of Afghans stuck outside the gates attempted to gain entry and board flights, the danger at the airport was evident. At times, U.S. and Afghan troops had to deploy tear gas to keep the crowds at bay, while Afghans seeking escape were routinely beaten by Taliban fighters. One senior official described the scenes outside the airport as “apocalyptic,” while another told *The New York Times* the crowds outside the airport could slip “into a mob at any given moment.”

As would continue to happen throughout, these early days would see “people with crushing injuries and gunshot wounds...rioting and gunfire and people throwing children over the gates,” Greg Floyd, the top U.S. consular officer at the airport, told *The Washington Post*.

In addition, “as many as 30 unaccompanied children showed up” at one gate each day, The New York Times reported.

As would-be escapees sought to enter the airport, overrunning the civilian side, the U.S. military personnel charged with guarding the military side of the airport refused at one point to admit anyone who did not have a western passport, even rejecting Afghans who possessed a valid US visa.

The thousands of Afghans waiting outside to be evacuated waited for hours in stifling heat, with little to no water, and faced occasional beatings by Taliban fighters wielding rifle butts and lead pipes. This fostered a sense of hopelessness:

Families waited outside the blast walls and barbed wire surrounding the airport. The Taliban fighters beat back the crowd with sticks, rubber hoses, knotted ropes and rifle butts. They fired into the sky, and sometimes pointed toward the crowd. I tried to take a picture of a Taliban fighter aiming a gun at a civilian. I felt the sting of a whip on my leg. The sound of gunfire kept popping. It came closer. A mother and child lay covered in blood on the street.”

- Marcus Tam, writing on August 17 for The Los Angeles Times, Published December 2021



Despite the chaotic scenes at the airport, administration officials were issuing statements disconnected from reality, with NSA Sullivan saying on August 17th, “What we are finding is that we are getting people through the gate, we are getting them lined up, and we are getting them on planes.”

But an internal State Department memo sent that same day said, “Crowds continue to pose a problem at HKIA, resulting in a temporary closure of some entrances and gates on August 17.” In addition, flights were once again paused about six hours late that night and into early morning on August 18, 2021, according to a State Department memo.

Flights once again resumed on August 18, 2021, at 6:00am local time.

While some 5,800 U.S. military personnel were eventually deployed to the airport, the State Department only had only 15 consular officers at HKIA on August 15, 2021. Three additional State Department consular officers arrived on August 17th, bringing the total to 18 consular officers by August 18, 2021, according to U.S. officials and an internal State Department memo – even though it was already several days into the NEO. This significantly limited the U.S. government’s ability to quickly process people who were able to get through the throngs of people at the gates and inside the airport.

In addition, the U.S. government continued to struggle to find a way to communicate with people on the ground who were cleared for evacuation flights.

At one point on August 18th, the State Department emailed a select group of evacuees an electronic badge, or “gate pass.”

Would be evacuees were told to “please make your way to Hamid Karzai International Airport. You should plan to enter the airport at the East Gate, which will open at 8 a.m.” The message said that “the below access pass may facilitate passage to the airport.”



However, the passes were easily duplicated, prompting greater confusion and challenge at the gate.

“Every credential we tried to provide electronically was immediately disseminated to the widest possible pool. And so it was no longer a viable credential to differentiate among populations, and we simply did not have the people for that time to be able to try to sift through that crowd of people demanding access, a State department official told *Politico*.

(One of the gate passes the State Department tried to use during the NEO)

As credentialed people struggled to get through the Taliban checkpoints around the city, the situation outside the airport gate remained dire. An internal State Department memo dated August 18, 2021, stated “reports of violence among the crowds outside the gates of HKIA, including fist-fights and one report of a person shot trying to climb the wall.”

That same night, President Biden privately told his administration “to expand the aperture” of evacuees beyond the previous priority groups of American citizens, green card holders, and U.S. embassy personnel, “to include women, children, etc,” Rear Adm. Vasely told Army investigators. He said with this move, “the flood gates were open.”

That night, President Biden went on television for the first time to address the dire situation in Afghanistan since the Taliban surrounded Kabul on August 13th. Speaking to *ABC News'* George Stephanopolous, the president made a promise he would later break:

“If there's American citizens left, we're gonna stay to get them all out.”

- President Joe Biden, August 18, 2021

He also claimed U.S. personnel “have control of the airport now.” But an internal State Department memo sent just a few hours later, on the morning of August 19, 2021, directly conflicted this claim by the president. It stated the situation at the airport “remains volatile with large crowds gathered at the North Gate and inside the terminal. People are desperate and are making multiple attempts to gain access despite being turned away on more than one occasion.”

“Congestion outside (Hamid Karzai International Airport) gates worsened, resulting in confrontation and stress,” said a second internal State Department memo. It went on to say “a large number of” locally employed U.S. Embassy Staff “were unable to enter HKIA and returned home, reporting deeply traumatic experiences.”

As one military officer arriving on August 19th described it, the situation on the ground at Kabul airport resembled scenes from the dystopian novel “Lord of the Flies.”

Despite these dire internal reports from people on the ground, later that day State Department Spokesperson Price’s public statements were in stark contrast to these ominous reports, telling reporters, “my understanding is that things are moving quite efficiently at this hour at the airport.”

It is not clear whether the Department spokesperson had simply not been given accurate information or was spinning the reality on the ground to make the situation more politically palatable for the administration. But either way, his statements were divorced from the reality of what the State Department was reporting internally as well as from press reports from the ground.

By August 19, 2021, the insufficient number of State Department consular officers at HKIA was greatly exacerbating significant processing issues inside the gates, making the security situation on the ground worse. By this date, five days after the NEO was ordered, only about 20 consular officers were on the ground, with *The New York Times* reporting “overwhelmed consular officials struggled to identify and verify those who had valid claims to be evacuated.”

The State Department also noted on August 19th “additional consular officers have also now landed in Kabul, and we will nearly double the number of consular officers on the ground by tomorrow, by Friday” August 20, 2021. In addition, the former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan John Bass arrived in Kabul at 4:00am on the morning of August 19th to “lead logistics coordination and consular efforts within the personnel who remain at the airport,” according to State Dept. Spokesperson Price. But the arrival of Amb. Bass sparked some confusion, as the lines of authority between him and the current Amb. Wilson were not immediately clear.

“With Ambassador Wilson and Ambassador Bass both on deck it was not initially clear who was the lead for providing us the support we required to execute the NEO,” Brig. Gen. Sullivan told Army investigators.

In addition, a series of internal State Department memos reviewed by the Committee found the number of State Department consular officers in Kabul during the massive military evacuation involving over 124,000 evacuees never surpassed 36 personnel, roughly one consular officer for every 3,444 evacuees.

U.S. military personnel also repeatedly complained about the absence of State Department consular officers during the evacuation, saying their absence impeded the processing of evacuees.

“Initially there were not enough consular officers to process everyone and that remained an issue throughout,” Brig. Gen. Sullivan told Army investigators.

In addition, multiple U.S. Marines assigned to Abbey Gate told Army investigators they rarely saw U.S. State Department personnel on the ground and when they did show up, they did so inconsistently. “Marines often had to halt gate processing and flow, because the consular officers were not present to screen and approve evacuees for movement,” the U.S. military’s investigation report said.

- ▶ “The [Department of State personnel] would show up whenever they wanted to and leave when they wanted to. They wouldn’t give any authority up to us to help when they were gone. They would just stop,” one Marine said.
- ▶ “The [Department of State personnel] were really inconsistent about showing up,” another Marine said.
- ▶ “My biggest gripe was the [Department of State] personnel...they would come out to do their shift and randomly show up and leave. They were slowing down the entire process. I couldn’t understand what their thought process was,” a Marine Platoon Sergeant told Army investigators.”

Yet, Sec. Blinken testified before the House Foreign Affairs Committee in September of 2021 – one month to the date after the NEO was ordered – that State Department personnel were “serving at the gates right alongside our brothers and sisters in uniform.”

Either the secretary was unaware of the significant lack of consular officers and the repeated concerns by the military, or his sunny optimism in his answers were purposefully misleading. Either way, it appears at the very least he spoke without understanding the full situation at the gate.

On August 21, 2021, the State Department “brought in new consular personnel and replaced the consular team that initiated the evacuation. This mid-evacuation rotation caused confusion as the new consular team established operations,” according to U.S. CENTCOM’s After-Action Report.

“Consular staff did not have sufficient manning to supervise all processing at the gates which often led to Department of Defense (DoD) personnel at the gates making on the spot calls concerning paperwork,” the report added.

Again, this stands in stark contrast with repeated claims by President Biden and his top officials, including NSA Sullivan and Sec. Blinken, that the administration planned “for all contingencies.”

In addition to the failed “gate passes” that only created more havoc and the failure to have enough consular officers on the ground to process those who were lucky enough to make it inside the gates, the U.S. Embassy repeatedly transmitted a series of often contradictory messages to American citizens and LPRs seeking to escape Afghanistan.

A security alert issued by the State Department on August 18, 2021 said “the security situation in Kabul continues to change quickly, including at the airport. U.S. citizens should continue to shelter in place,” further warning “[d]o not travel to the airport until you have been informed by email that departure options exist.”

The next day, on August 19, 2021, the embassy issued a message telling U.S. citizens, LPRs, and their spouses and unmarried minor children that they “should consider travelling to Hamid Karzai International Airport when you judge it is safe to do so.” While adding in bold, “The U.S. government cannot ensure safe passage to the airport.”

These contradicting messages created confusion.

“The State Department would push the message that went out to [American citizens]. Every message that went out was in error in some way. It would be the wrong gate or the wrong offsite location. Sometimes they were directed to unopened Taliban controlled gates,” one U.S. military officer assigned to U.S. Forces-Afghanistan told Army investigators. “Messages were often being pushed out too late for AMCITs to make pick up. At one point, in the last few days, we were supposed to send [a] mass message to all AMCITs to all get out. State didn’t push out that message,” the officer added, using an acronym for American citizens.

Rear Adm. Peter Vasely reiterated this frustration, telling Army investigators, “Messaging from State [to American citizens] was muddled. The first message gave the incorrect location (South Gate), the second message the timing was messed up.” As did Maj. Gen. Donahue, who told the same investigators, “My Paratroopers had to deal with the confusion that their messaging caused. They would send the wrong messaging, the wrong threat streams.”

The choke points throughout Kabul were so bad the U.S. military had to fly CH-47 Chinook helicopters to pick up some 169 people at the Baron Hotel near the airport on August 19, 2021

“Our commanders have the authority that they need to use their assets and their forces to help assist Americans who need to get to the airport, get to the airport on a case-by-case basis,” Defense Dept. Spokesperson John Kirby said.

As a result of the chaos and mixed messages caused by a complete lack of proper planning by the Biden administration – causing chaos outside the gates and slow processing inside the gates – C-17 transport planes began leaving Kabul with significantly less passengers than their official capacity

allowed. On August 19th, five days into the NEO, planes were taking off at only about 50% of their capacity.

Pentagon officials said this was because not enough people were not being processed through the gates to fly out.



The situation outside the gates of HKIA remained so desperate that parents were seen handing over their infant children to U.S. military personnel guarding the perimeter. Some 1,450 Afghan children were evacuated without their parents, and efforts to reunite many of these separated children with their relatives were ongoing months after their arrival in the US. As of late December 2021, about 250 of the children remained in US government custody, according to statistics the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). More updated information is not currently available.

d. Capacity Issues Force Shutdown in Evacuation Flights: August 20 - 22, 2021

On August 20, 2021, the same day President Biden touted “significant progress” in the evacuation, U.S. military flights out of Kabul were paused due to lack of capacity at the U.S. government-operated lily pad in Qatar. The facility had exceeded its evacuee population capacity of 8,000 the day before, meaning no more people could be evacuated there until those in Qatar had been transported to other locations.

What Is a Lily pad?

While the U.S. began ramping up evacuations of Special Immigrant Visa holders in late July 2021, it never established processing centers outside of Afghanistan, which would have allowed more SIV applicants to be evacuated prior to the NEO – and would have made a significant difference in our ability to evacuate more people during the NEO. At the time, the Biden administration had been reportedly talking with Qatar and Kuwait about temporarily hosting thousands of SIV applicants, a deal was never reached. At the same time, the administration opted to not pursue an offer for such a center in Guam, even though the governor of Guam offered. Guam, a U.S. territory, served as a lily pad in the previous evacuations of thousands of American allies from South Vietnam and the Kurdish region of Iraq.

During the evacuation itself, the administration similarly turned down an offer for a lily pad in Pakistan. The lily pads that were established, including Qatar, UAE, and Germany, reached capacity at various points of the evacuation, which hindered and paused flights out, underscoring the advantage that having additional locations would have brought.

The State Department did not officially reach out to regional partners for the purpose of establishing such transit centers until mid-July, and the Defense Department did not engage the government of Qatar about using facilities there until the middle of August, only reaching agreement to use these facilities to transit American citizens hours before the Taliban seized Kabul.

Failure to do so in advance meant that processing facilities had to be rapidly negotiated and assembled, with the facility in Qatar reaching capacity at one point on August 19th, and causing Afghan evacuees to endure poor housing conditions, something that caused a pause in evacuation flights for at least eight hours on August 20th, a critical period of the military evacuation.

In one example with Ramstein Air Base in Germany, Brigadier General Josh Olson, the commander of the 86th Airlift Wing at Ramstein Air Base, told The Washington Post that his staff “initially planned for 5,000 evacuees. They ended up with a peak of 20,000.” An internal State Department memo dated August 28, 2021 said, “Ramstein Airfield closed to incoming flights due to reaching capacity of more than 18,000 evacuees,” and the base remained closed for two days, delaying the evacuation process.

The last-minute nature of the facility’s establishment led to resources being strained due to the unpredictable evacuee throughput to the base. “The Afghans at Ramstein get two meals a day but at times, it was down to one because the military personnel weren’t sure how many more Afghans were coming”. Specialized military personnel also had to leave behind their day jobs to function as makeshift airport officials and refugee coordinators.

But the messaging on exactly what caused this backlog in Qatar was mixed. While State Dept. Spokesperson Price claimed, “[t]he military thought it imprudent to continue relocation flights from Kabul to Doha until we were able to move some of the individuals in Doha to other locations,” an internal Department memo had a different story. The memo, dated August 19, 2021, stated, “U.S. Embassy officials in Doha reported that sanitary conditions in the hangars sheltering the evacuees had deteriorated and tempers were short. The situation was rapidly growing untenable.”

Unable to fly out evacuees, capacity was also soon reached inside HKIA, effectively closing the gates for any new people to enter the airport. An internal memo from the State Department on August 20th confirmed this, stating “all gates at HKIA are closed and the terminal is at capacity.”

“From the 20th through the 22nd of August, the gates were closed at HKIA, this is because the intermediate staging bases were at capacity,” US Army Brig. Gen. Lance Curtis told reporters on February 4, 2022.

With flights halted, U.S. military personnel struggled to maintain control over unruly crowds as they became increasingly restless. One U.S. Marine said, “he witnessed a flash bang grenade detonate near a civilian’s head.” He stated the incident did not appear intentional and assumed the injury resulted in death.”

By this point, at least seven Afghans had “died while waiting outside HKIA access gates,” according to an August 20th State Department memo which said “the corpses are currently stored at HKIA” and the Taliban was “refusing to accept the remains.”

Yet, in another example of conflicting messages, that same day State Dept. Spokesman Price announced those seeking evacuation “should consider making their way to the airport compound,” despite the airport being at full capacity and the entry gates having been closed. Even more disconnected from reality was Price’s assertions during the same press conference – while the airport gates remained closed – that “operations” at the airport were “efficient and effective.”

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg offered a much more accurate view of the situation on the ground the following day, saying, “we have more planes than we have people or passengers. Because the process of getting people into – and especially Afghans into – the airport processed is now the big, big, big challenge.”

Exacerbating capacity problems at the airport even further, the Biden administration had waited until August 20th – five days after the NEO was ordered – to grant foreign airlines the authority to fly U.S. government approved evacuees to U.S.-based airports.

The following day, on August 21, 2021, the U.S. Embassy in Kabul issued another message to those awaiting evacuation saying, “because of potential security threats outside the gates at the Kabul airport, we are advising U.S. citizens to avoid traveling to the airport and to avoid airport gates at this time unless you receive individual instructions from a U.S. government representative to do so.”

A Timeline: Conflicting Messages from the State Department

August 18th

Would be evacuees are told to “shelter in place” unless “you have been informed by email that departure options exist.”

August 19th

Would be evacuees are told they “should consider travelling to Hamid Karzai International Airport when you judge it is safe to do so.”

August 20th

An internal State Department memo sent to senior officials reads, “all gates at HKIA are closed and the terminal is at capacity.” Yet, that same day, State Dept. Spokesperson Price publicly says those seeking evacuation “should consider making their way to the airport compound.”

August 21st

Would be evacuees were warned “to avoid traveling to the airport and to avoid airport gates” “because of potential security threats outside the gates.”

Capacity issues became so bad at the airport by August 21st, approximately 300 people were asked to leave the airport and go back into Kabul “due to unsatisfactory conditions at the airport,” according to an internal State Department memo.

Despite the gates still being closed to evacuees and planes still grounded, Sec. Austin told ABC News that same day, “If you look at what we're doing now and taking -- evacuating thousands of people every day, it really has been a tremendous piece of work.”

Sec. Austin also said, “if you have an American passport and if you have the right credentials, the Taliban has been allowing people to pass safely through,” while also admitting seconds later that this was not always true, saying, “There have been incidents of people having some tough encounters with Taliban.”

That same day, CIA Director William Burns reportedly met with senior Taliban official Abdul Ghani Baradar in Kabul, the senior most meeting between U.S. and Taliban officials since the insurgent group captured the capital.

The chaos outside the airport also presented persistent security concerns that began on August 15, 2021, when the Taliban were left the task of securing the outer perimeter. And as more and more Afghans arrived at the airport – with one internal State Department memo saying “more than 10,000 Afghans” had surrounded the airport on August 22, 2021, and that “conditions remained volatile outside the gates.”

On August 22, 2021, one day after the State Department warned would be evacuees about “potential security threats outside the gates,” an unidentified “hostile actor” fired upon Afghan security forces involved in monitoring access to the North Gate of HKIA, forcing Afghan, U.S., and coalition troops to return fire, according to U.S. CENTCOM. One member of the Afghan security forces was killed, and several other Afghans were wounded.

A second August 22nd memo said biometric screening was still not available to help vet evacuees at the airport, and that there were at least five cases of Afghans who presented U.S. passports that did not belong to them, “highlighting fraud concerns and complicating the process of screening individual to enter the airport.

In an effort to alleviate the overcrowding at lily pads so flights out of HKIA could resume, On August 22nd, the Biden administration took steps to activate the Civil Reserve Air Fleet (CRAF), the first time this authority had been used since 2003. A total of 18 aircraft were requested.

These activated aircraft were to be used to help relieve some of the overpopulation at the lily pads, transporting evacuees from those facilities to less overburdened locations in the U.S. and elsewhere.

One volunteer involved with evacuation efforts told the Minority Committee the administration had rejected private companies’ efforts to volunteer their aircraft in advance of the CRAF activation order.

As previously mentioned, overpopulation in places like Qatar and Germany had caused the evacuation flights to be suspended for a period, underscoring the need for aircraft to transport evacuees between the various third-country transit locations. Sec. Austin has defended the delay in activating the CRAF, saying the Pentagon held off activating it because of the negative impact it would have on the civilian airlines’ commercial operations.

But, the fact that it took several days to activate the CRAF despite the knowledge that tens of thousands were seeking evacuation in the earliest stages indicated an absence of adequate planning and a failure of operational imagination in the earliest days of the collapse. In addition, the failure to plan for adequate transit capacity that led to a two-day pause in flights could have possibly allowed thousands more people to be evacuated.

e. As Flights Resume, Gates Shutter, and Chaos Reigns Outside HKIA: August 23 – 25, 2021

“The people touching the barriers couldn’t move because of the number of people pushing against them and they were being crushed and injured. We couldn’t even pull them up to help them. We would grab women and children and muscle through the crowd to help them. Everyone was very desperate at this point. It was like this throughout the day of 26 August.”

- U.S. Marine to Army investigators, October 2021

On August 23, 2021, evacuation flights to the transit points in Qatar resume – but the situation there and in Kabul was bleak. The State Department reported some 13,000 people were now located within the HKIA compound – a facility not built to hold that many people. There was similar overcrowding at military facilities in Qatar, with a Pentagon spokesperson acknowledging the “terrible sanitation conditions there on August 23.”

“On the tarmac, the passengers sat on the floor of the plane for three hours, some of them nearly suffocating in the desert heat, until buses could be located to transport them to a hangar. There they found no beds—just cots for the sick—and little food and water. The line to use a toilet was 40 or 50 people long,” The Atlantic reported, with one former interpreter saying: “The Kabul airport crisis and the crisis at Qatar was the same.”

That same day, State Dept. Spokesperson Price calls the evacuation “a story of remarkable progress.”

While conditions inside the airport worsened, conditions outside the gates reached a breaking point. The violence and crowds surrounding HKIA deteriorated to the point the U.S. government began directing American citizens and locally employed embassy staff (LES) on August 24, 2021 to travel to a rally point at the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) compound for eventual movement to the airport.

“American Citizens who wish to depart Kabul must go to the MOI compound on the airport road at 0000 local time to be processed for an evacuation flight. American citizens who choose to remain in Afghanistan after today should be prepared to arrange their own departure without assistance from the US government,” a message sent to would be evacuees by the U.S. embassy said.

At the same time, the number of people awaiting evacuation flights inside the airport had dropped to about 2,500, with all the primary airport gates remaining mostly closed. According to an internal State Department memo, “the Taliban have resorted to gunfire in the air as a tactic for crowd control, impeding” efforts to allow locally employed U.S. embassy staff to access the airport.

Additionally, the airport’s East Gate closed on August 24th “because of the threat of mortars from the Taliban, and an inability to process evacuees without losing control of the gate.”

The same day that Taliban gunfire prevented U.S. local embassy staff from traveling from their residences to the airport, and threat of Taliban mortars forced the permanent closure of a gate.

Yet in the face of all of this, President Biden told reporters, “thus far, the Taliban have been taking steps to work with us so we can get our people out.”

The following day, August 25, 2021, Sec. Blinken speaks to reporters and reiterates President Biden’s assertion that the Taliban were being collaborative.

However, reporting on the ground told a very different story of Taliban members accosting would be evacuees, including Americans. And President Biden’s and Sec. Blinken’s comments have subsequently been disproven by the U.S. government’s own internal reporting from that same time period.

U.S. military officials revealed in February 2022 that during this time, the Taliban was increasingly “less and less cooperative,” blocking evacuees from reaching the airport gates, including American citizens. U.S. Marines deployed to Abbey Gate from August 20 to August 26, 2021 “reported seeing the Taliban turn potential evacuees away, beating potential evacuees and even made allegations of the Taliban shooting at potential evacuees.” This is information the president and secretary should have known or at least had access to when they made their statements about the Taliban being cooperative.

It is unclear whether the president and Secretary of State were not briefed about the actual situation on the ground, or chose to ignore those internal U.S. government reports when they made their statements about the Taliban being cooperative.



As the Taliban grew more violent, so did U.S. officials' internal concerns about security threats to HKIA. The crowds outside the gates "swelled exponentially" and became "desperate" and "aggressive."

The U.S. Embassy issued another warning message on August 25, 2021, stating, "U.S. citizens who are at the Abbey Gate, East Gate, or North Gate now should leave immediately."

That same day, the U.S. military "permanently" closed the East and North Gates at KHIA due to the threat of vehicle borne improvised explosive devices (VBIED), increasing the reliance on Abbey Gate – located directly across from the Baron Hotel – for processing evacuees.

Between August 25th and 26th, the U.S. military received information about four "imminent threats" to Abbey Gate.

One U.S. green card holder told volunteers helping with the evacuation that he and his family "can't move forward, can't move back. The Taliban have blocked us."

To mitigate further risk, U.S. military leaders recommend concluding the military evacuation on August 31, 2021, despite knowing that American citizens, thousands of green card holders, and tens of thousands of at-risk Afghan allies would be left behind in Taliban controlled Afghanistan. President Biden accepts the recommendation to halt the military evacuation on August 31st, abandoning his pledge just one week earlier that "if there's American citizens left, we're gonna stay to get them all out."

f. Terror at Abbey Gate: August 26, 2021



By August 26, 2021, the situation inside and outside of HKIA had reached a breaking point. An internal State Department memo notes that telecommunication systems at the airport “have become increasingly unreliable.” At the same time, the majority of regional lily pads hit capacity, with an internal State Department memo saying, “Many transit points in the Gulf were struggling with capacity limits. Several sites have reached capacity and over 20,000 remained in Doha at two sites, beyond their collective maximum of 17,000.”

The Defense Department reported major backlogs with people arriving at Dulles International Airport in the United States. The Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) said it needs “to re-vet passengers,” and the Joint Chiefs of Staff and CBP leadership “held a conversation to try to resolve the issue,” according to an internal State Department memo. A subsequent State Department memo says that the issue was still not resolved and that “clearance issues at Dulles continued to result in processing delays for most of August 26. Five planes were holding on the tarmac and previous flights waited for more than ten hours.”

Later that same day, at approximately 5:36pm local time, a suicide bomber was able to get past a Taliban checkpoint wearing a large ball bearings laden 20-pound suicide vest. The bomber detonated the vest near the entry control point at Abbey Gate, killing 13 U.S. servicemembers and at least 160 Afghan civilians. Additionally, forty-five U.S. military personnel were wounded in the attack.



**THIS WAS THE
DEADLIEST DAY
FOR THE U.S.
MILITARY IN
AFGHANISTAN
SINCE 2011.**



Blast effects from the bomb were felt 50 meters out, according to Pentagon officials.

The lack of planning by the Biden administration and their refusal to accept the Taliban's offer to secure Kabul during the NEO directly led to the bombing being so deadly. The chaos at the gates and the Taliban's inability to control the perimeter meant that U.S. military personnel were closely packed together as they sought to screen would be-evacuees,

placing them in a more vulnerable situation that was exploited by the bomber, contributing to the high number of casualties.

"The other thing we tried to do is we tried to push out the boundary even further so that we don't get large crowds massing at the gate. Clearly at Abbey Gate today, we had a larger crowd there that we would like, which goes show you that the system is not perfect," Gen. McKenzie said, adding "As you know, standoff for attacks like this is always the best defense. Unfortunately, we just don't have the opportunity, given the geography of the ground that we're on, to always gain that kind of standoff."

The Taliban's presence and control of the outer perimeter also meant the U.S. could not secure the outer area the way commanders would have preferred. Instead, having ceded Kabul to the Taliban, the Biden administration had given themselves no choice but to trust insurgents – terrorist who the United States had fought for almost 20 years – with the responsibility of securing the outer perimeter of HKIA and approaches to the airport.

Senior U.S. officials assigned responsibility to the Taliban for failing to properly secure the surrounding area prior to the deadly attack.

"The Taliban have conducted searches before they get to that point. And sometimes those searches have been good and sometimes not," Gen. McKenzie briefed reporters in the wake of the attack, referencing the Taliban's inability to detect a bomber wearing a rather large suicide vest.

"Clearly the 26th was a lapse in security on the [Taliban's] part," Rear Adm. Vasely told investigators examining the bombing.

Army investigators found the Taliban's increasing lack of cooperation led to Afghans finding other avenues of approach to the airport - avenues that were exploited by the ISIS suicide bomber. Tragically, U.S. servicemembers were placed in a position where their safety and security were reliant upon the Taliban insurgents.

Asked if he thought it was a mistake to cede responsibility for outer perimeter security at the airport to the Taliban, President Biden says: “No, I don’t,” while continuing to stress it is in the Taliban’s “interest” to cooperate on the evacuation, despite the U.S. government knowing at the time that such cooperation was no longer a reality.

g. Fear Leads to Despair as the Gates Are Welded Shut: August 27 – 29, 2021

The following day, August 27, 2021, the U.S. Embassy issued another statement saying, “Because of security threats at the Kabul airport, we continue to advise U.S. citizens to avoid traveling to the airport and to avoid airport gates. U.S. citizens who are at the Abbey gate, East gate, North gate or the New Ministry of Interior gate now should leave immediately.”

An internal State Department memo dated that same day said there were reports of the Taliban “turning away” U.S. citizens at the pre-designated rally point at the Ministry of the Interior– the same location the embassy statement encouraged U.S. citizens to travel to.



Yet a second internal State Department memo from that day revealed Consular Affairs had “sent out updated messaging to over 2,700 U.S. citizens instructing them to proceed to the rally point” at the Ministry of Interior. The memo also describes continued “use of aggressive crowd control by the Taliban.”

The two internal memos appear to suggest that the State Department was essentially urging U.S. citizens to go to a gate where the U.S. government knew that armed Taliban

members were turning people away, often doing so in a violent manner.

The following day, August 28, 2021, yet another warning was issued, saying “Due to a specific, credible threat, all U.S. citizens in the vicinity of Kabul airport (HKIA), including the South (Airport Circle) gate, the new Ministry of the Interior, and the gate near the Panjshir Petrol station on the northwest side of the airport, should leave the airport area immediately. U.S. citizens should avoid traveling to the airport and avoid all airport gates at this time.”

An internal State Department memo said, “security at the gates is precarious” and that new regulations were instituted prohibiting U.S. citizens, LPRs, and locally employed embassy staff from traveling with baggage.

Two weeks into the NEO on August 29, 2021, President Biden directs the Department of Homeland Security “to lead and coordinate ongoing efforts across the Federal Government to support vulnerable Afghans, including those who worked alongside us in Afghanistan for the past two decades, as they safely resettle in the United States.”

At the same time, with most gates permanently closed and the number of departing flights dramatically decreasing, desperate Afghans as well as U.S. citizens and LPRs began looking for

alternatives out of the country. Many fled north to Mazar-i-Sharif with the promise of flights potentially still departing from the airport there. The State Department received “numerous inquiries regarding private charters attempting to evacuate Afghans to third countries, many of these are attempting to evacuate through Mazar-i-Sharif,” according to an internal memo.

But those would-be evacuees in Mazar-i-Sharif would be stranded for months as the State Department proved incapable of substantively aiding their efforts to leave the Taliban-controlled country.

At approximately 11:00pm ET on August 28th and 7:30am local Kabul time on August 29th, “as many as five rockets were fired at the Kabul airport,” only two of the rockets landed inside the perimeter, with one being intercepted by the U.S. military’s counter rocket, artillery, and mortar (C-RAM) system.

Around the same time, the State Department received “reports that multiple U.S. citizens were unable to access HKIA due to the Taliban blocking passage and threatening/beating them at gun point,” according to an internal U.S. government memo sent late in the evening eastern time on August 29th, early morning local Kabul time on August 30, 2021. The report also says, “In other cases, crowds precluded access for U.S. citizens” trying to get to the airport.

An internal State Department memo sent August 30, 2021, says an attempt by NATO ally Romania “to evacuate 130 Afghan nationals from HKIA failed reportedly due to Taliban checkpoints.”

Over these final days in the country, U.S. military forces conducted two strikes against those they allege were responsible for the Abbey Gate bombing. The first on August 28th was an “over-the-horizon counterterrorism” drone strike targeting an “ISIS-K planner” in the Nangarhar Province in eastern Afghanistan. U.S. Central Command later identifies the planner as Kabir Aidi, aka Mustafa, “an ISIS-K high profile attack lethal aid facilitator involved in attack planning and magnetic IED production.”



The following day, the U.S. military carried out a drone strike at 4:53 PM local time targeting a white Toyota Corolla in Kabul, a car that the Defense Department said at the time was “an imminent ISIS-K threat to Hamad Karzai International airport.”

It is later revealed that the strike instead mistakenly killed 10 civilians, including seven children.

h. The Final American Military Flight Departs Kabul: August 30, 2021

At 2:41am local Kabul time on August 30, 2021, “the last group of Afghans came through the South Gate” at Kabul airport, according to U.S. Central Command.

At 5:36am local Kabul time on August 30th, “the last group of U.S. citizens,” constituting 41 Americans, came through the South Gate of the airport. These are the last civilians to be evacuated by the U.S. military during the NEO.

The last U.S. military C-17 carrying Maj. Gen. Chris Donahue and the US ambassador to Afghanistan, Ross Wilson took off from Hamid Karzai International Airport on August 30th at 11:59 local Kabul time.

Gen. McKenzie said on August 3, 2021 the U.S. military would have been prepared to evacuate additional Americans “until the very last minute. But none of them made it to the airport, and were able to be -- and were able to be accommodated.” He went on, “Look, there's a lot of heartbreak associated with this departure. We did not get everybody out that we wanted to get out.”

U.S. Air Force Capt. Kirby Wedan, commander of the lead aircraft of the last five U.S. military transport planes to leave Afghanistan on August 31, perfectly captured the sense of remorse – and even shame – many U.S. personnel experienced:

“I know there are a lot of people still there that needed us. And I know that we left a lot of people behind...It hurts to know we won't be able to go back and get them.”

VI. KEY MISTAKES BY THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION DURING THE NEO

As described above, there were many mistakes made by Biden administration officials during the NEO. But several of these mistakes were key components in the resulting disaster.

a. The U.S. Government Refuses to Take Security of Kabul

“As part of that conversation, he said, ‘Why don’t you just take security for all of Kabul.’ That was not why I was there. That was not my instruction. And we did not have the resources to undertake that mission.”

- Gen. McKenzie, September 2021

On August 15, 2021, Taliban representatives met with the Special Envoy Khalilzad and Gen. Frank McKenzie in Doha, Qatar. There, they discussed who would maintain security of Kabul during the evacuation. Kabul is Afghanistan’s capital and most populous city, being the home to one out of every ten Afghans.

The Taliban reportedly offered the U.S. the opportunity to secure Kabul, telling them, “we want you to have it,” Special Envoy Khalilzad told the Committee Minority. The offer was first reported by The Washington Post and subsequently confirmed by Special Envoy Khalilzad and Gen. McKenzie.

While still serving the Biden administration, Special Envoy Khalilzad told a reporter the Taliban were willing to stay out of Kabul and allow the U.S. to secure the city, telling the Americans, “we want you to take it.”

But Gen. McKenzie declined the offer. In testimony to Congress in September 2021, Gen. McKenzie explained his response, saying, “That was not why I was there, that was not my instruction, and we did not have the resources to undertake that mission.”

Former senior defense officials who spoke to the Committee Minority said that assuming responsibility for Kabul would have allowed the U.S. military to avoid relying on the Taliban to secure the outer perimeter of the airport – a task the Taliban proved incapable of performing, leading to the ISIS-K attack that killed 13 U.S. service members, injured 45 additional U.S. servicemembers, and killed 160 Afghans.

How Many Troops Would Have Been Needed?

While military assessments on how many U.S. personnel such a mission would require vary, given that the Taliban had suggested that the U.S. take control, the number would likely not be at the higher end of the estimates publicly offered by senior commanders, as those higher figures were based on the need to combat the Taliban.

“So your total, you’re looking somewhere in the range of 15 to 20,000 additional forces,” Gen. Milley told *Fox News*. Gen. McKenzie similarly said such a division would be needed to secure the city.

However, both their figures were predicated on needing to fight the Taliban for control of the city, something that would likely not have been needed given it was the Taliban leadership that had asked the U.S. to secure the city.

The U.S. already had additional forces prepared to deploy as part of a contingency plan that included the potential deployment of the rest of the 82nd Airborne Division and other enablers.

Fewer U.S. troops may have been needed if NATO allies were also able to contribute to the operation. UK officials told investigators that the Taliban's offer to secure Kabul had not been communicated to the British government despite the UK having reportedly explored establishing an international stabilizing force for Kabul without the U.S.

A senior U.S. CENTCOM official told the Committee Minority the U.S. military did not do any major planning in response to this offer because they believed the White House had provided strict guidance in its orders about the evacuation and felt that they would be prohibited from considering such an offer.

"Our objective has never been — and the President has been very clear about this — having a military presence to control Kabul. So, that's never been our objective," White Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters after the offer was first reported by *The Washington Post*.

Following questions as to why he did not accept the offer, Gen. McKenzie said he did not consider the offer to be "sincere." That interpretation seems at odds with that of Special Envoy Khalilzad, who was present with Gen. McKenzie when the offer and spent more time with Taliban representatives.

"I think there was a chance to do it, but it wasn't considered seriously by us, this offer," Special Envoy Khalilzad told the Committee Minority. "I think we could have considered it. I think Gen. McKenzie didn't have any orders—so he did not—that was not his mandate, so he did not consider it seriously. McKenzie didn't say let's take a break and consider it, he just said no this is not my mandate, that's not what I'm about."

Special Envoy Khalilzad said he and Gen. McKenzie reported the offer "immediately to the White House and the Secretary of State," but that neither the White House nor State Department had any comment on the momentous offer.

During the same meeting, Gen. McKenzie reportedly told the Taliban that he had "no opinion" on the Taliban's taking control of the city, after initially telling the Taliban to stay outside a 30-kilometer radius drawn around the center of Kabul, according to *The New York Times*.

In August 2022, Gen. McKenzie confirmed he intended to tell the Taliban "to stop at a perimeter maybe 15 or 20 kilometers outside Kabul." He added, "We wanted them to not come any closer until we pulled our forces out." But the general said he did not continue with this approach due to the fact that some Taliban fighters had already entered the city. However, it's unclear exactly how many Taliban fighters had entered, with some reports saying it was only a small number. In addition, the Taliban appeared willing to pull those fighters out with its offer for the U.S. to maintain the security of

Kabul. It is possible the Taliban were concerned that its forces would be incapable of pacifying the capital city, an area of Afghanistan historically opposed to the Taliban's ideology.

It is also unclear why this U.S. government demand for the Taliban insurgents to stay out of Kabul was not delivered earlier given the impact it would have on the evacuation. The delay in bringing adequate U.S. military personnel to Kabul in early August 2021 also likely contributed to making this demand less enforceable.

Keeping the Taliban out of Kabul for an extended window to enable a more orderly evacuation was also the stated policy of the Biden administration, who had sought to pressure Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani to step down and allow for a new Taliban-led government to be formed, a diplomatic push that was scuttled by Ghani's sudden departure.

Asked if they had requested the Taliban not enter Kabul, Special Envoy Khalilzad said, "We didn't say, 'don't go.' We advised them to be careful."

The Taliban presence in Kabul made the extension of the evacuation period beyond August 31, 2021 untenable according to the president's military advisers. Having forces confined to the airport also made them susceptible to sniper, rocket fire, and other attacks.

Taliban fighters operating checkpoints in Kabul also reportedly carried out beatings of U.S. citizens and Afghan allies seeking to evacuate, as well as shut down traffic to the airport without much explanation.

Why Controlling Kabul Could Have Made a Key Difference

If the Biden administration had accepted the Taliban's offer, U.S. forces could have set up processing centers outside the airport perimeter akin to the facility the British maintained at the Baron Hotel – but at a much greater scale. This would have allowed for more robust processing procedures and easier transport to the airfield, avoiding the bottlenecks and teeming crowds at the gates which frequently caused processing operations to be temporarily shut down.

The U.S. military did at one point consider establishing such a processing center at Camp Sullivan outside the airport perimeter "as an off-site location to bring prioritized individuals" into the airport compound, but was prevented from doing so "due to the size of the crowds and lack of Taliban support to extend the perimeter."

Greater control of the city would have also provided the U.S. with greater leverage over the Taliban with regards to negotiations on a litany of subjects, to potentially include women's rights, forming an inclusive government, harassment of former Afghan allies, most importantly, extending the evacuation period beyond August 31, 2021, as they would not have been as vulnerable as they had when they were penned in at the airport compound.

"The Taliban were willing to let us do all that was necessary to control the terrain to get out," a former senior military officer told The Atlantic, adding "When you consciously choose that the terrain you control is the fence line of the airport, you give up a lot of your prerogatives, and you permit yourself

to be quite vulnerable to infiltration by suicide bombers.”

It is also possible the U.S. military’s presence in a wider swath of Kabul would have had a rallying effect on the remnants of the Afghan security forces, allowing for additional local security support beyond the several hundred National Directorate of Security personnel and commandos who were deployed to help assist security operations at the airport.

In addition, it is possible that if the U.S. had accepted the offer to manage security inside Kabul and had instructed the Taliban to not enter the city, the disastrous and deadly evacuation may not have happened as it did. It would have allowed the U.S. military to expand the perimeter at the airport and have a more effective system of processing people.

b. Americans Rise to the Challenge: The Role of Volunteer and Veterans Groups

“I still struggle to understand how this supposedly preplanned, negotiated, and inevitable withdrawal ended the way it did...It is immensely painful and difficult to only be able to help a few. It feels so much like living ‘Schindler’s List.’”

- Rina Amiri, former senior adviser to the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan in the Obama administration, December 27, 2021

The Biden administration’s failure to properly plan for the Taliban’s advance along with its inability to provide any kind of clear strategy with regards to how to get people through the gates of HKIA and safely out of the country created a significant void of leadership. Unsure what to do as the Taliban began to make rapid battlefield gains, Afghans who worked with the U.S. military at various times throughout the previous 20 years began reaching out to their former American comrades, many of them now stateside and in civilian jobs.

These recipients were primarily current and former military personnel, but also included current and former intelligence officers, Members of Congress and their staff, civilians from the business world, and members of the media. They received thousands of texts, Facebook, and WhatsApp messages from a diverse group of Afghans, including women’s rights activists, journalists, current and former elected officials, and Afghan special operations forces soldiers who had fought shoulder-to-shoulder with our military during the 20-year conflict.

These Afghans all had one thing in common: they were desperate for help to escape the potential death sentence they would face with the Taliban back in control.

“It was the responsibility of the State Department and the Department of Defense to execute the evacuation of Kabul, but it was the volunteer groups that played the critical role of guiding them to the gate and sustaining those who didn't make it out.”

- Retired Lt. Col. Scott Mann, Co-Founder, Task Force Pineapple

Very quickly these Americans began banding together and formed different groups that were all focused on one thing – saving as many lives as possible.

The Committee Minority met with dozens of these groups and spoke to current officials who were clandestinely participating in some of these outside efforts. This includes a then-active U.S. intelligence official who told the Committee Minority they had been ordered by an immediate superior to cease working with outside groups seeking to evacuate Afghans who had directly worked with the U.S. intelligence community.

That official said dozens of these Afghan intelligence assets failed to get out on the last military evacuation flights after the stand down order was given.

Given their unique knowledge of U.S. intelligence operations, these Afghan personnel could potentially present a risk to U.S. security should they be coerced or coopted into working with an adversary, including international terrorist groups such as ISIS-K or state actors like China, Russia, and Iran.

And while these volunteer groups received no financial support from the U.S. government during the NEO, individual members of the Biden administration often reached out to them for assistance to evacuate Afghans they had a personal connection to – including very high-ranking officials.

High Ranking Biden Administration Officials Responsible for the NEO Needed Assistance from Outside Groups to Evacuate Their Own People

During the chaotic days outside the airport gates, staffers and advisers working for Vice President Kamala Harris and First Lady Jill Biden contacted several of the more high-profile groups, asking for assistance in helping Afghan nationals get through the Taliban checkpoints in Kabul and onto HKIA, according to multiple representatives of outside groups.

Representatives from the volunteer organizations said similar such requests were received from senior military leaders, including a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and a senior adviser to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs.

Other high ranking Biden administration officials sought to contact military officers on the ground in Kabul to request aid for specific at-risk Afghans, circumventing the State Department processes.

One military officer involved in the evacuation said senior officials from the White House, including NSA Sullivan, conducted such outreach.

The fact that high-level members of the administration felt the need to go to a volunteer organization and tactical-level commanders on the ground as opposed to utilizing the State Department's or other government entities' formal internal processes and chains of command underscores how critical outside groups became to the evacuation effort, even with thousands of U.S. military personnel on the ground. This also underscores that planning "for all contingencies" was not in fact done, no matter how many times the administration made the claim that it had done so.

Some State Department officials have acknowledged the inadequacy and confusion surrounding the official government response during that phase of the evacuation, telling Politico, “they were unclear of their own authorities and what policies they were allowed to employ to help evacuate people.”

During those chaotic days, many of these veterans and others attempting to aid evacuees found themselves establishing make-shift operations centers via encrypted messaging apps, such as WhatsApp and Signal, helping to guide their former interpreters, Afghan soldiers they had fought with, other at-risk Afghans, and even some LPRs and American citizens through Taliban checkpoints.

Some of these volunteers even used their personal military networks to contact active-duty U.S. military personnel deployed to HKIA, enlisting the assistance of soldiers and Marines to help shepherd Afghans through the confusing morass of people that had gathered outside the gates.

With the U.S. military largely at a loss as to how to process such a massive throng of thousands of would-be escapees, Afghans and even some American citizens and LPRs – often with young families in tow – had to push their way through densely packed crowds, sometimes being subjected to beatings by the Taliban.

The volunteer groups developed a series of procedures for helping get select people through the blockade, to include special signs with distinct symbols or phrases, agreed upon codewords and brightly decorated clothing to stand out in the crowd. These codes and markers were then communicated to American soldiers and Marines guarding the perimeter who were then able to snatch the desperate evacuees holding these unique images or passwords from the crowd.



An example of one of the signs used by outside groups and U.S. military personnel guarding the perimeter to facilitate the evacuation of Afghans stuck outside the gates at HKIA.

“Shortsightedness and failures at the top created slack that had to be taken up by the men and women on the ground—by the Marines on the perimeter, by the families that couldn’t get through the crush of the crowds,” Sam Ayers, a former U.S. Army Ranger who served multiple tours in Afghanistan, told *The Atlantic*.

“***It’s not sustainable to run government-scale evacuations with volunteers and donations. The biggest frustration is all of this is really best handled by our State Department and Department of Defense. And they appeared to be sitting on their hands.***”

- Evacuation Volunteer Retired Rear Adm. Tim Flynn, December 27, 2021

The last U.S. military aircraft departed Afghanistan on August 31, 2021, leaving behind more than 800 American citizens, thousands of green card holders, and tens of thousands of Afghans who directly aided the 20-year U.S. military campaign, as well as tens of thousands of other Afghans who were vulnerable to deadly reprisals.

While the State Department insisted it was continuing to work to get those people out, without an American military or diplomatic presence on the ground in country, those left behind were forced to fend for themselves in a country on the brink of collapse and now controlled by the Taliban – a group that spent decades killing and assassinating Afghans who had worked with the U.S. or who did not subscribe to the Taliban’s medieval interpretation of Islam.

c. The Taliban Kill Spree

Since seizing control, Taliban fighters have reportedly engaged in targeted revenge killings, with reports of hundreds of reprisals being carried out. Taliban militants have also seized land from former government officials and minority groups such as the Hazara, threatening people with violence if they refuse to surrender their property to the Taliban. ,

One investigation in April 2022 found nearly 500 former Afghan government officials and members of the Afghan security forces “were killed or forcibly disappeared during the Taliban’s first six months in power.”

These reprisal attacks, documented by U.S.-based volunteer groups seeking to aid Afghan evacuees, have included “Beheadings. Hangings. Severed limbs. Lash marks. Bullet-ridden bodies inside a car.”

- “One woman, targeted by the Taliban while she was more than eight months pregnant, couldn’t go to the hospital because she feared being identified and her throat cut. Another family, nine Afghans of the persecuted Christian minority, hid in a shed whose owners were savagely beaten for sheltering them.”
- A former Afghan police officer who had worked along US military forces was reportedly tortured for 49 days and subsequently executed by the Taliban
- Several Afghan soldiers were beheaded by the Taliban after surrendering to the insurgent group following its promise of amnesty.

“We are of course seeing retribution, attacks by Taliban against those who are part of the former government. These seem to be, for the most part, not centrally directed, that is they--they tend to be happening at a local level, but they’re happening,” Sec. Blinken testified before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on April 28, 2022.

Those left behind also found themselves facing a mounting humanitarian crisis as the country's economy and government collapsed, making the procurement of basic items like food, fuel, and shelter a daunting life or death challenge, well beyond the reach of most Afghans.

With the State Department unable to aid these people, the task of clothing, feeding, and sheltering tens of thousands of Afghans fell to these outside groups. With almost no support from the U.S. government, the personnel running these groups, many of them comprised of military veterans, drained their 401ks, quit jobs, and suspend their small businesses in order to raise the funds to operate these networks of safe houses. But these funds are not limitless, and the resource strains incurred have endangered the continued existence of these safe houses which many Afghans and Americans rely on for their very survival.

Firsthand testimonials paint a picture of organizations facing tremendous financial pressures struggling to stay afloat:

"To house and feed each of the would-be evacuees is roughly \$20-30 per day (an average of \$3,000 per person as they wait). It's a pittance for the U.S. government, but a fortune for volunteers."

"We've been left to solve an Uncle Sam-sized problem with the personal checking accounts of veterans."

The emotional toll involved in responding to thousands of pleas from desperate Afghans seeking to escape has also placed a strain on the mental health of those volunteers involved in the evacuation efforts, a toll shared by U.S. officials as well.

"Our political and military leaders on both sides of the aisle have allowed our veterans to bear the cost of their institutional responsibility," retired Lt. Col. Scott Mann, a former Green Beret who is actively involved in the evacuation of Afghan allies, wrote in an open letter to President Biden.

"A lot of veterans who are going to be facing a mental health crisis because they're going to be the ones that have to tell those people they can't pay their rent anymore," Mann said.

But, while some bipartisan Members of Congress immediately began calling on the State Department to collaborate more closely with these outside groups in August and September of 2021, it took the prompting of the U.S. military to compel such collaboration.

Gen. Milley reportedly helped spearhead the outreach to outside groups, meeting with them in early September 2021, and subsequently recommending the Biden administration formalize its relationship with them.

Gen. Milley proposed a "public/private partnership" between government and the volunteer organizations according to the readout of the meeting.

While those initial conversations between top military brass and some outside groups led the latter to believe that there would be robust collaboration, months after the last U.S. personnel left Afghanistan, many felt that they had been misled.

“***Their idea of a public private partnership is a f---ng joke.***”

- Special Forces Veteran and Senior Representative of a Volunteer Group, October 2021

In the weeks following the commitment to enhancing cooperation, the State Department only allowed a single representative from the over 100 outside groups working to assist those still trapped in Afghanistan to embed within its CARE Task Force, later adding a second representative.

And it was only after multiple months of outside groups of veterans and volunteers spending millions of dollars of their own money to house, feed, and safely transport thousands of Afghans that the State Department finally started funding limited ground operations being carried out by outside groups, according to State Department officials and representatives of volunteer organizations.

The majority of the groups actively working to safely house and evacuate thousands of vulnerable Afghans have received no such funding.

One of the primary groups selected for funding was also granted a necessary OFAC license for their work, confirming that it is humanitarian in nature, thereby protecting their efforts from running afoul of sanctions targeting the Taliban.

Many of the outside groups have acknowledged the State Department eventually enhanced its cooperation with the volunteers, releasing a statement in November 2021 that expressed gratitude for the increased collaboration while still calling on the administration to do more.

Sec. Blinken has also met with one coalition of volunteer groups in July 2022 with that group’s president saying “We are encouraged that Secretary Blinken remains so committed to this cause, and we are prepared to continue to work side-by-side with him and other partners to ensure that America keeps its promises to our Afghan allies.”

But while Sec. Blinken told reporters in November 2021 that all Americans who have the requisite documents and want to leave Afghanistan “have been offered an opportunity to do so,” representatives of volunteer organizations disputed that assertion just days later, saying that they were tracking multiple cases involving American citizens who were unable to receive information from the U.S. government regarding how they might safely evacuate:

“At least five American citizens” being tracked by Task Force Pineapple haven’t been contacted by the U.S. government for evacuation, retired Lt. Col. Scott Mann, a former Army Green Beret and leader of Task Force Pineapple, told *Politico* in November 2021.

Additionally, the U.S. government has relied on outside groups to evacuate individuals deemed to be a critical security risk. The nature of these persons this report cannot describe due to classification issues.

The Interpreter Who Rescued Biden: A Case Study in How Outside Groups Stepped Up After the NEO

Days after the conclusion of the U.S. military's evacuation efforts in Afghanistan, The Wall Street Journal revealed an Afghan interpreter who had helped rescue then-Senator Joe Biden after his helicopter was forced to make an emergency landing in a snowstorm during a 2008 congressional visit to Afghanistan had been left behind and was seeking to escape.

Following repeated questions from the press about the status of the interpreter, the administration vowed to aide his escape, telling him via a press conference, "We will get you out. We will honor your service. And we're committed to doing exactly that."

After weeks in hiding, the interpreter – Aman Khalili – and his family were able to escape Afghanistan in October 2021, crossing the border into Pakistan after traveling more than 600 miles by car with the assistance of private volunteer organizations.

These groups enabled his travel across much of war-torn and Taliban occupied Afghanistan, facilitating his escape across the border without direct U.S. government support. As one senior Biden administration official admitted, "In reality, there are limitations to what we can do, especially as a government, when compared to some private actors."

However, while the administration worked to resolve this high-profile case, its actions on behalf of the interpreter at the same time threatened the welfare of dozens of other Afghans that were considered to be high risk, according to two members of different volunteer organization that have helped evacuate at-risk Afghans.

Problems began when members of the Biden administration, including Dep. Sec. Sherman, became directly involved. At one point during a pre-planned October 2021 visit to Pakistan, Sherman is said to have sought the assistance of the security forces of Pakistan, telling them about the interpreter's location at a safe house near the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Her goal was to have Pakistani officials facilitate his transportation to an airfield where Khalili and his family could fly aboard a U.S. military plane bound for Doha, Qatar.

However, representatives of the outside groups said by sharing the location of the clandestine safe house with Pakistani officials, the administration put the other 240 "high-risk" inhabitants of that safe house at risk, forcing that safe house to close and the would-be evacuees to scatter and be relocated to alternate safe house locations.

Targeted killings of individuals in safehouses have been widely reported, with one report saying in December 2021 in Mazar-i-Sharif, "Taliban soldiers detained two people who managed safe houses, then raided a safe house and threw a man out of a window." In Kabul they, "killed a nine-year-old girl whose father worked with an international aid organization."

The Taliban also detained at least one American citizen involved in setting up safe houses in Afghanistan.

d. Private Charters During the Last Days of the U.S. Presence in Kabul

“There are limits to what we can do without personnel on the ground,”

- Sec. Blinken, September 7, 2021

During the NEO, some volunteer groups chartered planes with the intent of evacuating specific Afghans, several of whom had some kind of direct connection to those outside organizations paying for the aircraft. The price to charter just one of those aircraft could cost as much as \$1.15 million.

But because the intended evacuees could not access the airport due to the bottleneck at the gates or due to Taliban harassment and roadblocks, outside groups say the State Department opted to place Afghans who were not deemed a priority onto those chartered aircraft. Those planes would then fly to third countries that were not part of the official U.S. government operated “lily pad” system, thereby complicating their future onward movement.

These non-official “lily pads” were spread across 16 countries and included the UAE, Kosovo, Montenegro, Albania, and others.

One volunteer and former government official involved in evacuating Afghans via charter flights during this period said the decision to place these non-priority evacuees on charter aircraft came after several news articles reported charter flights had departed Kabul largely empty.

Instead of allowing the charter flights to remain until they were able to board the intended evacuees, those trying to get to the airport were only given a 12-hour window to get there before the State Department “effectively hijacked the aircraft,” placing Afghans who faced a more difficult path to being granted asylum in the U.S. on the chartered aircraft, according to one person involved with the volunteer evacuation effort.

Among the thousands flown out on these charter flights include SIV applicants who had not yet received Chief of Mission Approval and others that were at risk of Taliban reprisal for their work with civil society groups or the Afghan military.

“Those who through no choice or fault of their own were evacuated on private charters with the support of the State Department who are now in countries like Albania, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Ukraine, very little progress has been made in finding onward settlement opportunities for them,” Rep. Tom Malinowski (D-NJ), said at a November 3, 2021 House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing. “I mean is it right that these folks, many of whom are leaders in civil society, people who we absolutely want to protect under our policy, that they should be treated differently based on which kind of plane they got on.”

Dep. Sec. McKeon responded, “I will agree that it's an anomaly that we're focused on, and trying to figure out what to do with this population.”

On September 21, 2021, some three weeks after the end of the NEO, the State Department released cable guidance and instructions for embassies, “on steps for engagement with host governments and/or Afghan citizens who fled Afghanistan for their own safety from August 14-31 on non-U.S. government sponsored flights,” according to an internal State Department memo.

Yet, the State Department also included the population evacuated to the non-official lily pads as part of its official 120,000 figure of those it had flown out of Kabul when touting the “extraordinary success” of the operation.

One leader of a volunteer organization involved in evacuations said that the State Department had actually hijacked the use of a lily pad his group had negotiated, denying his evacuees a location to be flown to in late 2021.

“They’re blocking any private rescue organization’s negotiations with third party, ‘lily-pad’ countries. We have three flights that have been grounded for over eight weeks with 1,200 souls waiting to be evacuated...Amongst them are Catholic nuns, an American citizen, family members and green card holders and other at-risk individuals. And we have not been able to evacuate them because we have no place to take them,” Task Force Argo co-founder Jesse Jensen told the *New York Post*.

A separate anecdote confirms the obstruction that various parts of the federal government presented to outside groups. On August 30, 2021, the last full day of the U.S military’s presence in Afghanistan, one volunteer organization asked the State Department and Defense Department for help approving a charter flight’s departure from Mazar-i-Sharif. The flight’s manifest included 13 U.S. citizens, 19 LPRs, and 165 SIVs. The chartered aircraft was sitting on the runway waiting for permission to depart according to a representative of the volunteer organization.

The State Department officer forwarded the request to the Defense Department at 11:26am that day, saying that Defense Department personnel “are managing flight permissions.” However, the following day, a Defense official responded, saying “the Department is no longer approving flights anywhere out of Afghanistan.”

This bureaucratic back and forth came as U.S. citizens were desperately seeking to escape Afghanistan. And while multiple U.S. officials were aware of the situation, none were able to act to help rescue Americans.

e. The Taliban: Friend or Foe?

“To the best of our knowledge, the Taliban checkpoints — they are letting through people showing American passports”

President Biden, August 20, 2021

“The Taliban fighters beat back the crowd with sticks, rubber hoses, knotted ropes and rifle butts. They fired into the sky, and sometimes pointed toward the crowd.”

Los Angeles Times, August 17, 2021

Because the Biden administration gave up their opportunity to manage the security of the city of Kabul during the NEO, they were forced to rely upon the Taliban for assistance with getting Americans and Afghan allies to the gates of HKIA. Many senior Biden administration officials touted the Taliban's cooperation during the evacuation and in the days following, with one NSC spokesperson calling the insurgent group "businesslike and professional," U.S. officials were painting a different picture privately. And on August 20, six days into the NEO, President Biden said publicly, "To the best of our knowledge, the Taliban checkpoints — they are letting through people showing American passports."

But this painted an incredibly rosy and downright inaccurate picture.

The truth was the Taliban were using brutal tactics against Americans and Afghans alike. Private conversations with administration officials and news reporting on the ground painted the real story.

Sec. Austin privately told Members of Congress on August 20th 2021 the U.S. government received reports of Taliban fighters beating and harassing American citizens and others seeking to escape Kabul.

There were also reports of Taliban fighters beating Afghans waiting outside the gates, with one U.S. Marine assigned to Abbey Gate saying Taliban was firing into the crowds of would-be evacuees: "The Taliban were abusing and shooting people."



American allies similarly noted the Taliban's lack of cooperation, with Sir Laurie Bristow, the UK ambassador to Afghanistan, telling the UK Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, "The Taliban themselves were becoming increasingly, to say the least, uncooperative about letting people come forward to the vicinity of the airport or on to the airport. "

As these comments suggest, Taliban-driven bottlenecks – particularly the stopping of Afghans seeking to evacuate – prevented at risk groups from accessing the airport.

At one point, buses carrying teachers and children from the Afghanistan National Institute of Music were left waiting outside the airport, a vulnerable position due to the threat of a terrorist attack, for 17 hours.

In an effort to mitigate the challenge of the Taliban controlling the perimeter, the Biden administration reportedly provided the Taliban with lists of names of evacuees so that they could be more easily processed at Taliban checkpoints. One U.S. defense official who spoke to Politico described the move as putting "those Afghans on a kill list." Biden administration officials denied the reports of sharing lists of names of would-be evacuees with the Taliban while simultaneously admitting to sharing manifest information with the Taliban.

While administration officials will not say whether every manifested individual whose name was shared with the militants was able to make it through the Taliban checkpoints, at least one group of evacuees say they were unable to get through, despite that information being shared with the Taliban.

The challenge of Taliban checkpoints meant that U.S. personnel at HKIA had to take extraordinary measures to get people seeking evacuation through the Taliban perimeter and through the gates. A secret gate – known as the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) Gate – located approximately two miles north of the airfield and across the road from the gas station was established without the Taliban’s knowledge to facilitate the entrance of Afghan intelligence operatives who had worked with the CIA.

One U.S. intelligence official told the Committee Minority the Taliban continuously interfered with the evacuation efforts, and that CIA officials on the ground threatened to destroy equipment at the airport at one point in order to secure better cooperation from the Taliban.

f. The Biden Administration’s Failure to Coordinate with Allies During the NEO

**“The UK, the US, and other western countries did not coordinate our evacuation efforts,”
- UK Government Whistleblower, November, 9 2021**

During the NEO, the Biden administration regularly touted how it was working with NATO allies and other partners to best evacuate their respective citizens and vulnerable at-risk Afghans. On August 20, 2021, President Biden claimed, “We’re also facilitating flights for our Allies and our partners, and working in close operational coordination with NATO on this evacuation.”

But the U.S. military personnel on the ground involved in the evacuation said they had been prohibited from coordinating evacuation planning with all allies except for the UK until early August 2021.

“We could only coordinate with the UK” on NEO planning, Brig. Gen. Sullivan told Army investigators, adding, “no other multinational cooperation was approved including with the Turkish” who commanded one of the main military contingents tasked with airport security.

“The thought was that openly discussing NEO would send the wrong message,” he added, later saying “There were 20+ allied and other entities that were all trying [to] conduct their own evacuations through the limited throughput node known as HKIA,” and that they “were all relying on our ability to provide security, to provide all critical airfield functions.”

“The extent of these requirements were not fully appreciated during planning and created significant challenges in execution since discussing/jointly planning for NEO with our allies and partners did not start in earnest until early August. Again, this was significant,” he added.

And the leader of one of America’s closest allies, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, reportedly struggled for some 36 hours to get President Biden on the phone to discuss the fall of Kabul. At the time, the UK commanded the second largest contingent of international troops in Kabul.

NSA Sullivan told reporters on August 17, 2021, some two days after the Taliban seized the capital, President Biden “has not yet spoken with any other world leaders...I expect he’ll do that in the coming days.”

Sec. Blinken told Congress that Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, “began a series of calls with partners and allies to discuss the NEO and U.S. policy in Afghanistan,” while confirming these calls did not begin until August 22, 2021 – more than one week into the evacuation operation.

While the U.S. military was able to evacuate 120,000 people, including citizens of allied nations, there were multiple press reports of friction between U.S. and allied evacuation efforts.

The U.S. military had some 6,000 troops stationed at HKIA, in addition to State Department personnel. These forces were joined by military and diplomatic personnel from allied nations, to include some 1,000 UK service members.

According to press reports, U.S. commanders were angered by allied troops leaving the perimeter of HKIA to rescue their respective citizens, expressing concern these movements could draw a negative reaction from the Taliban. Despite these incidents being reported by multiple news outlets, U.S. and UK officials have denied any friction occurred.

But while U.S. military officers on the ground said they had worked well with UK military personnel, some senior commanders did seem to confirm the friction to Army investigators. “The international SOF forces were out of control,” Maj. Gen. Donahue told investigators without specifying which countries’ personnel he was referring to. “These guys lost their mind and didn’t know how to act,” he added.

The Army investigation said, “partner nation representatives/forces consistently conducted uncoordinated evacuee extractions at Abbey Gate” and that “the crowd would see the disparate treatment of select personnel and become agitated.”

British troops were able to secure a facility just outside HKIA’s perimeter, the Baron Hotel. This facility allowed UK personnel to process would-be evacuees outside the airport gates – avoiding much of the chaos and violence there. UK paratroopers began operating the facility on August 19, 2021. After processing, a minibus would transport approved would-be evacuees from Baron Hotel to the airfield.

“Once President Biden made his decision in April, we let contracts and brought things to life. We identified where we would have our temporary safe location in Dubai, and worked out where we were going to have our evacuation handling center, at the Baron Hotel, which became quite famous,” Gen. Sir Nick Carter, then-Chief of Defence Staff, told the UK Parliament’s Defence Committee in November.

The U.S. did not possess such a processing facility outside the airport perimeter. But, U.S. citizens were eventually able to make use of the Baron Hotel on August 20, 2021, with three Army CH-47 Chinook helicopters collecting some 169 Americans from the hotel and flying them to the airport.

In addition, U.S.-UK collaboration on evacuees was not as robust as Biden administration officials claimed it to be according to a UK government whistleblower.

A UK government official, in written testimony provided to the UK Foreign Affairs Committee's inquiry into Afghanistan, highlighted how the U.S. and UK could not even share their respective list of individuals they were seeking to evacuate, thereby preventing the two country's detachments in Kabul from supporting each other's designated evacuees.

"I emailed a moderately senior official in the U.S. State Department on the evening of Monday 23 August to suggest the UK and US compared our respective evacuation lists to prevent duplication," he wrote. However, the State Department opted to format its evacuee lists in a format that could not be shared with allies via email, thereby hindering the ability to share it with the UK and enabling the possibility that US evacuees could be more easily aided by British personnel.

"Unfortunately, this initiative failed because the UK's evacuation lists were not available and therefore it was not possible to share them with the US...U.S evacuation lists were organized in databases which could not be transferred by email."

In a shocking and glaring example of how poorly the U.S. was coordinating with the UK, the same UK government whistle blower testified the U.S. had denied a request for assistance in evacuating the British Embassy in Kabul.

A British memo from June 2021 suggesting President Biden assured the UK government the U.S. would maintain enough military forces in Kabul to enable the UK to keep its embassy open, telling allies Kabul would be secure for diplomatic posts.

But the whistleblower, citing a colleague that served in the UK Embassy in Afghanistan, said, "the UK had requested a promise of United States assistance evacuating the British Embassy to Afghanistan in the event of a Taliban advance on Kabul. The United States had declined their request...because if the United States promised the UK assistance it would also have to promise assistance to other NATO allies, which the United States believed would be an unmanageable obligation in the context."

"Without United States assistance, the (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office) feared it would be impossible to safely evacuate the Embassy in the event of a Taliban advance on Kabul," he added.

g. The State Department's Failure to Coordinate with Congress

We in many respects had to take it into our own hands and become our own kind of mini State Departments. We did save a lot of lives. But it was very emotionally stressful — when you're making life and death decisions and pleading with people on the ground at the airport itself to let these people in. Because you know if they get in, they will escape. And if they don't get in, they will die."

- House Foreign Affairs Committee Ranking Member Michael McCaul (R-TX)

As desperate American citizens, LPRs, and Afghans began reaching out to congressional offices as well for assistance, Members and staffers hit a brick wall at the State Department.

On August 12, 2021, "senior Senate leaders were informed of the plan to remove U.S. citizens from Afghanistan," but despite the rapidly deteriorating security situation which had placed tens of thousands of Americans and Afghans at risk, the State Department waited until August 15, 2021 "to establish a generic email for congressional inquiries about cases and individuals."

On August 15 at 3:16pm, the State Department sent a link to congressional staffers that would allow them to fill out requests for repatriation assistance. The link ceased working almost immediately. Asked the next day about why the link had stopped working, a State Department official directed a congressional aide to another link, seemingly unaware they had distributed a non-functioning link at a critical time during the fall of Kabul.

At one point, the State Department attempted to establish a dedicated email inbox for congressional offices to communicate cases involving Afghans in need of evacuation that those offices were tracking to facilitate U.S. government support.

However, State Department officials told congressional offices the initial inbox was overwhelmed and said that it would be temporarily shut down because they needed to establish a more robust system capable of handling the high volume of requests for assistance.

State Department Officials in the Dark

With the State Department effectively absent during the NEO, congressional staffers became involved with many of these outside groups in order to help get American citizens, LPRs, and at-risk Afghans through Taliban-occupied Kabul and inside the gates of HKIA. They often acquired, over the encrypted messaging app Signal, real time information concerning the situation on the ground that had yet to make its way to those State Department officials tasked with overseeing elements of the evacuation.

At one point a congressional staffer called the State Department Task Force hotline to inform them one of the gates an Afghan evacuee had been directed to go to at HKIA was now closed. The State Department representative told the staffer their information was not correct and that the gate was in fact open – only to contact the same staffer several hours later to confirm the gate was closed and the Task Force's information had not been up to date.

The message from the State Department announcing the temporary shutdown of the assistance email inbox for congressional offices listed a State Department official and their email address as the appropriate point of contact for help requests pertaining to Afghanistan in the interim while the new system was established.

A message from a congressional staffer to the designated email address shortly thereafter on August 24, 2021 received an “out of office” reply, which said the assigned official liaison was “out on leave.”

This dedicated email inbox “did not provide any guidance on who, what, or how to communicate cases or individuals in need of evacuation.” Further guidance from the State Department on the parameters for communication between Congress and State did not arrive until August 23, 2021 – a full week into the evacuation and seven days before the end of the military phase of the evacuation.

Often times, the State Department task force requested congressional staff resubmit information multiple times due to formatting concerns, asking for the information to be submitted a particular way days after it was originally submitted.

Congressional offices submitted thousands of cases concerning 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.”

During the entire evacuation, the State Department “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.”

These efforts by Members of Congress and their respective staffs were often driven by concerns from constituents, Afghan Americans, veterans, and others who were closely following the situation on the ground and concerned about the desperate plight of their friends, family, and former colleagues in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

VII. THE FALLOUT AFTER THE FALL

Since the last U.S. military aircraft departed Afghanistan, things in Afghanistan have gone from bad to worse. The Taliban have killed hundreds of former Afghan allies, and instituted unprecedented repressive policies targeting women and girls. At the same time, they have forced the U.S. government to indirectly pay millions to a Taliban controlled airline so the U.S. can evacuate its citizens, placed cronies and thugs in key positions thereby enabling an economic collapse and humanitarian disaster, and created an environment where terror groups like al Qaeda and ISIS-K can enjoy a safe haven while rebuilding their capabilities to attack the U.S. and its allies.

To make matters worse, the Biden administration has yet to take action to prioritize the evacuation of U.S. Special Operations Forces trained Afghan commandos who fought side by side with U.S. troops, despite acknowledging that leaving them behind enemy lines constitutes a major risk to U.S. national security.

a. U.S. Government Stymies Charter Flights Post August 31, 2021

“What drives me now is there are Americans saying, ‘Help me, help me, help me.’ And the State Department is saying, ‘Fill out your form in triplicate.’”

- Brian Stern, Task Force Dynamo, January 11, 2022

When the last U.S. military plane took off from Afghanistan on August 31, 2021, hundreds of Americans, thousands of LPRs, and tens of thousands of America’s Afghan allies were left behind. Outside groups that had organized during the NEO continued their work to try and evacuate those they could.

However, many outside groups felt stymied by the State Department bureaucracy when they sought assistance to operate privately chartered aircraft to fly Afghans to safety.

One such group expressed frustration regarding its multiple attempts to fly hundreds of evacuees, including a dozen American children, out of Mazar-i-Sharif.

The volunteer organization said it had received confusing and sometimes contradictory messages from the State Department as to whether its passenger manifest had received official approval to fly from Mazar-i-Sharif.

At one-point representatives of the outside group said the State Department’s Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts (CARE) task force told them they received approval only to be told later that the approval had not been officially given.

One group said more than 70 days after they submitted a travel manifest, the hundreds of evacuees had yet to be allowed to fly out – despite being told by the State Department, “the approval and validation process of our charter manifest would take approximately 2-3 weeks.”

A representative from the group said they had “run a gauntlet of rule changes and restrictions that we have been told were levied by Qatar, Taliban factions, and ‘in some cases’ the (State Department) itself.”

Another episode involved an outside group asking the State Department for a memo supporting its operation of a charter airline to fly a group of evacuees out of Afghanistan to help facilitate the aircraft's departure. State Department officials eventually provided an unsigned memo on a blank piece of paper to the outside group.

After some prompting, the State Department provided a memo on official U.S. government letterhead, but the memo still did not have a signature. Eventually after another round of prompting, this time by senior congressional staff, a State Department official did finally agree to sign the memorandum to facilitate the evacuation of these at-risk Afghans, albeit after much critical time was lost.

The State Department's actions in this case and the need for continuous prompting left the volunteer organization with the distinct impression the Biden administration was reluctant to support outside groups working to assist at-risk Afghans seeking to evacuate.

Task Force Argo relayed a similar story, saying it had shared one flight manifest with the State Department in October 2021, which included dozens of at-risk Catholic nuns. As of late December 2021, the only message Argo had received was that "The flight manifest is still being reviewed by State," Zach Nunn, a co-founder of the group, told the National Review.

Mazar-i-Sharif

The State Department has acknowledged its inability to carry out operations on the ground in Mazar-i-Sharif.

"We don't have anyone on the ground who can validate the manifest and who's getting on the aircraft, and we've had some challenges with some of these planes. We've had stowaways, the air crew themselves wanted to stay in Qatar and not return to Afghanistan," Dep. Sec. McKeon told the House Foreign Affairs Committee in November 2021.

The stricter enforcement contrasts sharply with the practices State Department officials had engaged in prior to August 31st, when flying people out of Afghanistan appeared to be of greater importance than ensuring that manifests were 100% accurate.

The State Department also does not have any U.S. government personnel on the ground in Kabul either. But that appears to not be an insurmountable barrier to conducting charter operations, with Dep. Sec. McKeon saying airlines' representatives, rather than U.S. government personnel, are tasked with validating these manifests.

"We are working some charter flights out of the Kabul airport where we have agents from the airlines that we're working with validating who's getting on the airplanes," Dep. Sec. McKeon told the House Foreign Affairs Committee in early November 2021. McKeon offered no explanation as to why this same model would not work in Mazar-i-Sharif.

An internal State Department memo dated September 6, 2021, said, "the Taliban are preventing private charter flights from departing Mazar-e-Sharif." A subsequent memo from September 12, 2021,

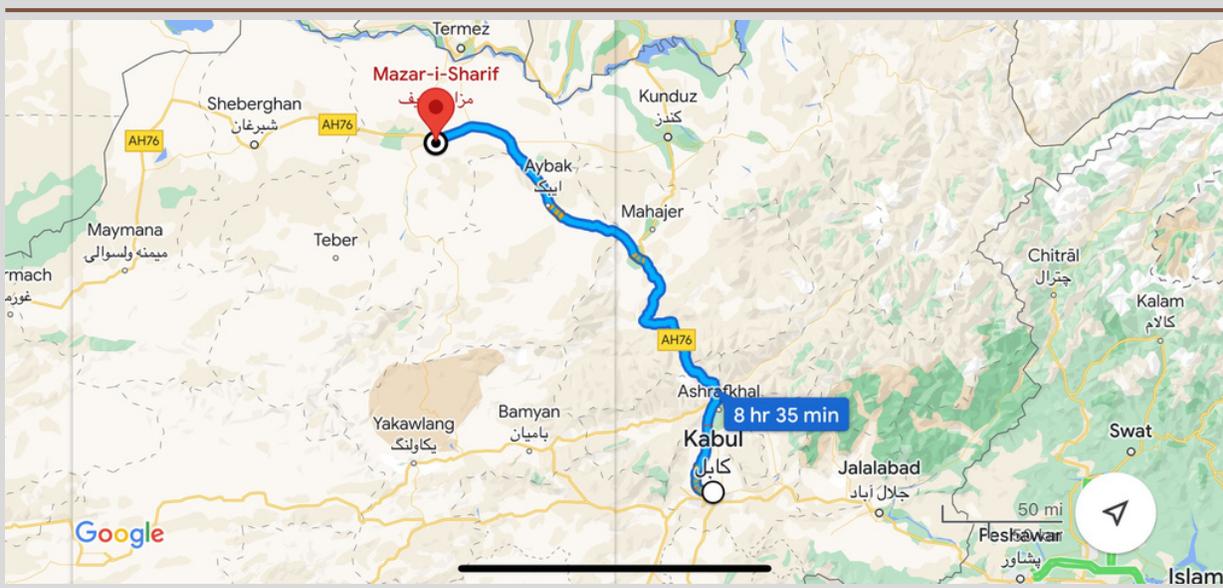
said, “Approximately 8,200 at-risk Afghans and U.S.-affiliated individuals were seeking to depart Mazar-e-Sharif, and at least 1,300 were seeking departure via Kabul International Airport or overland transport.”

Yet, just days after the Taliban prevented these charter flights from departing, the White House praised them for being “businesslike and professional” in their behavior toward charter flights.

At one point, the U.S. Embassy in Albania “requested U.S. Government screening assistance of Mazar-i-Sharif origin flights,” according to internal State Department documents. It is unclear what the response to this request was.

The State Department in fact has instructed volunteer organizations with hundreds of evacuees in Mazar-i-Sharif to transport their at-risk Afghans to Kabul airport to be flown out by US government-chartered aircraft.

But given the economic crisis in Afghanistan, the high cost of fuel, reports of reprisal killings by the Taliban, ISIS-K attacks, and other rampant instability, traveling the approximately 265 miles from Mazar-i-Sharif to Kabul is easier said than done.



One volunteer organization deemed such a drive too risky to its evacuees, particularly in the winter months, when snow fall makes driving conditions in the mountainous country rather poor.

The volunteer organizations chartering aircraft to fly evacuees out of Mazar-i-Sharif also lack a destination to transport their passengers to.

“Several of these charter flights manifested with at-risk Afghan allies and their families have recently sought permission to land at Al Udeid Air Base in Doha, Qatar, currently the largest lily-pad site. Unfortunately, I understand they have been denied permission to land because some of their manifests do not fit certain narrowly defined categories established by the State Department,” Senator Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) wrote in a [letter](#) to Sec. Blinken, dated November 30, 2021.

Sen. Blumenthal's letter also highlighted the continued confusion as to who would qualify for evacuation from Afghanistan and official processing support at U.S. government-operated lily pads.

Further, the airport in Kabul has still not received the necessary upgrades to permit anything other than visual-based flight operations, and winter has rendered the airport inoperable for at least some period of time. Having a second airfield to be able to fly out Afghans would have helped ease the burden on Kabul airport.

In addition, complicating the issue, the Taliban have at times interfered or blocked charter flights carrying evacuees from leaving Kabul.

Some volunteer organizations have even accused the State Department of actively undermining their evacuation efforts, refusing to assist in obtaining landing rights for private charters leaving Afghanistan.

The State Department is "actively impeding our efforts to find third countries to accept flights of Afghans...All these countries are asking for is the U.S. Department of State, through an embassy in their country, to say, 'Go ahead. We don't care if you do this. We're not going to help you do it, but we're also not going to hinder your effort to do it.'"

- Ben Owen, the chief executive of Flanders Fields, December 2021

Task Force Dynamo has similarly said that its operations have been stymied by the State Department and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), telling the investigation team that one of its chartered flights carrying over 100 American citizens out of Kabul in late September 2021 was denied landing clearances in the US at the last minute, forcing the passengers to become stuck in Abu Dhabi.

The last-minute denial of landing clearance by DHS's Customs and Border Protection meant that the would-be evacuees were unable to continue to have access to the charter aircraft which could only be operated for a set period of time.

And while stranded in the UAE, the U.S. Embassy in Abu Dhabi refused to provide any support – other than a few spare blankets to a group numbering over 100 – to the US citizens that had been seeking to escape Afghanistan, despite their being kept in an unused airport terminal in poor humanitarian conditions.

A representative of Dynamo said U.S. embassy personnel declined to provide meaningful humanitarian supplies or allow Dynamo staff to purchase the supplies themselves. They also declined to verify the U.S. passports of the stranded evacuees, despite the presence of a CBP Preclearance facility in the airport. One U.S. embassy official even advised the group to go to the refugee camp at Emirates Humanitarian City (EHC), a process that would have only extended their travails for even longer.

After several days in dire conditions at the airport terminal, including little access to food and water, the State Department eventually agreed to pay for a commercial flight for the Dynamo group.

The U.S. government has been quick to criticize the substandard vetting being carried out by some of the volunteer organizations but has at times acknowledged their efforts, with Under Sec. Kahl telling the Senate Armed Services Committee in late October that private groups had been responsible for nearly 25% of all American citizens evacuated from Afghanistan since the military withdrawal.

b. Terror Groups Reconstitute

“I do think that conditions are, more likely than not, to develop over the course of time that will allow for the reconstitution of al-Qaida and or ISIS. And that time varies depending on which analyst you're listening to, but sometime between say six to 12 and maybe 36 months,”

- Gen. Milley, October 2021

The U.S. military's inability to have access to bases in countries bordering Afghanistan means that the U.S. does not have as effective surveillance or strike capabilities as it did when the U.S. military had a presence in multiple bases in Afghanistan, or as effective as it could have been had the Biden Administration successfully negotiated basing arrangements with one of Afghanistan's neighbors. This lack of capability comes as al Qaeda and ISIS-K have increased their activities in Afghanistan and as senior U.S. commanders have warned the two terror groups could reconstitute and target the United States as early as six months following the date of the withdrawal.

Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee on October 26, 2021, Under Sec. Kahl testified:

“I think the intelligence community currently assesses that both ISIS-K and al Qaeda have the intent to conduct external operations, including against the United States. But neither currently has the capability to do so. We could see ISIS-K generate that capability and somewhere between six or 12 months. I think the current assessments by the intelligence community is that al Qaeda would take a year or two to reconstitute that capability.”

FBI Director Christopher Wray expressed similar concern on August 4, 2022. When asked whether he was worried about an attack on the homeland emanating from places like Afghanistan following the withdrawal of U.S troops, he responded, “I think about that day every day. Especially now that we're out, I'm worried about the potential loss of sources and collection over there, so we're going to have growing intelligence gaps.”

The United Nations reported in November 2021 that ISIS-K was similarly resurging, saying a “major negative development has been the Taliban's inability to stem the expansion of” ISIS-K.

Once limited to a few provinces and the capital, ISKP now seems to be present in nearly all provinces, and increasingly active,” the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, Deborah Lyons, told the UN Security Council in November 2021.

A January 2022 United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan report said between August 19, 2021 and December 31, 2021 the UN recorded 152 attacks by ISIS-K in 16 provinces, compared to 20 attacks in five provinces during the same period last year.

Another UN report from February 2022 said, “there are no recent signs that the Taliban has taken steps to limit the activities of foreign terrorist fighters in the country. On the contrary, terrorist groups enjoy greater freedom there than at any time in recent history.”

The report said one UN member state had reported Osama Bin Laden’s son, Abdallah, “visited Afghanistan in October for meetings with the Taliban.” It also said the terror group’s regional affiliate, Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent, “retains a presence in Afghanistan, in the Provinces of Ghazni, Helmand, Kandahar, Nimruz, Paktika, and Zabul, where the group fought alongside the Taliban.

Just four months after the U.S. completed its military withdrawal, Gen. McKenzie said the number of al Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan was already up “slightly” since the last U.S. troops departed.

And even more shockingly, in July 2022, the leader of al Qaeda, Ayman al Zawahiri, was found living freely in downtown Kabul. Secretary Blinken confirmed on August 1, 2022, that the Taliban had been “hosting and sheltering” the al Qaeda leader. However, despite Blinken saying this was proof “the Taliban grossly violated the Doha Agreement,” the Biden administration has once again yet to take any action to punish the Taliban for its violation of its responsibilities under the agreement, despite Blinken previously suggesting there would be “consequences,” if they did so.

Does al Zawahiri’s death “mean that the threat from al Qaeda is over? No, of course, it’s not,” former Defense Dept. Spokesperson and current NSC Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby, told the press on August 2, 2022.

“The fact that he was being looked after in Kabul by members of the Haqqani network with his family, that shows the kind of safe haven that the Taliban and the Haqqani network are providing to al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan,” Edmund Fitton-Brown, the outgoing Coordinator of the United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team concerning the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da’esh), Al-Qaida, the Taliban, told an interviewer in August 2022.

A recent UN report from the same month confirmed the increased presence of al Qaeda in Afghanistan in the wake of the withdrawal, saying that the terror group’s “leadership reportedly plays an advisory role with the Taliban, and the groups remain close.” The report added al Qaeda “enjoys greater freedom in Afghanistan under Taliban rule.” In addition, Al Qaeda’s regional affiliate, al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, has hundreds of members in Afghanistan, with those fighters sometimes joining Taliban units during combat operations.

U.S. CENTCOM has assessed, “ISIS-K has increased its recruitment and attack capabilities since U.S. and coalition forces withdrew from Afghanistan,” a May 2022 Pentagon Inspector General report said. The report also said the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), “assessed that ISIS-K could direct attacks in the West, including against the U.S. homeland, within the next year if the group prioritizes developing such a capability. Regionally, ISIS-K is connected to fighters from countries across Central and South Asia, probably making the group a threat to U.S. interests in the region.”

In June of 2022, Gen. Kurilla, the top U.S. general overseeing the region, told *The Wall Street Journal* that, despite limited intelligence, the U.S. is already seeing the re-establishment of terrorist training camps inside Afghanistan.

“When we look into Afghanistan, we look at ISIS-K and we look at al Qaeda and we attempt to determine if attack planning is going on to deliver an external attack against the United States and our ability to do that, the architecture that supports our ability to do that, is based on overhead imagery, open source intelligence, signals intelligence, a variety of things and that architecture is still being developed right now now, we’ve looked hard at it but we’ve taken no strikes to date.”

- Gen. McKenzie

Following the deadly terror attack on Abbey Gate, President Biden vowed retribution.

“I’ve also ordered my commanders to develop operational plans to strike ISIS-K assets, leadership, and facilities. We will respond with force and precision at our time, at the place we choose, and the moment of our choosing...with regard to finding, tracking down the ISIS leaders who ordered this, we have some reason to believe we know who they are — not certain — and we will find ways of our choosing, without large military operations, to get them.”

- President Biden, August 26, 2021

However, as of the writing of this report there have been no strikes against any ISIS-K targets since August 31, 2021.

c. Emboldening Our Adversaries

“The victory of the Taliban would be a kind of rallying cry, a morale boost for extremists around the world, and indeed for those sitting in the capitals in Beijing, Tehran, and Moscow.”

- Sir Richard Moore, Chief of MI6

The Biden administration has repeatedly claimed China and Russia would have preferred if the U.S. had stayed in Afghanistan and not withdrawn its military forces.

“There’s nothing China or Russia would rather have, would want more in this competition than the United States to be bogged down another decade in Afghanistan,” President Biden said in a speech on August 31.

And in testimony to the House Foreign Affairs Committee in September 2021, Sec. Blinken said, “There is nothing that our strategic competitors like China and Russia – or adversaries like Iran and North Korea – would have liked more than for the United States to re-up a 20-year war and remain bogged down in Afghanistan for another decade.”

However, these claims seem to ignore the analyses by the president's own Defense Department, as well as the views of some of America's closest allies, that the withdrawal was welcomed by America's adversaries and constituted a significant strategic setback that damaged the credibility of the U.S. and emboldened those same adversaries. In addition, the loss of our intelligence capabilities within the country leaves us at a greater disadvantage a region that includes Iran, Russia, and China.

The UK's top intelligence official, Sir Richard Moore the chief of MI6, said in November 2021, "There is no doubt about the morale boost the Taliban victory in Afghanistan has given to the extremist movement globally, as well as its potential emboldening effect on countries such as Russia, China, and Iran...I won't soft soap it, the threat we face will likely grow now we have left Afghanistan."

Retired Lt. Gen. HR McMaster who served as the National Security Adviser during the Trump administration agreed, testifying before the House Foreign Affairs Committee in October 2021, "I think China and Russia are both very happy that we get out."

Others question why the Chinese Communist Party would be unhappy about the removal of Bagram Air Base, the only major U.S. military base in a country that borders China.

"We should have looked at Afghanistan as a way of containing China's westward move," Vali Nasr, the former Senior Adviser to U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee on September 30. "Bagram would have certainly helped that," he added.

Even Sec. Blinken has acknowledged Russian and Chinese "influence in Afghanistan is likely to grow in the future."

One former senior Afghan security official told the Committee Minority the Ghani administration had seen evidence of Chinese and Iranian support to the Taliban. That support reportedly increased during the insurgent group's summer offensive in 2021 that culminated in the fall of Kabul and their takeover of the country.

"China, Russia, Pakistan and Iran all converge in their mutual desire for an American exit from Afghanistan," the official wrote in an earlier authored internal Afghan government memo obtained by the Committee.

And the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) propaganda organs have used the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan to intimidate Taiwan, with the Global Times calling the U.S. withdrawal and the fall of the Afghan government an "omen of Taiwan's future fate."





Chinese state media sets sights on Taiwan as US' Afghan retreat stokes nationalism

"From what happened in Afghanistan, they should perceive that once a war breaks out in the Straits, the island's defense will collapse in hours and the US military won't come to help," it said.

Russian officials made similar comparisons, linking the U.S. failure in Afghanistan to the situation in Ukraine, with Nikolai Patrushev, secretary of Russia's Security Council, suggesting that the withdrawal from Afghanistan meant the U.S. and NATO would similarly abandon Kyiv.

The Pentagon has also previously assessed that, while China did benefit from the U.S. military's stabilizing effect on Afghanistan, Russia and Iran would in fact be in favor of a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan – in direct contradiction with the claims made by Biden administration political appointees and President Biden himself.

"Russia desires a complete but phased US military withdrawal from Afghanistan," a Defense Department report released in April 2021 said.

The DIA similarly told the Pentagon Inspector General's office in July 2021, "Iran welcomes the withdrawal of U.S. and coalition forces from Afghanistan."

Senior U.S. military officials have also previously said Moscow and Tehran were providing war materiel and other support to the Taliban.

These years-long attempts to support the Taliban's insurgency evidences a concerted push by Russia and Iran to eject the U.S. and its coalition allies from Afghanistan.

The overwhelming evidence – including multiple assessments by the Biden administration's own top military advisors – is that our adversaries were emboldened by the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, and that President Biden's claims to the contrary are provable inaccurate.

d. The Return of Taliban Atrocities

"In less than a year, the Taliban have decimated the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan. They have violated women's and girls' rights to education, work and free movement; demolished the system of support for women and girls fleeing domestic violence; arbitrarily detained women and girls for infractions of the Taliban's discriminatory rules; and contributed to a surge in the rates of child, early and forced marriage. Women who peacefully protested against these restrictions and policies have been harassed, threatened, arrested, forcibly disappeared, detained and tortured."

- Amnesty International, July 27, 2022

The withdrawal of U.S. military forces and subsequent seizure of power by the Taliban in Kabul has allowed the former insurgent group to institute a series of repressive policies, to include unprecedented bans on girls' education and restrictions on women's rights, as well as violent reprisals against former government officials and security personnel.

Taliban fighters have reportedly engaged in targeted revenge killings, with reports of nearly 500 reprisal attacks being carried out against former members of the Afghan government, despite a supposed Taliban offer of amnesty. These reprisal attacks, documented by U.S.-based volunteer groups seeking to aid Afghan evacuees, have included "Beheadings. Hangings. Severed limbs. Lash marks. Bullet-ridden bodies inside a car.



"One woman, targeted by the Taliban and more than eight months pregnant, couldn't go to the hospital because she feared being identified and her throat cut. Another family, nine Afghans of the persecuted Christian minority, hid in a shed whose owners were savagely beaten for sheltering them."

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan reported in July 2022 these "killings are often carried out execution style—for example, when an individual is taken out of their house and shot almost immediately."

Even senior Biden administration officials have acknowledged reprisal attacks in the wake of its withdrawal, while de-emphasizing the Taliban leadership's responsibility for the killings.

"We are of course seeing retribution, attacks by Taliban against those who are part of the former government. These seem to be, for the most part, not centrally directed, that is they--they tend to be happening at a local level, but they're happening," Sec. Blinken told the House Foreign Affairs Committee on April 28, 2022.

Taliban militants have also seized land from former government officials and minority groups such as the Hazara, threatening people with violence should they not turn over their property to the Taliban. ,

The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan has also documented incidents where the Taliban and their thug-like enforcers from the draconian and fundamentalist "Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice" have repeatedly used violence to enforce its medieval morality, beating Afghans for not attending prayers and stoning men and women for having an extramarital relationship. The new Taliban authorities even reportedly flogged a female rape victim 39 times for reporting the crime, and the Taliban authorities then forced her to marry her assailant, a truly barbaric act.

“According to four individuals who worked in Taliban-run detention centres, the Taliban have arbitrarily arrested and detained women and girls for violating their discriminatory policies...Those arrested have usually been charged with the vague and ambiguous “crime” of “moral corruption,” according to a July 2022 report from the Amnesty International.

There are also reports of child marriage being on the rise in Afghanistan since the Taliban have seized power, with girls as young as nine years old being sold into marriage to pay off debts , or families being forced to marry off their young daughters to Taliban fighters.

“The Taliban are abducting women and girls and taking them without the family's consent,” *PBS Frontline* documentary filmmaker Ramita Navai said in August 2022 following two visits to Afghanistan.

She said Taliban fighters and even senior commanders will “approach the family and they try the official route first — ask for a hand in marriage. When the family says no, that's when they abduct the girl... every single case that I came across, family members were beaten when the girls were taken.”

Amnesty International also reported that “many women protesters” in Afghanistan who demonstrated against the Taliban’s repressive policies “have been subjected to arbitrary arrest and detention, enforced disappearance and torture,” to include the Taliban administering beatings and electric shocks with tasers.

Sec. Blinken claimed on July 28, 2022, that the Biden administration will “do all that we can to support progress for Afghan women, girls, and other at-risk populations,” while later listing out all the atrocities the Taliban have committed in Afghanistan since the U.S. military departed. During the entirety of his 10-minute speech he did not acknowledge that the administration in which he serves took policy decisions with regards to Afghanistan that contributed decisively to the Taliban’s taking over the country and the subsequent emergence of the most repressive regime for women that has existed in decades.

Furthermore, despite the Taliban’s lack of demonstratable progress towards the commitments made on human rights, the administration has restarted certain foreign assistance activities, without meaningful consultation with Congress on how these funds will be effectively managed and part of overall strategic policy objectives.

The Taliban’s seizure of power by force, an act made possible by the U.S. military’s withdrawal, has also led to a massive humanitarian crisis where some estimates say that 95% of the country will need emergency assistance to avoid hunger.

While the international community, to include the United States, has provided billions of dollars in humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan since the fall of the U.S.-backed government in Kabul, U.S. government reports show the Taliban has sought to interfere with that humanitarian aid, attempting to funnel the assistance to Taliban favored projects and workers.

USAID’s Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) “reported that the Taliban regime required national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to sign memorandums of understanding

prior to commencing activities, in addition to placing greater restrictions on female humanitarian aid staff.” These agreements “have included various Taliban stipulations, such as requirements to use specific vendors; requests for Taliban participation in project planning and monitoring activities; and requirements that implementers dispose of any remaining equipment and material by transferring it to the Taliban.”

e. U.S. Supplied Military Equipment Left to the Taliban

“We don’t have a complete picture, obviously, of where every article of defense materiel has gone, but certainly a fair amount of it has fallen into the hands of the Taliban. And obviously, we don’t have a sense that they are going to readily hand it over to us at the airport.”

- NSA Sullivan, August 17, 2021

Between 2002 and 2021, the United States appropriated approximately \$18.6 billion for Afghan National Defense and Security Forces “equipment and transportation costs,” according to SIGAR.

Yet, it is now clear the Biden administration had no robust plan for ensuring these U.S.-supplied military equipment did not fall into the hands of the Taliban or its terrorist allies as the insurgent group made battlefield gains.

In fact, the Pentagon informed Congress in April 2022 that approximately \$7.12 billion in US provided military equipment remained in Afghanistan at the time of the U.S. withdrawal.

The accounting shed light on what equipment was in the inventory of Afghan forces before the government’s collapse, how much the value of that equipment would have depreciated by age and use, and what other equipment had been removed from Afghanistan prior to the Taliban’s seizure of Kabul.

According to Major Rob Lodewick, a Defense Department spokesman, “Since 2005, the U.S. military has provided the Afghan national defense and security forces with many thousands of small arms, ranging from pistols to medium machine guns...We recognize that large numbers of these weapons are probably now in Taliban hands.”

Some of these weapons have begun appearing for sale in the bazaars of Afghanistan at a time when when we are also seeing a growth in the number of militants and terrorist groups in the country.

A Defense Department report also highlights the Taliban has kept much of this “windfall” of U.S.-supplied materiel, parading that equipment in multiple ceremonies, according to SIGAR.

More than 180,000 “air to ground munitions” remained in Taliban controlled Afghanistan, constituting some 18,000 precision and non-precision “gravity” bombs and 160,000 precision and non-precision aviation rockets.

More than 258,000 rifles, to include M-16/M-4 and AK-47 variants were left behind, in addition to 56,000 machineguns and 31,000 rocket propelled and handheld grenade launchers.

Heavier weapons likely now in Taliban's hands include 1,845 D-30 60-82mm mortar systems along with over one million mortar rounds as well as 224 D-130 122mm howitzer artillery guns.

Other equipment still in Afghanistan included 17,400 night vision devices, 95 small drones, and other surveillance and communication gear.

Images have shown "Taliban fighters with captured U.S.-supplied weapons such as M4 carbines, machine guns, night-vision devices, body armor, Toyota trucks, and Humvees" in addition to "MRAPs, and even some aircraft such as UH-60 Blackhawks, Mi-17 helicopters, and ScanEagle unmanned aerial systems," the watchdog said.

It has also been reported that the Taliban seized U.S.-supplied biometric equipment used to register Afghan security personnel, making the latter more vulnerable to potential reprisals.

The U.S. government did attempt a few late-stage efforts to ensure some of this materiel did not make its way into Taliban hands.

In addition to a series of airstrikes in July and August 2021 targeting captured equipment, the U.S. government appears to have made some efforts to render certain aviation related equipment inoperable so it would be of little benefit to the insurgents.

As of July 31, 2021, the Afghan Air Force had 131 available, usable aircrafts in Afghanistan among the 162 aircraft in its total inventory, according to information provided to SIGAR by the Defense Security Cooperation Management Office-Afghanistan (DSCMO-A).

Most of these aircraft had been supplied by the U.S., to include 43 MD-530 attack and reconnaissance helicopters as well as 23 A-29 turboprop light attack aircraft.

Afghan Air Force pilots managed to fly themselves and other personnel along with some aircrafts to two of Afghanistan's neighbors, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, with Sec. Blinken confirming 46 aircrafts were flown to Uzbekistan. Some 25% of Afghanistan's usable military aircraft were reportedly flown out of the country during the collapse. The issue continues to be worked by U.S. diplomats.

Sec. Blinken told Congress in September 2021, "Senior Department officials have formally asked the Government of Uzbekistan not to return these aircraft to the Taliban. The Department has received high-level assurances that Uzbekistan will honor this request." He also said Uzbekistan had promised to only let Uzbek officials and US personnel have access to the aircrafts.

In addition to the Afghan pilots' efforts, the U.S. military also attempted a quiet effort to deny the Taliban the acquisition of helicopters and some ground vehicles that were at HKIA before the final personnel departed the airport.

Gen. McKenzie said U.S. forces "demilitarized" 70 Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles in addition to some 27 Humvees, "that will never be driven again."

Some 73 aircraft were similarly rendered inoperable according to Gen. McKenzie who said, “Those aircraft will never fly again when we left.” U.S. forces also destroyed the C-RAM which was providing defense against rocket attacks as the last U.S. troops left Kabul. Some six RQ-21 drones were also destroyed during the evacuation, according to the April 2022 Pentagon report.

However, outside of Kabul airport and some limited airstrikes, there appears to have been little effort to render U.S. supplied equipment unusable to the Taliban.

The Taliban were even able to use U.S.-supplied night vision goggles to watch the last U.S. military personnel evacuate Kabul at the end of August 2021.

In April 2022, Sec. Austin finally produced the congressionally mandated report on U.S.-supplied equipment left in, destroyed, or removed from Afghanistan during the withdrawal, despite having been required to do so by December 29, 2021.

The U.S. military did fly out some non-U.S. supplied military equipment during the military evacuation from Afghanistan, to include a green Toyota “technical” pick-up truck outfitted with an anti-aircraft gun which was flown out on a military aircraft so that it could be emplaced outside the 82nd Airborne Division War Memorial and Museum.

f. Rushed Vetting Process and No Long-Term Plan for Evacuees Who Fail Vetting

Due to the chaos brought about by the withdrawal and subsequent NEO, the Biden administration was unable to evacuate many high priority Afghans such as vetted SIV holders and applicants. As previously described, the desperate situation outside the airport gates resulted in many less vetted Afghans being able to get onboard aircraft during the chaotic initial days of the NEO.

Due to this lack of preparedness on the part of the Biden administration, a robust system of vetting was not able to be put into place that would draw on all the databases of information in the possession of the U.S. government, failing to use several Defense Department systems. This failure allowed Afghans who had derogatory information about them in the U.S. government’s own files to be able to slip by the initial screening and reach the continental United States.

A Pentagon Inspector General report from February 2022 found that 50 Afghans who had arrived in the U.S. during the evacuation had information about them in the Defense Department’s databases that indicated they would present “potentially significant security concerns.”

The report added that the U.S. government could only locate three of Afghans who had derogatory information in their files and had arrived in the continental United States, and that some 28 other Afghans with similar such information in the databases could not be located.

The Biden administration’s failure to adequately and urgently plan for the evacuation meant that thousands of vetted Afghan allies were left behind and subject to Taliban reprisal killings while dozens of potential security risks were brought to the United States.

But even when the incomplete vetting procedures being used worked, there was no plan for what to do should vetting determine that a would-be evacuee had security concerns associated with them.

The U.S. government was eventually able to come to an agreement to use Camp Kiya located on Camp Bondsteel in Kosovo to house those who are flagged for security concerns. Their families are similarly housed there with them. More than a dozen Afghans who made it to U.S. soil have been sent to Camp Bondsteel after security concerns were raised. The Department of Defense runs the camps with assistance from the State Department. Afghans cannot leave the camp.



Camp Bondsteel

While in some cases, those who have received additional screening are eventually cleared and then released for onward travel, there is currently no plan or policy decision in place as to how to handle cases where additional vetting does not alleviate the security concern.

The U.S. government has signed an agreement with the Kosovo government in order to run this operation for a year. US officials told the investigation that the Biden administration has promised the government of Kosovo that none of these evacuees will remain in Kosovo on a permanent basis.

Camp Bondsteel was hosting approximately 138 Afghan evacuees as of late July 2022, according to press reports, a figure that includes family members of those requiring additional vetting.

“Fewer than 10 Afghans have been declared ineligible for entry” to the United States “after security officials found disqualifying information about them during an extensive vetting process,” the Wall Street Journal reported on January 21, 2022, citing a person familiar. An additional 90 Afghans were still being vetted.

CNN reported that the Biden administration was weighing deporting those evacuees who could not pass screening from Kosovo back to Afghanistan.

A DHS report to Congress said that “as of January 16, 2022, several hundred Afghan evacuees were prohibited from immediate onward travel to the United States in order to undergo additional screening and vetting outside of the United States. As of this date, 88 Afghan evacuees (along with 113 associated family members) are still undergoing additional screening and vetting outside of the United States.”

In May of 2022 the State Department informed Congress that several Afghans who were undergoing additional vetting were notified that they have not been approved for onward travel to the US, adding that “the State Department is working to identify appropriate durable solutions for these individuals and impacted family, including helping individuals return to Afghanistan should they choose to do so.” It is therefore clear that there is no long-term plan with what to do with evacuees who failed vetting some 12 months after the end of the military evacuation.

There were also major failures in vetting evacuees, failures due to the absence of proper planning in advance of the NEO. As of November 2, 2021, the U.S. government has “identified 50 Afghan personnel in the United States with information in DoD records that would indicate potentially significant security concerns.”

g. Commandos, Pilots, and Female Security Personnel Abandoned

“Although the U.S. Congress in 2009 established a visa regime — within the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program — for Afghans who worked with the U.S. government as translators and employees, there was no plan to extract members of the Afghan military which the U.S. spent billions training and equipping.”

- The Diplomat, December 30, 2021

As the Taliban's advance on Kabul progressed, there was no organized effort to prioritize the evacuation of critical Afghan military personnel who possessed unique knowledge of the U.S. military's tactics, techniques, and procedures and could thereby pose a security risk to America if they could be forced to divulge their knowledge to a U.S. adversary.

Of particular concern were Afghan Commandos, Ktah Khas units, Special Forces, National Directorate of Security forces, and other elite military and intelligence units who for years fought and trained alongside U.S. Special Operations Forces, gaining an understanding of their tactics. Notably, some of the Afghan commandos trained in U.S.-based Special Operations courses.

Afghan commandos often took the lead in some of the toughest operations, directed by U.S. commanders, with Afghan troops taking the heaviest brunt of the fighting. They participated in operations to kill several key terrorist leaders, including senior members of al Qaeda and ISIS-K. They often performed duties in direct support of U.S. military personnel, to include route clearance and perimeter security duties. During the Taliban takeover in August 2021, many of these elite soldiers displayed “heroic resistance” despite the overall collapse of the Afghan security forces, often fighting to the very end



Even President Biden who has repeatedly lambasted the Afghan military's willingness to fight, has acknowledged the bravery of the Afghan special forces, saying on August 16, 2021 "there's some very brave and capable Afghan special forces units and soldiers."

Despite the lack of a formal process to evacuate these individuals, many

of the volunteer organizations that stood up during the fall of Kabul were focused on aiding this population.

Many of the leaders of these groups are former American Special Operations Forces members, to include Army "Green Berets" and Navy SEALs, eager to assist their former comrades in arms, and senior U.S. military officers have also used their influence to assist Afghan commandos evacuate, even though they do not qualify for special status as part of the SIV, P1 refugee, or P2 refugee programs.

For example, Gen. Miller and Maj. Gen. Donohue both used their influence to help get former Afghan elite troops through gates at HKIA and on evacuation flights, according to two members of a veterans' organization working to evacuate Afghan allies.

The U.S. government did evacuate about 600 Afghan security force personnel who assisted the evacuation by providing perimeter security and other functions, but these represent a very small fraction of U.S. trained units who fought alongside American troops. Even those who were lucky enough to be flown out have found themselves stranded in third countries.

The Taliban are reported to have already engaged in reprisal killings aimed at former members of the Afghan security forces, particularly the Afghan commandos who frequently fought alongside U.S. troops.

"The commandos were hunted. Using pay records the US government left behind, the Taliban went door-to-door searching for them. The Afghan commandos and their families hastily stuffed belongings into plastic bags and fled their homes."

- Retired Lt. Col. Scott Mann, November 2021

Taliban reprisal killings and forced disappearances targeting former Afghan security force personnel have been documented by The Washington Post and Human Rights Watch.

A UN report in January 2022 said despite assurances by the Taliban "of general amnesties for former members of the Afghan government and security forces, as well as those who worked with international military forces," the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan "received credible allegations of killings, enforced disappearances, and other violations impacting the right to life and

physical integrity of these individuals.” Former female members of the Afghan security forces have also expressed concerns about Taliban reprisals. “The lives of women who served in the military are in danger because we served in the military,” one former Afghan Air Force officer told The Wall Street Journal.

Other Afghan military personnel who were key in the fight against the Taliban and ISIS-K have also gone into hiding for fear of Taliban reprisals, to include 50 U.S.-trained former Afghan Air Force helicopter pilots.

There have even been reports of former commandos and intelligence personnel having joined the ranks of ISIS, a startling development that suggests the terror group is now benefitting from the skills and training bestowed by the U.S. military to elite Afghan units.

Afghan Security Forces Fled Iran

General Masoud Andarabi, a former director of the Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS) said on December 1, 2021, “a significant number of former Ministry of the Interior (MOI) personnel went straight to Iran, where they were welcomed.”

Following the Taliban takeover, “around 3,000 Afghan security forces consisting of high-ranking officers to foot soldiers, along with their military equipment and vehicles, crossed the border into Iran,” according to a SIGAR report from May 2022. The report went on to say, “While most of these forces feared going back to Afghanistan, it has been reported that most of them were sent back after United Nations representatives intervened and the Taliban issued a general amnesty.”



“Iran may seek to recruit from the pool of military-trained former Afghan security forces hiding in Iran,” the report added. U.S. officials have sent mixed messages as to whether the US would assist in the evacuation of Afghan military personnel.

But Afghan military personnel do not qualify for the SIV program, and at present, the U.S. government is only seeking to evacuate via charter aircraft American citizens, Green Card holders, and SIV applicants with Chief of Mission approval.

Additionally, it is not clear whether they would qualify for P1 or P2 refugee status, and even if they did, they would be responsible for getting themselves out of the country on their own first. In the aforementioned August 14th White House NSC memo, the Defense Department was directed to “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.” Despite this direction, very few of these personnel were evacuated during the military evacuation and the US government is not evacuating P-1 and P-2 eligible refugees as part of its irregular US funded charter flight program.

Additionally, State Department officials told Congress in October 2021 the Biden administration was cognizant of the security risks and that the Pentagon was compiling a list of critical personnel for prioritization for evacuation.

“Afghans who possess the knowledge specific to security operations, intelligence collection, other aspects of security and defense forces that if it were to fall into terrorists’ hands would pose a national security risk to the United States, those people will have a special category, I think there is just no way around it,” a Senior State Department official said. The State Department said in October 2021 that the Department of Defense was in the process of compiling a list of critical Afghan personnel that would warrant prioritization in being evacuated.

However, as of mid-February 2022, the Pentagon list had still not been shared with the State Department Task Force, meaning several months of inactivity with regards to evacuation.

Afghan Commandos Stuck in Limbo

It is possible these former Afghan military and other intelligence personnel could be recruited or coerced into working for one of America’s adversaries that maintains a presence in Afghanistan, including Russia, China, or Iran. This is especially true given reports that some former Afghan military personnel have fled to Iran. The recruitment of former Afghan military and intelligence personnel poses a major national security risk due to the fact these Afghan personnel know the U.S. military and intelligence community’s tactics, techniques, and procedures.

“These commandos are trained, highly trained, on how we do signals intelligence, how we do human intelligence, how we operate,” Rep. Michael Waltz (R-FL). “We know that the Taliban are hunting them down. They are seeking to force them through coercion to hand over that information so that they can use it and they can understand how we operate.”

Asked specifically about evacuating Afghan commandos on October 22, 2021, Sec. Austin said, “We’ll continue our work and so we’ll work as hard and as long as we need to take care of as many people as we possibly can.”

A senior State Department official said on February 16, 2022, the issue of evacuating Afghan commandos “will be discussed in the interagency” and “it all still remains to be discussed and determined.”

But the Biden White House had still not made a policy decision on the issue as of July 2022 according to senior State Department officials, despite the State Department informing the NSC that a decision needed to be made.

Furthermore, no special prioritization status has yet been granted to any former Afghan military personnel despite the security risks highlighted by the Biden administration's own State Department.

"I don't think the current administration has any intentions of ever evacuating the men that fought and bled next to us, and their families," Ben Owen, the chief executive of Flanders Fields, told National Review. "The U.S. government doesn't see any duty to evacuate these guys. And they are dead. They are dead. They are dead if they get caught. I've had three executed in the last two weeks, one in front of his wife and children...None of us are going to quit until we find a way to get them out. These guys, they fought like hell."

A U.S. intelligence official told the Committee the DIA failed to evacuate many of its own local partners, and worse, stymied the efforts of U.S. officials to work with outside groups to evacuate those partners despite the Afghan personnel possessing unique knowledge about America's intelligence community.

These haphazard Biden administration efforts contrast with that of a close American ally.

The UK equivalent of the SIV program, known as the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP), includes critical Afghan security force personnel among those warranting evacuation, including members of the Afghan intelligence service, the National Directorate of Security.

The UK has even reportedly floated a draft proposal to incorporate former elite Afghan military personnel into the British Army.

More than one year after the last U.S. military aircraft left Afghanistan, the Biden administration still does not have a plan or policy in place to prioritize the evacuation of critical Afghan military personnel who could potentially pose a risk to US national security if they were coopted by American adversaries or international terrorist groups.

h. U.S. Military Families Left in Afghanistan

“These brave men and women have volunteered to risk their lives to protect our country. Yet, now, when they need us the most, the federal government has turned our backs on them. If we abandon the family members of our service men and women in Afghanistan, they will certainly be slaughtered by the Taliban.”

- Ranking Member Michael McCaul (R-TX), September 23, 2021

Another area where the Biden administration showed a reluctance to act was prioritizing the evacuation of U.S. military personnel's families who are residing in Afghanistan.

"More than two months after the U.S. military withdrew completely from Afghanistan, Undersec. Kahl issued a memo asking any U.S. military personnel and DOD civilians with immediate family members

who need help leaving Afghanistan to email his office," *NBC News* reported in November 2021.

The Kahl memo also came months after the Ranking Member McCaul (R-TX) wrote to Secretary of Defense Austin and Secretary of State Blinken asking them to get involved.

The New York Times

Lawmakers Press to Rescue Afghan Relatives of U.S. Service Members

MilitaryTimes

'Dozens' of troops' family members still in Afghanistan, Pentagon estimates

"Since that memo, about 60 service members have come forward and expressed concerns about family members in Afghanistan," then-Defense Dept. Spokesperson Kirby said on November 15, 2021. Those family members, however, were deemed ineligible for humanitarian parole status.

Prior to the memo, during the military evacuation phase in August 2021, a separate Group of 62 US service members sought assistance to evacuate family members, according to the Pentagon.

However, only 50 family members of six Department of Defense civilians and military service members were evacuated on U.S. government flights, according to Pentagon spokesman John Kirby.

An additional 10 family members of US military personnel have been evacuated since the end of the military evacuation on August 31st according to the Pentagon. The Committee Minority has not been provided any further update in recent months.

i. Other Allies Left behind

The chaos and violence around HKIA meant many Afghan allies were not evacuated. Of the 124,000 people evacuated during the military evacuation phase, only 2,496 were SIV holders, according to Under Sec. Kahl – despite the fact that Members of Congress were told on August 20, 2021 that SIV holders would be able to gain access to the airport without having “to show the actual visa in order to be admitted by U.S. personnel,” with State Department officials assuring Congress that the U.S. government “has other ways of confirming their identity.”

A senior State Department official told reporters shortly after the military withdrawal “the majority” of SIV applicants had been left behind.

By the administration’s own count, more than 10,000 SIV applicants, to include primary applicants with Chief of Mission approval remained stuck in Taliban controlled Afghanistan as of July 2022, this figure does not include their immediate family members which could involve tens of thousands additional people. An additional 67,000 SIV applicants who have yet to receive Chief of Mission approval remain in Afghanistan as of July 2022.

“On the issue of why we didn't bring our civilians and SIVs sooner, again, the call on how to do that and when to do it is really a State Department call,” Sec. Austin testified in September 2021. “But again, we provided our input, and we certainly would have liked to see it go faster or sooner.”

One would-be evacuee who worked for the U.S. embassy and tried to gain entry to HKIA during the NEO described the chaos and indiscriminate nature of the processing procedures:

“I am sorry to say that I couldn't get to the airport, I am unable to continue getting to the airport, it's a miserable and total disaster. I have three children, two 10 years old twin daughters and another 3 years old baby, I can't put their lives at risk.”

- A locally employed staff member at the Kabul Embassy, August 2021

The State Department subsequently admitted it was not able to evacuate all its 689 locally employed staff during the NEO, saying that they were only able to get out “most of our locally employed staff.”

Sec. Blinken has since told Congress that 11 locally employed staff who worked for the U.S. embassy were unable to be evacuated during the military evacuation despite their wanting to leave Taliban controlled Afghanistan.

However, the eleven-figure provided by Sec. Blinken fails to account for the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM) employees the U.S. government left behind in Afghanistan. This decision to not count those employees is particularly odd as in the same response to Congress, Sec. Blinken confirmed these employees “were designated as Locally Employed Staff during the August evacuation and relocation operation.”

Some 140 U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM) employees and their families – roughly 500 people – were left behind in Taliban controlled Afghanistan after August 31. Those left behind include journalists working for the Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) who have worked in Afghanistan for years. These individuals were left behind despite a direct appeal to President Biden by the head of the USAGM on August 23, 2021, and another appeal to President Biden by members of Congress on August 25, 2021.

“Some of these journalists were given express assurances by the Biden Administration that they would be treated as locally employed staff – but were not. My office was working with one of these journalists and tried for two weeks to get attention brought to his case so he, his wife, and his infant child could be saved – but our pleas were ignored.”

- Ranking Member Michael McCaul (R-TX), August 31, 2021

It is also unclear if any specific evacuation efforts were made regarding the approximately 14,000 Afghans who have been employed by Embassy Kabul and worked under U.S. Chief of Mission authority in the years since Embassy Kabul was re-established in 2001.

The situation was much the same for USAID. One former USAID official described the evacuation of U.S. foreign assistance partners as the “hardest and most depressing thing [she had] worked on in 20 years.” On September 15, 2021, two full weeks after the August withdrawal deadline, the former USAID official said that there was still no official U.S. policy about getting aid partners out of the country.

These general sentiments were shared by those who were focused on evacuating vulnerable Afghan women – and particularly those in positions of authority – who many assumed would become Taliban targets.

Even when people did manage to get through the airport gates there was confusion. “There were times where we allowed more extended family through simply because it would have been a death sentence to send them back into the crowd,” Greg Floyd, the top U.S. consular officer in Kabul, said.

American Citizen Escorted out of HKIA

In one instance, a former interpreter and current American citizen living in Austin, Texas, had returned to Afghanistan in an attempt to secure his wife and children’s evacuation out of Kabul. His family members had obtained Chief of Mission approval for their SIV visas.

The family was instructed, via an email from the U.S. State Department on August 18, 2021, to go to the airport. But after being admitted through the gates, they waited at the airport for four days without food or water. Eventually, they were told by U.S. military personnel they had to leave because they did not possess a green card or a passport and were escorted out of HKIA.

This was in spite of the fact that, in the message prompting them to travel to the airport, the State Department said that “a non-citizen spouse or unmarried children (under age 21) of a U.S. citizen or LPR may accompany” a U.S. citizen or LPR seeking to leave but that they “should have valid travel documents.”

Fortunately, the American citizen and his family were able to be evacuated by the outside volunteer organization Task Force Pineapple.

Since the military evacuation, the U.S. government initially relied on charter flights operated by Qatar to fly out Afghan allies and partners as well as those remaining American citizens. But charter flights out of Kabul have also ceased at times due to disagreements between the Qataris and the Taliban, with the Taliban blocking all evacuation flights in 2022.

One member of a volunteer organization told the investigation that the source of the dispute between the Taliban and the Qatari representatives was that Qatar had ceased flying Taliban members to Qatar in order to allow them to work as migrant laborers, thereby denying the Taliban a source of remittance income and prompting the Taliban to halt Qatari evacuation efforts.

State Department officials said the dispute was over security issues, compensation and the Taliban the Taliban's changing "requirements."

After flights briefly resumed, the dispute again led to the Taliban preventing passengers from departing, forcing a chartered aircraft to depart Kabul without any passengers on February 2, 2022.

The Taliban eventually blocked the charter flights entirely, effectively forcing the Biden Administration to pay approximately \$300,000 per flight to a Taliban controlled airline in order to allow U.S. citizens and Afghan allies to continue evacuating from Afghanistan. U.S. State Department officials in Qatar confirmed that the cash-strapped Taliban are profiting from these payments which are being channeled through a third party.

But even using the Taliban-controlled airlines, only about two flights a week are expected, a number far too paltry to evacuate some tens of thousands of applicants and immediate family members with Chief of Mission approval nor the 67,000 SIV applicants who do not yet have Chief of Mission approval by September 2022, a date reportedly set by Qatar as the cut off for bringing in new SIV applicants at Al Udeid Air Base.

As of July 2022, there was no finalized plan as to what to do with SIV applicants departing from Afghanistan after September 2022, as Qatar has reportedly told the Biden administration it intends to close the reception center in September ahead of its hosting of the 2022 soccer World Cup. While the State Department is actively attempting to compensate for the anticipated disruption, it is unclear how it will manage to do so, with capacity issues in Al Udeid and nearby Camp As Sayliyah already straining the evacuation process in July of 2022.

Of the 124,000 evacuated number touted by the administration, around 2,000 were U.S. Embassy personnel, 5,530 were American citizens, 3,335 "were third-country nationals."

The administration has also said it evacuated about 2,004 NATO citizens and facilitated the evacuation of "44,874 people coming out on non-US aircraft."

The administration has said that "about 84 percent of the people we brought out were Afghans at risk of various kinds, SIVs, P-1s, P-2s, or others."

Data provided to Congress by DHS in January 2022 says that of those evacuated, 82,015 were “non-U.S. citizens whose evacuation from Afghanistan to the United States, or to a location overseas controlled by the United States, was facilitated by the United States.”

Of that population 3,529 were LPRs, 3,290 possessed an SIV or are the immediate family member of an SIV holder, and 36,821 were SIV applicants, the immediately family member of an applicant, or eligible to apply for an SIV. However, many of these SIV applicants applied after arriving in the U.S. and were not known to be SIV applicants upon arriving at HKIA.

The number of Afghan evacuee P-1 refugee referrals is 1,941. And the number of the number of Afghan evacuee P-2 refugee referrals is 2,109.

The number of Afghan evacuees who had no history of working with the U.S. or do not fall into any of the aforementioned categories was 36,433, suggesting that nearly half of those brought to the U.S. were not high priority evacuees.

VIII. CONCLUSION

“F-k that. We don’t have to worry about that. We did it in Vietnam. Nixon and Kissinger got away with it...I am not sending my boy back there to risk his life on behalf of women’s rights.”

- Then-VP Biden on Concerns of Humanitarian Costs of a U.S. Withdrawal, According to Amb. Holbrooke, former U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, 2010

Biden administration officials insist the decision to withdraw was informed by months of deliberations. Yet despite the supposed lengthy deliberation process and the subsequent four-month withdrawal period, U.S. diplomats were unable to secure bases for ISR operations in countries bordering Afghanistan. As of August 2022, no such agreements have been reached.

The U.S. government also did not take steps to prevent the release of thousands of al Qaeda, ISIS, and Taliban prisoners from Afghanistan government prisons. Additionally, the administration did not properly plan for the need to have transit and processing centers in third countries outside of Afghanistan to facilitate the evacuation of U.S. citizens, LPRs, Afghan allies, and other Afghans at-risk. Further, when faced with a rapidly deteriorating security situation during the traditional summer fighting season in Afghanistan, the administration made no significant adjustments to its plans to match the urgency and severity of the situation.

The administration repeatedly, and at times potentially intentionally, misled the American public about the likely consequences of its decision to withdraw unilaterally, irrespective of conditions. The administration also misled the American public about the military advice President Biden had received regarding Afghanistan. In truth, the president chose to ignore the advice of his top military and diplomatic officials, as well as that of America’s closest allies who sought to make the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan contingent on the Taliban taking real steps towards peace.

Once President Biden chose to ignore that advice and proceed with a unilateral withdrawal, the administration failed to plan adequately for the likely consequences of that decision, failing to ensure that there were plans and processes in place to safely evacuate American citizens, LPRs, SIV holders and applicants, and other Afghan allies who aided the war effort and helped keep Americans safe.

The absence of adequate plans was made worse by failures in execution, in not sending adequate military and consular personnel to Kabul, in rejecting a Taliban offer to gain greater control over Kabul in the final days, and in being unable to devise more effective procedures for getting people processed into the airport.

a. No Accountability

A generation of government civilians, military personnel, contractors, aid workers, and everyday Americans volunteered to take part in the campaign against those who targeted the United States on September 11, 2001.

That campaign brought them to Afghanistan, where they helped battle the terrorist threat while often working to give Afghans an opportunity for a better life than they had under the brutal Taliban regime.

On the 20th anniversary of 9/11, Americans never would have imagined their president would leave these same Afghans under a renewed Taliban rule, in a country with a growing number of terrorist safe havens.

Some of these same Americans would later volunteer their time and resources to support a rescue mission of Americans and Afghan allies as they watched the country collapse. The U.S. government often relied on these volunteers to perform functions the national governments and diplomatic corps should have been doing themselves.

The U.S. government now owes all Americans accountability for the failure and consequences of the Biden administration's withdrawal from Afghanistan.

While even senior administration officials have described the end of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan as a "strategic failure" and an "ugly final phase," the Biden administration has yet to hold anyone accountable for the execution of the withdrawal and evacuation operations. Instead, almost every official who participated in the decision to withdraw U.S. troops, oversaw the collapse of the U.S.-backed Afghanistan government and the ascendancy of the Taliban and its terrorist allies, and led the evacuation are still in positions of major authority, weighing in on life and death decisions every day.

This appears to be at least partially – if not completely – due to President Biden's personal and intense resistance to any review. He recently declared he was "rejecting" the findings of an Army investigation. That investigation found the White House planning for the evacuation of Afghanistan lacked adequate urgency. Similarly, the Biden administration ceased sharing information with the Congressionally mandated Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), with SIGAR calling the Biden administration officials' refusal to share critical information an "illegal obstruction of SIGAR's oversight work."

This contrasts with some of America's closest allies such as the UK and the Netherlands, where both countries foreign ministers were removed from their posts following their involvement in the Afghanistan evacuation. Other countries have also conducted more targeted inquiries focused on recent decisions carried out by those still in office. For example, the UK Parliaments' committees on Defense and Foreign Affairs have conducted thorough reviews into the withdrawal and evacuation.

Some internal investigations are occurring. The State Department Inspector General is reviewing various aspects of the evacuation, as is the Inspector General at the U.S. Agency for International Development. In addition, the State Department and Department of Defense have both pledged to conduct their own reviews into the events surrounding the evacuation, with both agencies' reviews beginning in December 2021.

However, such internal reviews require the organizations to police themselves, and their lenses are frequently too narrow, ignoring the fact that multiple agencies and the White House National Security Council were simultaneously involved in the withdrawal and evacuation efforts. Furthermore, the reviews will reportedly be classified, at least in part, minimizing their ability to provide accountability to the American public.

The 20-year “Afghanistan War Commission” established by the recently passed National Defense Authorization Act is also a noble effort likely to cast light on major missteps across multiple presidential administrations and secure the historical record. But it is not sufficient to get to the bottom of what specifically happened regarding the Biden administration’s unconditional withdrawal from the country that led to the death of 13 U.S. servicemembers and the abandonment of more than 800 American citizens in a terrorist-controlled country.

b. Next Steps

The Biden administration’s, and specifically the State Department’s, refusal to provide Congress with the necessary information regarding America’s unconditional withdrawal from Afghanistan has hampered the Committee Minority’s ability to complete a thorough investigation.

As indicated in the Committee Republicans’ Resolution of Inquiry first filed on October 5, 2021 as H.Res. 701, and updated and reintroduced as H.Res. 1240 on July 20, 2022, the State Department should provide the Committee with the requested documents, messages, reports, legal opinions, meeting readouts, and other materials related to the withdrawal from Afghanistan. That would include, but would not be limited to, information regarding: consultation with U.S. allies; any agreements with the Taliban related to the evacuation of U.S. citizens and our allies; information provided to the Taliban during the NEO; reporting on the Taliban’s relationship with al Qaeda, the Haqqani network, and other terrorist organizations; any money or assets transferred by or at the request of the U.S. government to the Taliban; all written plans related to the evacuation; assistance or coordination with NGOs and outside veterans groups; agreements with third countries who provided official and unofficial lily pads during the NEO; and flights both during the NEO and after.

If the State Department continues to refuse to provide this information, the Committee should subpoena that information to compel compliance.

In addition, the State Department should make the following people available for transcribed interviews with the Committee, as Committee Republicans requested on November 15, 2021. The Committee Minority took this action only after the State Department refused to support numerous document requests. If any of these people no longer work at the State Department, leaders should allow them to support the Committee Minority efforts.

Suzy George, Chief of Staff to U.S. Secretary of State	Kevin O’Keefe, Director, Office of Security Assistance, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs
Brian McKeon, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources	Tracey Jacobson, Operation Allies Welcome Home State Department Liaison
Carol Perez, Acting Under Secretary of State for Management	Beth Jones, Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts (CARE)
Laura Dogu, CONUS Coordinator	Virginia Palmer, CARE Task Force Lead for Third Country Operations
John Bass, former Ambassador to Afghanistan and State Department lead of evacuation efforts at Hamid Harzai International Airport	Shannon Farrell, CARE Task Force Lead for CONUS Operations
Scott Weinhold, Assistant Chief of Mission, U.S. Embassy Kabul	Karen Decker, CARE Task Force Lead for American Inbound Flight Manifests
Ross Wilson, Charge d’Affaires, U.S. Embassy Kabul	Evyenia Sidereas, Director, Arabian Peninsula, Bureau of Near East Asian Affairs
James Morris, Department approver of flight manifests	Brett Holmgren, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Intelligence and Research
Rena Bitter, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Consular Affairs	Salman Ahmed, Director, Policy Planning Staff
Ian Brownlee, former Acting Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Consular Affairs	Maureen Cormack, Dean of Foreign Service Institute
Ian Hillman, Senior Advisor, Visa Office, Consular Affairs	Dafna Rand, Director of the Office of Foreign Service Institute
Nancy Izzo Jackson, Senior Bureau Official, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration	Richard Visek, Acting Legal Advisor
Larry Bartlett, Director of Admissions, Population, Refugees and Migration	Karen Freeman, Acting USAID Assistant Administrator, Bureau for Asia
Dean Thompson, head of Department’s Afghanistan Task Force and Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs	Mark Walther, USAID Director of Acquisition and Assistance
Mark Evans, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs	Sarah Charles, Assistant Administrator, Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance
Todd Brown, Acting Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Diplomatic Security	Tina Dooley-Jones, USAID Mission Director Afghanistan
Greg Sherman, Deputy Assistant Secretary and Assistant Director of High Threat Programs Directorate, Bureau of Diplomatic Security	

In addition, the State Department should make available for a transcribed interview State Department Spokesperson Ned Price.

The Committee Minority would also request the White House make Deputy National Security Advisor John Finer, National Security Council Homeland Security Adviser Liz Sherwood-Randall, and White House Chief of Staff Ron Klain available for transcribed interviews. Finally, the Committee Minority would request the White House release former White House Spokesperson Jen Psaki to participate in a transcribed interview as well.

The Minority Committee also recommends the full Committee hold multiple, open hearings focused specifically on Afghanistan, with senior Biden administration officials who were responsible for the decision to unconditionally withdraw and for the evacuation. Those officials should include, but should not be limited to:

- ▶ U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken
- ▶ U.S. Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources Brian McKeon
- ▶ USAID Administrator Samantha Powers
- ▶ U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman
- ▶ National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan

If the State Department refuses to provide these individuals, the Committee should subpoena them to compel compliance.

Much more investigation is still needed to provide a full accounting of what caused this disaster. And as more information is revealed, more questions will certainly arise.