

WILLFUL BLINDNESS:

An Assessment of the Biden-Harris Administration's
Withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Chaos that Followed

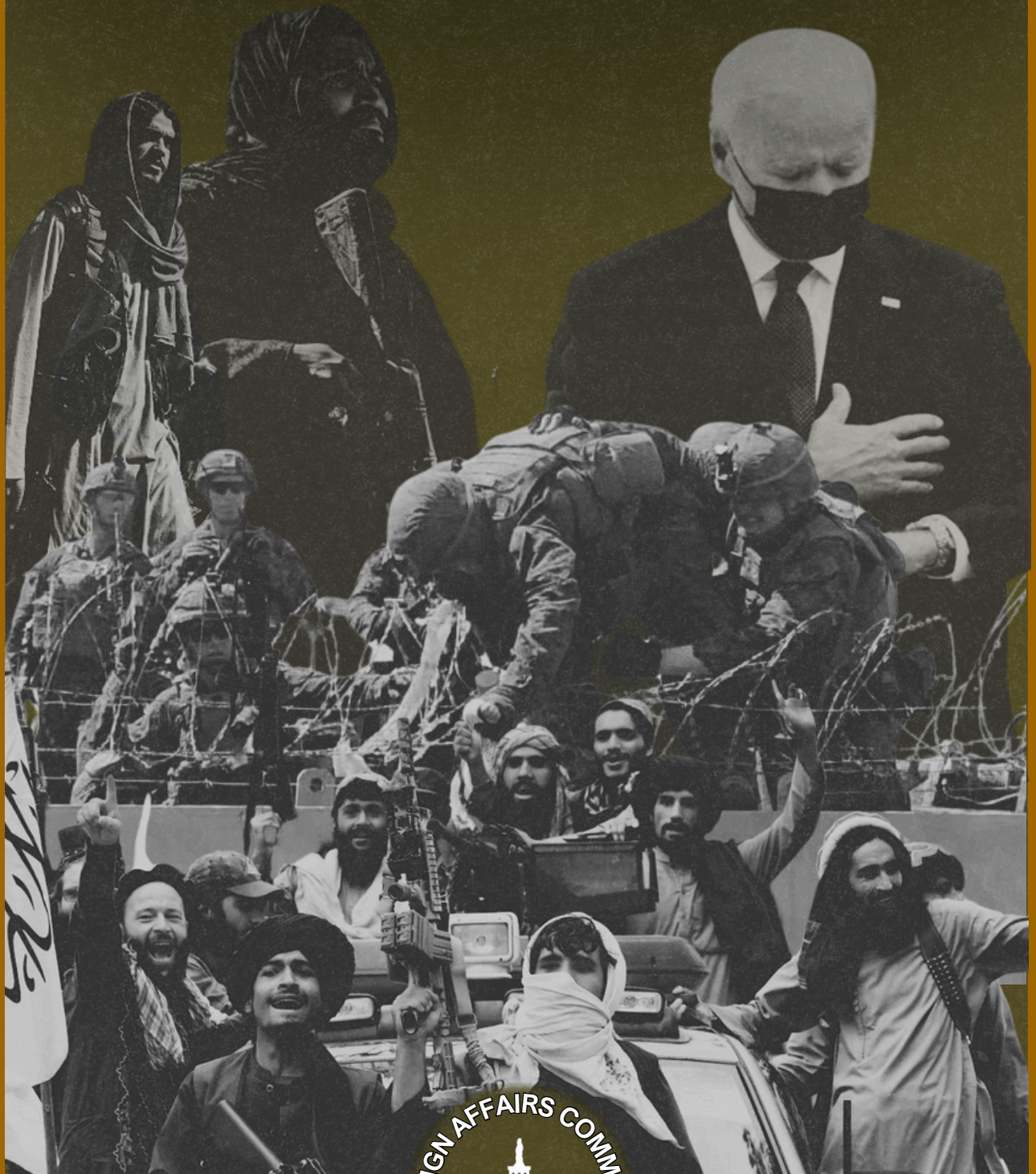
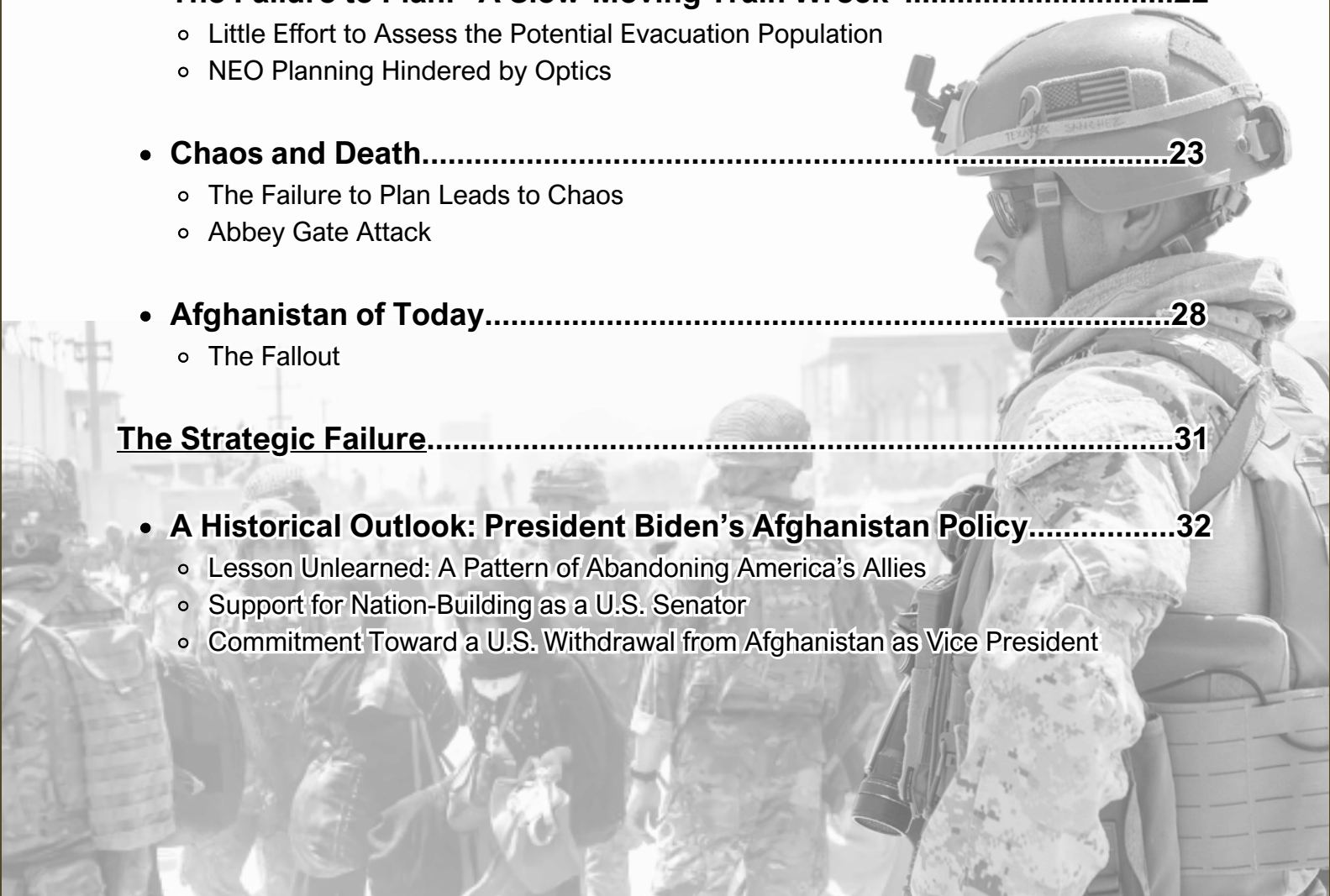


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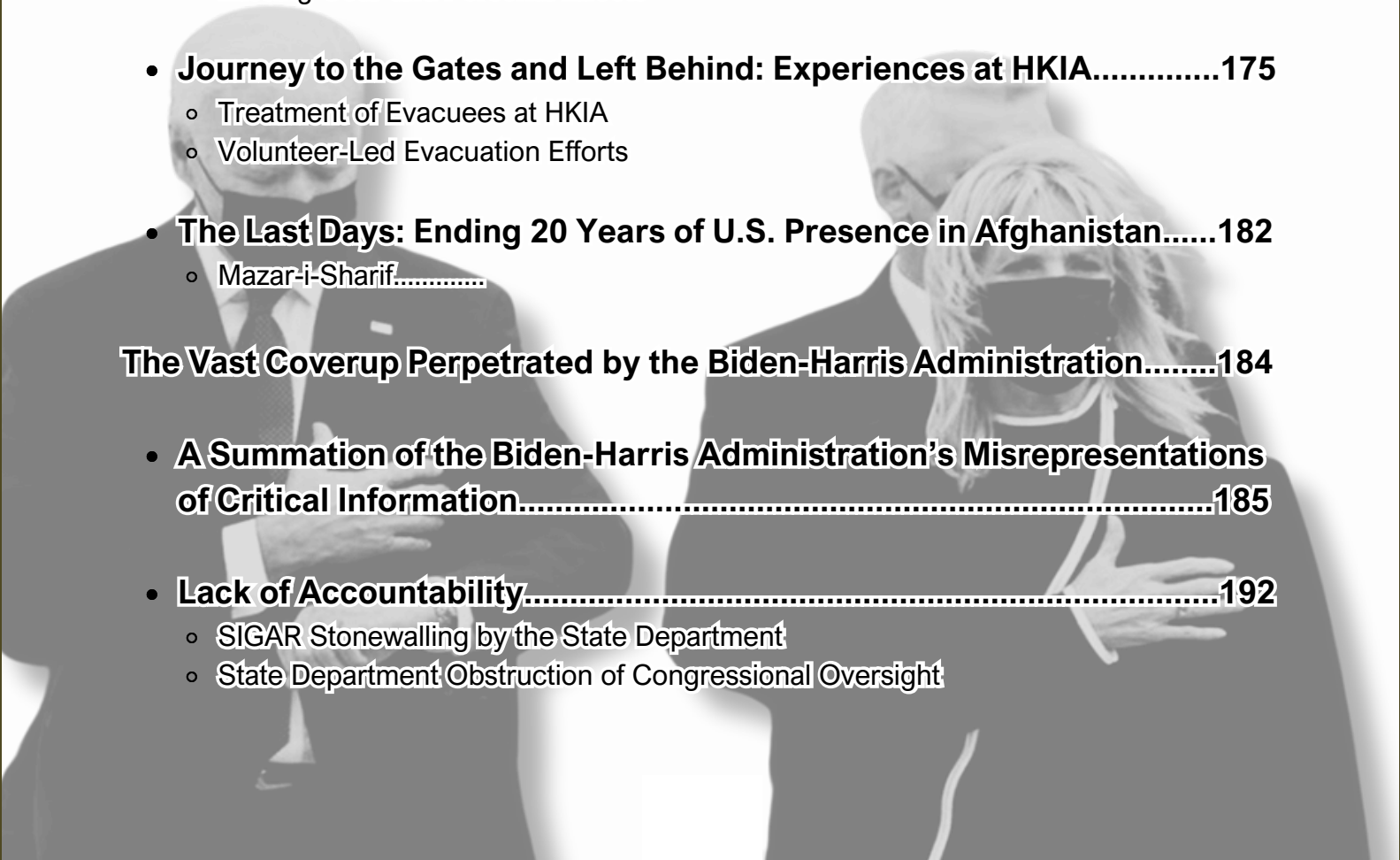
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KEY PEOPLE

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The White House:

Barack Obama: President of the United States, 2009 to 2017

Donald J. Trump: President of the United States, 2017 to 2021

Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall: National Security Council, U.S. Homeland Security Advisor, 2021 to Present

George W. Bush: President of the United States, 2001 to 2009

H.R. McMaster: National Security Council, U.S. National Security Advisor, 2017 to 2018

Jake Sullivan: National Security Council, U.S. National Security Advisor, 2021 to present

Jen Psaki: White House Press Secretary, 2021 to 2022

Joseph R. Biden: President of the United States from 2021 to present

Jon Finer: National Security Council, Deputy U.S. National Security Advisor, 2021 to present

Kamala Harris: Vice President of the United States, 2021 to present

Lisa Curtis: National Security Council, Senior Director for South and Central Asia, 2017 to 2021

Robert O'Brien: U.S. National Security Advisor, 2019 to 2021

Ron Klain: White House Chief of Staff, 2021 to 2023

Russ Travers: National Counterterrorism Center, Acting Director; National Security Council, Senior Deputy Homeland Security Advisor on the NSC, 2021

The State Department:

Antony Blinken: U.S. Secretary of State, 2021 to Present

Brian McKeon: U.S. Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources, 2021 to 2022

Carol Perez: U.S. Acting Under Secretary of State for Management, 2021 to 2021; Director General of the Foreign Service, 2019 to 2022

Dean Thompson: Acting Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, 2021 to 2022

Derek Chollet: Counselor of the US Department of State, 2021 to 2024

Greta Holtz: Chief of Mission to U.S. Embassy Doha, Qatar, 2020 to 2022

Greg Sherman: Bureau of Diplomatic Security, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State and Assistant Director of the Diplomatic Security Service for High Threat Programs, 2019 to 2023

Hilary Clinton: U.S. Secretary of State, 2009 to 2013

Ian McCary: U.S. Deputy Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS from September 2022 to Present; Chief of Mission to the U.S. Mission to Afghanistan, 2021 to 2022; Deputy Chief of Mission to U.S. Embassy Kabul, Afghanistan, 2020 to 2021.

James Cunningham: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan, Senior Analyst, 2015 to 2022

Jayne Howell: Consul General, Islamabad, Pakistan, 2023 to Present; Minister Counselor for Consular Affairs in Turkiye, 2020 to 2023

John Bass: Acting Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs 2024 to Present; Under Secretary of State for Management, 2021 to Present; U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, 2017 to 2020

John Sopko: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, Inspector General, 2012 to Present

Jonathan Menutti: Office of the High Representative, Principal Deputy and Brčko District Supervisor, 2022 to Present; Chief of Staff to Acting Under Secretary of State for Management Carol Perez, 2021 to 2021

Jim DeHart: Consul General, Vancouver, Canada, 2023 to Present; Coordinator for Special Immigrant Visa Diplomacy, 2022 to 2023; U.S. Coordinator for the Arctic Region, 2020 to 2022; U.S. Embassy Kabul, Afghanistan, Assistant Chief of Mission, 2018 to 2019

Karen Decker: Chief of Mission to the U.S. Mission Afghanistan, 2022 to Present

Mark Evans: Deputy Chief of Mission to U.S. Embassy Stockholm, Sweden, 2022 to Present; Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Afghanistan, 2021 to 2022; Director of the Afghanistan Desk in the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, 2020 to 2021

Mike Pompeo: U.S. Secretary of State, 2018 to 2021

Molly Phee: Deputy Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, 2018 to 2021

Naz Durakoğlu: Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Legislative Affairs at the Department of State, 2021 to Present

Ned Price: Deputy to the U.S. Representative to the United Nations, 2024 to Present; Senior Advisor to Secretary Blinken, 2023 to 2024; State Department Spokesperson, 2021 to 2023

Richard Holbrooke: U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, 2009 to 2010

Richard Visek: Acting Legal Adviser at the Department of State from 2021 to Present; Principal Deputy Legal Adviser, 2016 to Present

Rina Amiri: U.S. Special Envoy for Afghan Women, Girls, and Human Rights, 2021 to Present

Ross Wilson: Chief of Mission to U.S. Embassy Kabul, 2020 to 2021, Ambassador to Turkey, 2005 to 2008

Ryan Crocker: U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, 2011 to 2012

Salman Ahmed: Director of Policy Planning, 2021 to Present

Scott Weinhold: Assistant Chief of Mission to U.S. Embassy Kabul, Afghanistan, 2020 to 2021

Victoria Nuland: Under Secretary for Political Affairs, 2021 to 2024

Zalmay Khalilzad: U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, 2018 to 2021; U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, 2004 to 2005

Department of Defense

Aidan Gunderson: U.S. Army, Specialist, End of Active Service July 2022

Austin Scott Miller: U.S. Army, Commander of NATO's Resolution Support Mission and U.S. Forces Afghanistan, Years of Service 1993 to 2021

Brad Whited: U.S. Marines Corps, Lieutenant Colonel, Active Duty

Christopher Donahue: U.S. Army, Major General, 2020-2022; Lieutenant General 2022-Present

Christopher Miller: Acting U.S. Secretary of Defense, 2020-2021

C.J. Douglas: U.S. Marine Corps, Colonel, Retired

Colin Kahl: Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, 2021 to 2023

David Petraeus: U.S. Army, International Security Assistance Force and U.S. Forces Afghanistan, Commander, 2010 to 2011; U.S. Central Command, 2008 to 2010

David Sedney: Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia, 2009 to 2013

Farrell J. Sullivan: U.S. Marines, Brigadier General, Active Duty

Hila Hanif: Office of the Secretary of Defense, Director, Afghanistan Strategy and Policy, 2018 to 2021

Jim Mattis: U.S. Secretary of Defense, 2017 to 2019

John Kirby: U.S. Navy, Rear Admiral; U.S. Department of Defense, 2021 to 2022

Kenneth F. McKenzie: U.S. Marine Corps, Commander of U.S. Central Command, 2019 to 2022; Years of Service 1979 to 2022

Lance Curtis: U.S. Army, Major General, 2023 to Present; U.S. Army, Brigadier General, 2020 to 2023

Lloyd Austin: U.S. Secretary of Defense, 2021 to Present

Mark Milley: U.S. Army, Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2019 to 2023; Years of Service 1980 to 2023

Michael E. Kurilla: U.S. Army, Commander of the U.S. Central Command, 2022 to Present

Mike Mullen: U.S. Navy, Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2007 to 2011

Peter Vasely: U.S. Navy, Rear Admiral, Commander of U.S. Forces Afghanistan-Forward, Years of Service 1990 to 2023

Robert Gates: U.S. Secretary of Defense, 2006 to 2011

Colonel Seth Krumrich: U.S. Army, Colonel, Chief of Staff for Special Operations Command Central of U.S. Central Command, 2019 to 2022

Stanley McChrystal: U.S. Army, Commander, International Security Assistance Force and US Forces Afghanistan from 2009 to 2010; Commander, Joint Special Operations Command, 2003 to 2008; Years of Service 1976 to 2010

Tyler Vargas-Andrews: U.S. Marine Corps, Sergeant, Retired 2023

Other Federal Agencies:

Alejandro Mayorkas: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security, 2021 to Present

Christopher Wray: Federal Bureau of Investigation, Director, 2017 to Present

David Cohen: Central Intelligence Agency, Deputy Director, 2015 to 2017

Robert Hur: U.S. Department of Justice, Special Counsel, 2023

Scott Berrier: U.S. Defense and Intelligence Agency, Director, 2020 to 2024

Samantha Power: U.S. Agency for International Development, Administrator, 2021 to Present

International:

António Guterres: United Nations, Secretary-General, 2017 to Present

Jens Stoltenberg: NATO, Secretary General, 2014 to 2024

Nicholas Carter: General Sir; British Army Officer, Chief of the Defence Staff, 2018 to 2021

Roza Otunbayeva: United Nations, U.N. Special Representative of the Secretary-General and head of the U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, 2022 to Present

Rosemary DiCarlo: U.N. Undersecretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, 2018 to Present

Steve Brooking: Chief of Mission to the British Embassy in Kabul and Special Adviser to the U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, 2015 to 2021

Outside Experts:

Bill Roggio: Foundation for Defense of Democracies, Long War Journal, Senior Fellow and Editor

Jonathan Schroden: Afghan War Commission, Research Director

Government of Afghanistan:

Abdullah Abdullah: Afghanistan High Council for National Reconciliation, Chairman, 2020 to 2021

Ashraf Ghani: President of Afghanistan, 2014 to 2021

Bismillah Khan Mohammadi: Minister of Defense 2021 to 2021 and 2012 to 2015

Darwaish Raufi: Bagram Air Base, District Administrator throughout 2021

Hamid Karzai: President of Afghanistan, 2002 to 2014

Hamdullah Mohib: National Security Advisor, 2018 to 2021, Afghan Ambassador to the United States 2014 to 2018

Hibatullah Alizai: Afghan Army General and Chief of General Staff, 2021 to 2021

Matin Bek: Former Chief of Staff to President Ashraf Ghani and a member of the negotiating committee between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban

General Mir Asadullah Kohistani: Commander of Bagram Air Base, 2021

Nader Nadery: Afghanistan Peace Process Negotiator, 2020 to 2021; Senior Advisor to the President of Afghanistan, 2016 to 2017

Sami Sadat: Afghan National Army, Lieutenant General and Deputy Chief of General Staff, 2021 to 2021; Maiwand Corps, Commander 2020 to 2021

The Taliban Regime, ISIS-K, al-Qaeda:

Abdul Rahman al-Logari: ISIS-K Abbey Gate August 26, 2021 person-borne IED bomber

Ayman al-Zawahiri: Deputy to Osama bin Laden and leader of al-Qaeda, 2011 to 2022; killed by U.S. forces in 2022

Hibatullah Akhundzada: Supreme leader of the Taliban, 2021 to Present

Shahab al-Muhajir: Leader of ISIS-K's Province, 2020 to Present

Sirajuddin Haqqani: Leader of the Haqqani Network and Taliban Regime's Interior Minister, 2021 to Present

Zabiullah Mujahid: Taliban regime Chief Spokesperson, 2021 to Present

METHODOLOGY



METHODOLOGY

This report presents the findings of the committee majority’s investigation into the Biden-Harris administration’s withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan is understood to encompass the U.S. military retrograde, beginning with the “Go to Zero” order officially announced by President Biden on April 14, 2021, through the noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO) ordered by President Biden on August 15, 2021, as well as related planning by the White House, U.S. Department of State, and other federal agencies and their decision-making processes. The withdrawal culminated in the Abbey Gate terrorist attack on August 26, 2021, which killed 13 U.S. servicemembers, wounding another 45, and killed more than 170 Afghan civilians. The withdrawal concluded on August 30, 2021, when the last U.S. military aircraft left Afghanistan.

Congress’s oversight and legislative powers are derived from the U.S. Constitution and have repeatedly been affirmed by the U.S. Supreme Court.[i] Pursuant to 22 U.S.C. § 2680, “The Department of State shall keep ... the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives fully and currently informed with respect to all activities and responsibilities within the jurisdiction of these committees. *Any Federal department, agency, or independent establishment shall furnish any information requested by ... such committee relating to any such activity or responsibility.*” Rule X of the House of Representatives furnishes the committee with oversight authority over, in relevant part, “[r]elations of the United States with foreign nations generally,” the “[d]iplomatic service,” and the [p]rotection of American citizens abroad and expatriation.” [2]

The withdrawal from Afghanistan occurred during the 117th Congress — which spanned from January 3, 2021 to January 3, 2023. During that period, the Democratic party held the majority in the U.S. House of Representatives and in the U.S. Senate. Accordingly, the Democratic majority controlled the chairmanships of all Congressional Committees. During the withdrawal, the House Foreign Affairs Committee was chaired by Representative Gregory Meeks (D-New York). Under Chairman Meeks’ leadership, the House Foreign Affairs Committee did not launch an investigation into the withdrawal; the committee majority held one hearing on Afghanistan and conducted no transcribed interviews. In an effort to conduct oversight over the withdrawal in the 117th Congress, Ranking Member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Representative Michael McCaul (R-Texas), launched an investigation into the Department of State’s planning, decision-making, and execution of the Afghanistan withdrawal. Pursuant to that effort, the committee minority produced an interim report of its findings. [3]

Because only the committee majority wields subpoena authority necessary to compel information and testimony from relevant stakeholders, the committee minority was limited in its pursuit of oversight during the 117th Congress. Accordingly, the interim report reflected the committee minority’s limited capacity to pursue information from the Department of State.

In the 118th Congress — spanning from January 3, 2023 to January 3, 2025 — the Republican party secured the majority of the U.S. House of Representatives. In January 2023, Representative McCaul assumed chairmanship of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and launched an investigation into the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Chairman McCaul’s investigation is divided into three components: (1) public hearings, (2) transcribed interviews, and (3) document discovery. Under his leadership, the committee has sought documents and testimony from the U.S. Department of State, the U.S. Department of Defense, and the White House, in pursuit of an official account of the policy-making processes and execution of the Afghanistan withdrawal. The investigation aims to provide accountability to the American people and inform legislative efforts to help ensure another such a catastrophe never occurs.

The committee majority has held seven public hearings and roundtables on the withdrawal from Afghanistan, affording witnesses from the Department of State, Department of Defense, White House, and relevant stakeholders the opportunity to testify before Congress and the American people regarding the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. These public hearings were held pursuant to Chairman McCaul’s commitment to transparency throughout this investigation. Chairman McCaul afforded witnesses reasonable accommodations in order to secure their timely public appearance. The public hearings held on the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan were the following:

1. **March 8, 2023:** “During and After the Fall of Kabul: Examining the Administration’s Emergency Evacuation from Afghanistan”
 - a. **Addressing:** The operations, volunteer efforts, and experiences of the Afghanistan NEO.
 - b. **Featuring:** Francis Q. Hoang, Executive Chairman of Allied Airlift 21; Lieutenant Colonel (Ret.) David Scott Mann, founder of Task Force Pineapple; Sergeant Tyler Vargas-Andrews, U.S. Marine Corps, serving in the Afghanistan evacuation; Aidan Gunderson, Specialist, U.S Army, serving in the Afghanistan evacuation; Peter Lucier, Team America Relief; Camille Mackler, Executive Director of Immigrant ARC.

2. **July 27, 2023:** “A Failure to Plan: Examining the Biden Administration’s Preparation for the Afghanistan Withdrawal”
 - a. **Addressing:** The military operations and logistics planning throughout the Afghanistan withdrawal.
 - b. **Featuring:** Colonel (Ret.) Seth Krummrich, Chief of Staff of Special Operations Command Central during the Afghanistan withdrawal; Command Sergeant Major Jacob Smith, 4-31 Infantry, 2nd BCT of the 10th Mountain Division, U.S. Army, who as the senior enlisted leader for the Area Support Group – Afghanistan, was responsible for the life support functions of HKIA during the NEO.
3. **August 29, 2023:** “A Gold Star Families Roundtable: Examining the Abbey Gate Terrorist Attack”
 - a. **Addressing:** The Abbey Gate attack and the Gold Star families’ calls for accountability.
 - b. **Featuring:** The Gold Star families of the 13 fallen servicemembers, including Darin Hoover and Kelly Barnett, Steve Nikoui, Coral Briseno, Alicia and Herman Lopez, Cheryl Rex, Christy Shamblin, Paula Knauss Selph, Greg Page, Mark and Jaclyn Schmitz.
4. **November 14, 2023:** “Go-to-Zero: Joe Biden’s Withdrawal Order and the Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan”
 - a. **Addressing:** The impact of the U.S. military retrograde on the Afghan government and military.
 - b. **Featuring:** Lt. General (Ret.) Sami Sadat Chairman of the Afghanistan United Front and former Commanding General of the Afghan National Special Operations Corps; Bill Roggio the Senior Fellow and Editor of the Long War Journal at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies; Dr. Dipali Mukhopadhyay, Associate Professor at the University of Minnesota.
5. **January 31, 2024:** “Roundtable on Taliban Reprisals”
 - a. **Addressing:** The campaign of reprisals being conducted by the Taliban against Afghans who supported the U.S. mission in Afghanistan.
 - b. **Featuring:** Amy Marden, the Moral Compass Federation; Andy Sullivan, No One Left Behind; Thomas Kasza, 1208 Foundation; Justin Sapp, Badger Six; Michael Cizmar, Rafiq Friends of Afghanistan; Elizabeth Lynn, Operation Recovery; Joe Maida IV, the NATO Afghan Justice Sector Group; Sanjar Sohail, 8AM Media.

6. **February 15, 2024:** “Behind the Scenes: How the Biden Administration Failed to Enforce the Doha Agreement”
 - a. **Addressing:** The Biden-Harris administration’s interagency review of the Doha Agreement, and their assessments of compliance with its conditions.
 - b. **Featuring:** Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, the Former U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation at the U.S. Department of State.
7. **March 19, 2024:** “An Assessment of the Biden Administration’s Withdrawal from Afghanistan by America’s Generals”
 - a. **Addressing:** The assessments and recommendations of senior military leaders on the withdrawal from Afghanistan.
 - b. **Featuring:** General Mark A. Milley (Ret.), former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr. (Ret.), former Commander of United States Central Command.

On May 22, 2024, Chairman McCaul requested U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken appear for a public hearing in September on the committee’s report. The Chairman restated his request on August 12, 2024. Secretary Blinken asserted his intention to not appear on September 3rd, triggering the issuance of a subpoena by the committee that day, mandating his appearance for September 19th. Appropriate measures, including congressional contempt, shall be pursued should Secretary Blinken not appear.

The second component of the investigation consists of closed-door transcribed interviews from current and former officials at the Department of State, Department of Defense, and White House, involved in the policy and execution of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Although the committee exercises statutory authority for oversight over the Department of State, the department did not produce witnesses without threat of compulsory process. The White House similarly sought to limit the committee’s ability to interview government witnesses, purporting to exercise control over appearances from the Department of State and Defense Department, in addition to the White House.

Transcribed interviews led by the committee majority lasted approximately eight hours per witness, including alternating rounds of questioning from the committee majority and minority. The transcribed interviews were conducted by committee majority and minority staff and made available to committee majority and minority members.

Transcribed interviews were made available to agency counsel representing the federal government and, as applicable, private counsel. All transcripts of the interviews were released to the public and remain available on the committee's website. The committee interviewed the following witnesses:

1. **June 16, 2023:** James Dehart, *Consul General Vancouver*. During the Afghanistan withdrawal, State Department leadership tasked Mr. DeHart on August 17, 2021, to assist with the NEO as Ambassador Bass's deputy.
2. **July 20, 2023:** Jonathan Mennuti, *Director of the Office of Career Development and Assignments*. During the Afghanistan withdrawal, Mr. Mennuti served as Chief of Staff to Acting Undersecretary of Management of State Carol Perez.
3. **July 28, 2023:** Jayne Howell, *Consul General Pakistan*. During the Afghanistan withdrawal, Ms. Howell volunteered to assist with the NEO, and State Department leadership sent Ms. Howell to Kabul as the lead consular officer on the ground at HKIA on August 17, 2021.
4. **August 23, 2023:** Mark Evans, *Deputy Chief of Mission Sweden*. During the Afghanistan withdrawal, Mr. Evans served as the Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the South and Central Asia Bureau at the State Department. Mr. Evans was responsible for supporting U.S. Embassy Kabul's operations.
5. **August 31, 2023:** Dan Smith, *Ambassador (Ret.)*. Ambassador Smith led the State Department's after-action review of the Afghanistan withdrawal, upon his selection by Secretary Blinken.
6. **September 15, 2023:** Samuel Aronson, *U.S. Foreign Service Officer (Fmr.)*. During the Afghanistan withdrawal, Mr. Aronson served as a diplomat in the State Department's Foreign Service. He volunteered to assist with the State Department's NEO, arriving in Kabul on August 20, 2021, after which he assisted with consular operations and supported Consul General DeHart.
7. **October 12, 2023:** Salman Ahmed, *Director of Policy Planning Staff at the State Department*. During the Afghanistan withdrawal, Mr. Ahmed served as the Director of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff and was responsible for the State Department's strategic planning and coordination, in addition to the policy debate and development process. The Policy Planning Staff are the keepers of the Dissent Channel.

8. **October 24, 2023:** Ross Wilson, *Ambassador (Ret.)*. During the Afghanistan withdrawal, Ambassador Wilson served as the Chief of Mission to U.S. Embassy Kabul. Ambassador Wilson was the highest-ranking U.S. government official in Afghanistan in the absence of a Senate-confirmed ambassador to the country. Ambassador Wilson held overall responsibility for the security of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan and protecting all U.S. Government personnel on official duty (other than those personnel under the command of a U.S. area military commander) and their dependents.
9. **October 26, 2023:** Dean Thompson, *U.S. Ambassador to Nepal*. During the Afghanistan withdrawal, Ambassador Thompson served as the Acting Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Bureau and was responsible for overseeing State Department activities in Afghanistan and planning for how to maintain an Embassy presence in Afghanistan after the military withdrew.
10. **November 8, 2023:** Zalmay Khalilzad, *Ambassador (Ret.)*. During the Afghanistan withdrawal, Ambassador Khalilzad served as the Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation and was responsible for the 2020 Doha Agreement and negotiations with the Taliban throughout 2021.
11. **November 15, 2023:** Carol Perez, *Ambassador (Ret.)*. During the Afghanistan withdrawal, Ambassador Perez served as the Acting Under Secretary of State for Management, where she was responsible for helping maintain a safe platform for the ongoing diplomatic presence.
12. **November 29, 2023:** Brian McKeon, *Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources (Ret.)*. During the Afghanistan withdrawal, D-MR, Mr. McKeon was the third-highest ranking member at the State Department and was responsible for oversight and coordination of U.S. foreign assistance and overseas diplomatic operations. Secretary Blinken delegated the responsibility for the State Department's planning of Afghanistan withdrawal to D-MR McKeon.
13. **December 12, 2023:** Ned Price, *Deputy to the U.S. Representative to the United Nations*. During the Afghanistan withdrawal, Mr. Price was the State Department spokesperson, responsible for communicating the State Department's official positions on U.S. foreign affairs.
14. **December 14, 2023:** Suzy George, *Chief of Staff to Secretary of State Blinken*. During the Afghanistan withdrawal, Ms. George served as the chief of staff to Secretary of State Blinken, where she worked to structure the Secretary's office, to facilitate communications across the agency, and to coordinate with the interagency.

15. **December 19, 2023:** Derek Chollet, *Chief of Staff to the Secretary of Defense*. During the Afghanistan withdrawal, Mr. Chollet served as Counselor to Secretary of State Blinken. Counselor Chollet was delegated responsibility for the State Department equities in a continued counterterrorism operation in Afghanistan and shared responsibilities for the State Department's overall withdrawal planning with D-MR McKeon.
16. **January 22, 2024:** John Bass, *Acting Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs*. During the Afghanistan withdrawal, State Department leadership tasked Mr. Bass on August 17, 2021 to assist with the leading the State Department's NEO. Mr. Bass served previously as U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan from 2017 to 2020.
17. **April 15, 2024:** Austin Scott Miller, *U.S Army General (et.)*. General Miller was the final Commander of NATO's Resolute Support Mission and U.S. Forces – Afghanistan through July 2021. General Miller was the longest-serving U.S. commander of the war in Afghanistan.
18. **July 26, 2024:** Jen Psaki, *MSNBC Host and Contributor*. During the Afghanistan withdrawal, Ms. Psaki served as the White House Press Secretary and an advisor to the President, where she was responsible for speaking on behalf of the White House and president.

In addition to public hearings and transcribed interviews, the investigation was comprised of a third segment: document discovery. The committee majority pursued and analyzed over 20,000 pages of documents produced by the State Department. Through compulsory process, the committee majority obtained internal State Department memoranda, interview notes from the State Department's After Action Review (AAR), and a Dissent Channel Cable sent by U.S. Embassy Kabul staff in July of 2021, all of which were available for review by both majority and minority Representatives and staff. In order to secure these documents, the majority was forced to issue two subpoenas to Secretary of State Antony Blinken, threatening contempt on both occasions. Prior to the issuance of these subpoenas, the State Department's document productions consisted of duplicative documents, over-redactions, over-classification, and impertinent information.

Throughout the investigation, members of the public had the opportunity to submit their stories and information to the committee through the committee's website. On several occasions, committee majority staff further conducted informal interviews and phone calls with these individuals.

In addition to the committee majority’s primary investigative efforts, this report also draws from the Department of Defense’s After-Action Review of the Abbey Gate terrorist attack. The Department of Defense’s investigation, which included interviews with officers on the ground and military leaders, shed additional light on the topics covered by this investigation. After this committee’s hearing on March 8, 2023 — and as a result of pressure by Chairman McCaul — the Department of Defense reopened its Abbey Gate investigation, thereby interviewing missing witnesses and revealing critical information.

Throughout the investigation, the committee majority endeavored to pursue this information with investigative integrity and in good faith for the benefit of the American people. The synthesis of these investigative efforts — public hearings, transcribed interviews, and document review — served as the basis for the findings of this report. It is Chairman McCaul’s hope this report brings forth the necessary legislative and policy solutions to prevent another such catastrophe.

[1] See U.S. Const. art. I; *McGrain v. Daugherty*, 273 U.S. 135, 174 (1927) (holding that “the power of inquiry—with process to enforce it—is an essential and appropriate auxiliary to the legislative function”); *Eastland v. U.S. Servicemen’s Fund*, 421 U.S. 491, 504 (1975) (holding that “the power to investigate is inherent in the power to make laws”); *Barenblatt v. United States*, 360 U.S. 109, 111 (1959) (holding that “the scope of power of inquiry . . . is as penetrating and far-reaching as the potential power to enact and appropriate under the Constitution”).

[2] Clerk of the H.R., 118th Cong., Rules of the H.R. Rule X (Jan. 10, 2023),

https://cha.house.gov/_cache/files/5/3/5361f9f8-24bc-4fbc-ac97-3d79fd689602/1F09ADA16E45C9E7B67F147DCF176D95.118-rules-01102023.pdf.

[3] Congressman Michael T. McCaul, House Republican Interim Report, A “Strategic Failure”: Assessing the Administration’s Afghanistan Withdrawal, 117th Cong, House Foreign Affs. Comm. Republicans (Aug. 2022).

<https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/HFAC-Republican-Interim-Report-A-22Strategic-Failure22-Assessing-the-Administrations-Afghanistan-Withdrawal.pdf>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Over the course of three years, House Foreign Affairs Committee Republicans, led by Chairman McCaul, have conducted a thorough investigation into the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, pursuant to the outlined methodology. The investigation has revealed five primary conclusions:

1. The Biden-Harris administration was determined to withdraw from Afghanistan, with or without the Doha Agreement and no matter the cost. Accordingly, they ignored the conditions in the Doha Agreement, pleas of the Afghan government, and the objections by our NATO allies, deciding to unilaterally withdraw from the country.
2. The Biden-Harris administration prioritized the optics of the withdrawal over the security of U.S. personnel on the ground. For that reason, they failed to plan for all contingencies, including a noncombatant emergency evacuation (NEO) and refused to order a NEO until after the Taliban had already entered Kabul.
3. The Biden-Harris administration's failure to prepare for a NEO and order a timely NEO created an unsafe environment at HKIA, exposing U.S. Defense Department and State Department personnel to lethal threats and emotional harm. As a result, 13 U.S. servicemembers were murdered by a terrorist attack on August 26, 2021. It was the deadliest day for the U.S. military in Afghanistan since 2012.
4. In the aftermath of the withdrawal, U.S. national security was degraded as Afghanistan once again became a haven for terrorists, including al Qaeda and ISIS-K. America's credibility on the world stage was severely damaged after we abandoned Afghan allies to Taliban reprisal killings — the people of Afghanistan we had promised to protect. And the moral injury to America's veterans and those still serving remains a stain on this administration's legacy.
5. The Biden-Harris administration misled and, in some instances, directly lied to the American people at every stage of the withdrawal, from before the go-to-zero order until today. This coverup included mid-level administration officials all the way up to the Oval Office. And as this investigation reveals, the National Security Council and NSA Jake Sullivan were of the source of the majority of that misinformation campaign.

THE DECISION TO WITHDRAW

The Doha Agreement

On February 29, 2020, the U.S. and the Taliban signed “The Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan,” commonly known as the Doha Agreement. It was a conditions-based deal to withdraw U.S. troops in exchange for the Taliban meeting certain obligations, including:

- Cutting ties with al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations;
- Ceasing attacks on U.S. and coalition troops;
- Reducing violence against Afghan forces; and
- Starting negotiations with the Afghan government.

The agreement was negotiated by Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation (SRAR) Zalmay Khalilzad. Bowing to the demands of the Taliban, Ambassador Khalilzad excluded the Afghan government in these negotiations, undermining America’s ally and likely harming the Afghan government’s legitimacy. In addition, throughout the negotiations, Ambassador Khalilzad regularly excluded key military leaders from the decision-making process and turned a blind eye to concerns by American officials that the Taliban were not negotiating in good faith. It was unsurprising to many that, by late 2020, the Taliban were not meeting their obligations under the Doha Agreement. For that reason, President Trump decided to maintain 2,500 U.S. troops in the country until he left office on January 20, 2021.

The Interagency Review

When President Biden was sworn in, he selected National Security Advisor (NSA) Jake Sullivan to lead an interagency review of the United States’ policy towards Afghanistan, which included an assessment of the Doha Agreement. He also kept Ambassador Khalilzad in place, signaling his support of the decision to withdraw troops. But NSA Sullivan’s interagency review would be severely flawed in many respects:

1. **Input from key officials was severely limited.** Former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan John Bass — who would ultimately be sent to Afghanistan to lead the NEO after Kabul fell — was contacted only once by the NSC at the inception of the review and there were no “discussions about [the] way forward.” General Austin Scott Miller — the senior U.S. military official in Afghanistan at the time and longest serving U.S. commander in the country — was permitted to attend a single NSC deputies meeting. His assessments were otherwise never sought by NSA Sullivan. Both these officials would have had a tremendous amount of information and knowledge to share with the NSC for their review.

2. **The failure of the Taliban to uphold its commitments under the Doha Agreement were disregarded.** Warnings were issued from Ambassador Wilson, Embassy Kabul's regional security officer (RSO), Embassy diplomats, senior State Department officials in Washington, D.C., and senior U.S. military officials that the Taliban were actively violating the Doha Agreement. Yet, the decision to withdraw was made anyway. The Biden-Harris administration had clear and undisputable authority to pause the withdrawal pursuant to the Doha Agreement, but instead used it as pretext to justify their political aims. As State Department Spokesperson Ned Price admitted to the committee, the Taliban's adherence to the Doha Agreement was "immaterial" to the administration's decision to withdraw.

3. **Warnings and advice from both U.S. allies and a majority of President Biden's senior national security experts were ignored.** Despite President Biden's public assertions to the contrary, our investigation has revealed the Secretary of Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the Commander of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), the Secretary of State, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), and the Commander of NATO's Resolute Support Mission and United States Forces — Afghanistan all advised against withdrawing all U.S. troops from the country — both during and after the interagency review. The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) John Sopko went so far as to warn in March 2021 a complete withdrawal of U.S. troops would mean the Afghan government "probably would face collapse." At the same time, NATO allies strongly opposed the complete withdrawal of troops, urging the Biden-Harris administration to keep a contingency force in Afghanistan to maintain NATO's footprint. They were concerned the situation on the ground would otherwise unravel, with the British Chief of the Defense Staff warning, "withdrawal under these circumstances would be perceived as a strategic victory for the Taliban." In the end, the president would ignore their warnings and withdraw all troops — while publicly and falsely claiming his senior advisors and NATO were in favor of that decision.

The evidence proves President Biden's decision to withdraw all U.S. troops was not based on the security situation, the Doha Agreement, or the advice of his senior national security advisors or our allies. Rather, it was premised on his longstanding and unyielding opinion that the United States should no longer be in Afghanistan. As Colonel Seth Krummrich, the chief of staff for Special Operations Command (SOCOM), put it: "The president decided we're gonna leave, and he's not listening to anybody."

His decision allowed the Taliban to conquer Afghanistan, left the U.S. in a perilous counterterrorism position for years to come, and set the stage for the chaotic evacuation from Kabul in August of 2021 that resulted in the deaths of 13 U.S. servicemembers. To this day, the president has yet to acknowledge his role in this in tragedy.

CREATING AN UNSAFE ENVIRONMENT

Expanded Embassy

Once the president announced his decision to withdraw on April 14, 2021, the U.S. military urged a speedy retrograde because, as former CENTCOM Commander General McKenzie put it, “speed brought safety.” President Biden signed off on this speedy retrograde and, according to General McKenzie, the withdrawal was complete by July 12, 2021 — two months before President Biden’s arbitrary September 11th deadline.

During the Trump administration, the U.S. diplomatic footprint was reduced alongside the U.S. military footprint in accordance with recommendations from State Department and Defense Department officials. It was understood that, as U.S. troops left the country, the security situation would diminish and threaten the safety of the U.S. personnel and other American citizens who remained. Unfortunately, the committee’s investigation has revealed the same was not true during the Biden-Harris administration.

Instead, there was a dogmatic insistence to keep a large diplomatic footprint in Afghanistan across all levels of the Biden-Harris NSC and State Department. The committee’s investigation has uncovered that the size of the U.S. Embassy Kabul instead grew during the retrograde, even after the State Department implemented an ordered departure status. Testimony obtained by the committee points squarely at Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Ambassador Ross Wilson being behind this expansion. Ambassador Wilson vehemently opposed the military’s advice to scale back the embassy along with the troops, and fought against the ordered departure status, playing shell games with staff and forcing embassy personnel to return after R&R leave. Secretary Blinken advised the president that Embassy Kabul should remain open irrespective of a military withdrawal. In the summer of 2021, even under the ordered departure, U.S. Embassy Kabul was one of the largest U.S. embassies in the world. According to General McKenzie, the administration’s insistence at keeping the embassy open and fully operational was the “fatal flaw that created what happened in August.”

That obstinance continued throughout the retrograde, even with the deteriorating security situation. According to then-Deputy Assistant Secretary and Assistant Director for High Threat Programs Greg Sherman, State Department leaders created “pressure to get to yes” so the embassy remained open despite the Taliban’s rapid gains in 2021. The committee’s investigation uncovered State Department officials went so far as to water down or even completely rewrite reports from Diplomatic Security and the Defense Department that warned of threats. In one instance, a Diplomatic Security officer was told to change his report assessing “provincial capitals failing was imminent and that the ANDSF would fail.” When he refused, a different, “watered-down timeline was eventually pushed out.”

Loss of Capabilities to Track and Fight the Taliban

With the closure of U.S. bases, particularly Bagram Air Base, U.S. counterterrorism activities were greatly diminished. ISR capabilities were moved to our bases in the Gulf — an eight hour flight from Afghanistan. This made us all but blind to the situation on the ground. As General McKenzie put it, “it just doesn’t work.”

At the same time, U.S. and international contractors were forced to withdraw alongside U.S. troops — contractors that were pivotal to the Afghan military’s operations against the Taliban, particularly the Afghan Air Force. The Biden-Harris administration was warned of the damage this loss of contractors would cause, including a July CENTCOM 2021 report that concluded, without contractor support, the Afghan air forces would risk inoperability.

The severely diminished ISR capabilities coupled with the drawdown of U.S. troops and U.S. and international contractors in the middle of the Afghan fighting season, which ran annually from April through October and coincided with better weather, created fertile ground for Taliban conquests. From April 14, 2021, when the withdrawal was announced, until July 15, 2021, three days after CENTCOM announced 95% of the retrograde was complete, the Taliban tripled the number of districts under its control from 73 to 221. This was accomplished through both military gains as well as negotiated surrenders with local Afghan leaders, which were being overlooked by Biden-Harris administration officials.

This report proves senior Biden-Harris administration officials were willfully blind to warnings about the degrading security situation on the ground given to them by U.S. military personnel, U.S. intelligence assessments, American and international media reports, and State Department personnel in Kabul who sent a Dissent Channel cable in July 2021. Instead, they consistently prioritized the optics of maintaining a large U.S. embassy presence over the safety of embassy personnel.

THE FAILURE TO PLAN: “A SLOW-MOVING TRAIN WRECK”

The investigation upends the Biden-Harris administration’s continued claim that they “planned for all contingencies.” Instead, the State Department and White House’s tunnel vision that U.S. Embassy Kabul remain open resulted in a failure to properly prepare for worst case scenarios, including conducting an evacuation under Taliban rule. When that precise scenario manifested, the Biden-Harris administration was caught flat-footed and chaos ensued.

Little Effort to Assess the Potential Evacuation Population

While American citizens are not required to report their travel to foreign countries, the investigation uncovered little to no effort was made to determine the number of American citizens in Afghanistan prior to the NEO. At the same time, the Biden-Harris administration took very few steps to increase the processing of Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) for those Afghans who assisted the U.S. government. Publicly, the administration vowed to get Americans and Afghan allies out of the country. Privately, however, they knew it was an all but impossible task with the U.S. withdrawing all their troops. As Russ Travers, the deputy homeland security advisor at the NSC, would later admit, “There was no way we were getting all those people out...From my perspective it was a slow-moving train wreck. We were going to fail; the question was how badly we were going to fail.” As a result, when the last U.S. military aircraft departed Kabul on August 30, 2021, approximately 1,000 Americans were left behind and over 90% of SIV-eligible Afghans were still in the country.

NEO Planning Hindered by Optics

The investigation has revealed senior State Department and NSC officials equated a NEO with failure. This explains, in part, the decision to keep Embassy Kabul open no matter the cost and their refusal to plan for a NEO. Indeed, testimony obtained by the committee reveals the administration failed to even contemplate a plan for a NEO with the Taliban in control of the country. This failure is inexcusable in light of warnings from Embassy Kabul personnel and the Defense Department that a Taliban takeover was imminent following the military withdrawal. Following President Biden’s go-to-zero order, only two interagency rehearsal of concept (ROC) drills were conducted, and the embassy did not fully engage in NEO planning until August 6th — a little more than a week prior to the fall of Kabul. As the Taliban surrounded Kabul on August 14th, notes from an NSC meeting that day reveal the U.S. government still had not determined who would be eligible for evacuation, nor had they identified third countries to serve as transit points for an evacuation.

In viewing a NEO as failure, Ambassador Wilson ignored triggers set by the Defense Department and refused to call the NEO until August 15th — as the Taliban were marching into Kabul and three days after the U.S. embassy began transferring staff to HKIA. According to General Milley, the “fundamental mistake” that resulted in the chaotic emergency evacuation was that the NEO “was too slow and too late.” Acting Under Secretary for Management Carol Perez, who was charged with ensuring the U.S. could maintain an embassy in Afghanistan after the military left, summed up the situation succinctly when she testified to the committee, “We were still in planning when [Kabul] fell.”

Again, evidence obtained by the committee points to Ambassador Wilson as a key figure in the unwillingness to properly plan for a NEO. In fact, one official claimed embassy personnel resorted to having “subversive NEO meetings” to avoid his retribution. Even with three years of hindsight, Ambassador Wilson testified to the committee he remains “comfortable” with his decision to have waited until August 15th to formally request a NEO. Indeed, he testified, “I regret that we don’t have any embassy now.” Further, as with the interagency review, the committee was pointed to the NSC and NSA Sullivan as taking the lead for the Biden-Harris administration’s withdrawal planning and strategy — and owning many of the failures. According to D-MR McKeon, the decision whether to keep the embassy open or to close it rested with the NSC. And White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki testified to the committee her press statements on the Afghanistan withdrawal and NEO — including those proven untrue by the committee — came directly from the NSC and NSA Sullivan.

CHAOS AND DEATH

The Failure to Plan Leads to Chaos

The failure to plan for all contingencies and order a NEO only after the Taliban seized Kabul directly resulted in chaos reigning at Embassy Kabul and HKIA. Drove of classified documents and systems were left behind, and American and Afghan passports were unnecessarily burned as pandemonium enveloped the embassy compound. One Embassy employee concluded, “We know that some of [the classified documents] are being used by the Taliban. Another Embassy employee explained there was no embassy roster available when it came time to evacuate. As a result, the employee went room to room to clear the embassy compound. Indeed, on the day of the evacuation, some embassy personnel were not even aware the Taliban had marched into Kabul.

As consequence of the rapid military retrograde — rendering U.S. troop presence to less than 1,000 — and the failure to plan for a NEO, HKIA was overrun, and the airfield was forced to shut down for 48 hours.

Meanwhile the Taliban marched through the streets of Kabul exacerbating the panic amongst fleeing civilians. Rather than stationing troops in Afghanistan in advance of the NEO, President Biden ordered a troop surge to Afghanistan after Kabul was toppled.

Once the United States was able to surge enough troops into the country and retake the airport from panicked civilians, the airlift finally began on August 17th. Because the State Department and NSC never defined the parameters of eligible evacuation populations, Americans and Afghans on the ground seeking to escape received inconsistent messaging on who could leave and when. In fact, consular officers and servicemembers on the ground fell prey to the very same issue, unclear who would be allowed into the airport. In the end, the heartbreaking task of determining who could or could not get inside the gates of the airport were often left to rank-and-file servicemembers and foreign service officers. This situation was greatly exacerbated by the Taliban checkpoints around the airport, where Afghan allies and American citizens were often detained, refused entry, or in some cases physically assaulted.

At the height of the NEO, this investigation uncovered there were at most only 35 consular officers — many of whom were volunteers — at HKIA to process the thousands of people coming into the airport each day. And while these individuals acted in service of their country, they were neither trained nor prepared for the physical and emotional toll of the ill-prepared and chaotic NEO. Consular officers were consistently given changing guidance and had limited time to process people. According to Ambassador Bass' deputy during the NEO, Consul General DeHart, because of the changing guidance, consular officers may have turned away someone under previous guidance who would have been later admitted. The changing guidance also contributed to an environment where rushed, often flawed vetting took place. In one example, a consular officer at HKIA testified they “didn't have access to systems or databases” crucial to determining the eligibility of evacuees.

Additional issues cropped up at every step of the way during the evacuation because of the Biden-Harris administration's failure to plan for a NEO, including, but not limited to:

- There were insufficient military planes to conduct an airlift of this size, and the U.S. Department of Transportation waited until August 20th — five days after the country fell — to allow foreign civil aircrafts to conduct their own flights.
- Throughout the NEO, logistics operations responsible for the provision of food, medical support, clean water, vehicles, and other critical supplies did not have more than a one-day supply on hand. U.S. government personnel were at great risk of running out of food and water.

- “Lily pads” for evacuees were not secured before the NEO began. It was not until August 19th that all three primary lily pads in Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait were operable. This delay resulted in multiple operational pauses of the evacuation, limiting the number of Americans and Afghan allies able to escape.

To compensate for the Biden-Harris administration’s failure to plan for the inevitable NEO, volunteer organizations across the country mobilized to assist Americans, green card holders, and Afghan allies escape the Taliban. These groups were made up of veterans, active duty servicemembers, journalists, former government officials, congressional staffers, and in some instances, average Americans with no ties to Afghanistan who wanted to do their part. They worked for free at great expense to themselves — emotionally and financially — to track down evacuees across the country, get them through the Taliban checkpoints in Kabul, and finally on a plane to safety.

Abbey Gate Attack

The failure to prepare for a NEO had ramifications not only for Americans and allies in Afghanistan, but U.S. personnel on the ground forced to evacuate desperate civilians in a hostile environment. Those concerns were sidelined by the Biden-Harris administration in favor of optics. Rather than concede their negligence, U.S. servicemembers and foreign service officers were directed to prioritize evacuating as many people as possible, no matter the threat posed to their lives.

Threat stream warnings regarding an attack at HKIA were consistent but vague. As a result, personnel on the ground were aware an attack was likely but could not identify a potential attacker with certainty given the breadth and ambiguity of those alerts. Abbey Gate, in particular, was exposed to multiple threats because it served as a main inroad into HKIA. On August 25th, Major General Chris Donahue selected Abbey Gate as being at highest risk of an attack in an assessment shared with General McKenzie. Despite that knowledge, little was done to reinforce protections around the gate. And ultimately, a decision was made by Brigadier General Farrell Sullivan to keep Abbey Gate open, primarily because British forces were still using the gate to evacuate individuals from Baron Hotel into HKIA. At that point, State Department officials on the ground pulled back its consular officers leaving only the U.S. Marines around when the bomb went off at 5:36:52 PM Kabul time on August 26th.

One hundred and eighty-five people were killed in the attack, including 13 U.S. servicemembers. Their names are:

Marine Lance Corporal David L. Espinoza
Marine Sergeant Nicole L. Gee
Marine Staff Sergeant Darin Taylor Hoover
Army Staff Sergeant Ryan Christian Knauss
Marine Corporal Hunter Lopez
Marine Lance Corporal Rylee J. McCollum
Marine Lance Corporal Dylan R. Merola
Marine Lance Corporal Kareem M. Nikoui
Marine Corporal Daegan W. Page
Marine Sergeant Johanny Rosario Pichardo
Marine Corporal Humberto A. Sanchez
Marine Lance Corporal Jared M. Schmitz
Navy Corpsman Maxton W. Sowiak

Countless people were wounded including 45 U.S. servicemembers. It was the deadliest day in Afghanistan for the U.S. military since 2012.

As this report outlines, the attack was a result of a myriad of factors, including but not limited to:

- **The failure to close Abbey Gate in spite of consistent threat warnings about an imminent attack.** The intention behind this decision was magnanimous — getting innocent civilians to safety. But as a result, U.S. servicemembers were exposed to significant risk.
- **The reliance on the Taliban for security.** Relying on a long-time, brutal enemy to provide security around the airport was fraught with problems from the very beginning. The Taliban long harbored violent intentions toward Americans and have expressed no regard for innocent human life. In addition, their security screening was inconsistent and haphazard. The Taliban also did not consistently assist the U.S. military with confronting known or suspected ISIS-K cells operating in the city, including the cell that would eventually carry out the attack.
- **The refusal of the U.S. military to conduct any direct attacks against ISIS-K inside Afghanistan for fear of upsetting the Taliban.** Intelligence pointed to the ISIS-K cell behind the attack, but the U.S. military did not have the manpower and the Biden-Harris administration did not have the political will to conduct operations in and outside Kabul to neutralize it. Instead, the Biden-Harris administration relied on terrorists to capture other terrorists.

In the lead up to the attack, some Marines on the ground believed they spotted the suspected suicide bomber. Upon identification, they attempted to alert their commanders, who shared the identification up their chain of command. They did not hear back. For years, their stories of guilt and sacrifice went unheeded by the initial Defense Department investigations. It was not until April 2023 that the Defense Department reopened their investigation into the Abbey Gate attack. With pressure from Congress, CENTCOM released the name and photo of the Abbey Gate bomber: Abdul Rahman al-Logari, an ISIS-K fighter who was freed by the Taliban when they took over Bagram Air Base. Their report claims al-Logari was not the person the Marines identified, but many who were on the ground that day still believe they were one in the same. The full report remains classified.

Debate over whether the Abbey Gate attack was a lone suicide bomber or a complex attack, including gunfire after the bomb, has yet to be resolved. After initially representing it as a complex attack, CENTCOM then claimed its investigation revealed there was little to no gunfire after the bomb exploded, and any instances of gunfire were merely warning shots. This investigation, however, collected testimony from witnesses who recounted hearing gunfire following the bomb and spoke to doctors treating bullet wounds. An exclusive video released by CNN earlier this year shows 11 instances of gunfire taking place over four minutes raising further questions about the attack. There are two contributing factors as to why questions remain regarding this issue:

1. After consistent threat streams of an imminent attack and Abbey Gate as the likely target, there was no video footage of Abbey Gate leading up to and at the time of the attack.
2. In the aftermath of the Abbey Gate attack, the Defense Department demilitarized — a.k.a. destroyed — physical hard drives and servers. Some hard drives were brought to a shredder at HKIA. Other hard drives, servers, and information systems were punched through or even smashed.

Both are inexcusable errors by the Defense Department. Further investigation is necessary to determine why and how these failures transpired. As evidenced by this investigation, record collection and preservation are key to ensuring another such catastrophe does not occur again and preventing the loss of American life.

In response to the Abbey Gate attack, the Biden-Harris administration launched two retaliatory air strikes. The first killed two ISIS-K terrorists, including Kabir Aidi who CENTCOM identified as one of the planners behind the Abbey Gate attack. In a tragic turn of events, the second airstrike killed an innocent aid worker employed by a U.S. NGO, as well as nine members of his family.

After the Abbey Gate attack, President Biden and Vice President Harris showed disregard and disrespect toward the Gold Star families of the 13 U.S. servicemembers killed at Abbey Gate, and the servicemembers injured in the attack. Almost immediately after the dignified transfer at Dover Air Base for 11 of the 13 servicemembers, media outlets reported President Biden “checked his watch multiple times” during the event. The White House attempted to deny the allegation, until photos surfaced proving he did. Almost three years later, Ms. Psaki continued to perpetuate the lie that President Biden did not check his watch in her memoir. After media reports debunked her falsehood, she was forced to retract it.

After 20 years of American blood and treasure were poured into the country, the last U.S. military plane departed Afghanistan on August 30, 2021 at 11:59 pm Kabul time.

AFGHANISTAN OF TODAY

The Taliban once again control Afghanistan, and they run the country with brutality and violence. Their regime is made up of terrorists who are sanctioned by the United Nations, as well as members of the Haqqani Network, a U.S. Designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). There are consistent reports of revenge killings of America’s Afghan allies — the ones who were abandoned by the Biden-Harris administration. A 2023 United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan report described of “hundreds of human rights violations,” including the murder of over 200 former government officials and ANDSF members.

Women in Afghanistan today live bleak, oppressive lives. They are not allowed to teach, work, study, travel, or even leave the house without a male escort. They are not allowed to receive education beyond sixth grade. Most recently, they have been banned from even showing their bare faces in public. There are also reports that child marriages are skyrocketing, with more than 200 girls in one province who have been sold into marriage or are awaiting buyers. The Taliban are also learning from America’s other adversaries, including Russia, that American hostages are currency. Currently, the Taliban holds at least seven American citizens. They recently released Mark Frerichs, who had been held by the Haqqani Network since January 2020. But the cost was high: The Taliban demanded the U.S. release a drug warlord who used his ill-gotten gains to fund the Taliban’s war against the United States.

The Fallout

The fallout from the ill-advised withdrawal and ill-prepared NEO created a tidal wave of problems in Afghanistan, the United States, and around the world.

Seven billion dollars of U.S. weapons and up to \$57 million in U.S. currency were left behind in Afghanistan for the Taliban to use and profit off of by selling to other terrorist regimes. Despite their claims of amnesty toward former Afghan government officials, the Taliban continue to carry out systematic and brutal reprisal killings. In fact, a NATO report written by the Defence Education Enhancement Programme found the Taliban were using U.S. military biometric devices and databases to hunt down America's Afghan allies.

The catastrophic withdrawal at the hands of the Biden-Harris administration has created a crisis within the U.S. military and among American veterans. Recruitment and retention within the military are down, with experts pointing to the withdrawal as a significant factor. Servicemembers and veterans are also facing devastating moral injury. Each day, they are forced to reckon with the reality that terrorists they fought against for two decades — who their brothers and sisters died to defeat — are once again in power. They are also forced to stand by while their Afghan allies are trapped in Afghanistan, at the mercy of the Taliban. Scott Mann, the founder of Task Force Pineapple and a Green Beret testified to the committee, "Relinquishing Afghanistan...has become a moral injury on our veterans and military families. A moral injury is an injury to the soul. A violation of what we know to be right by leaders whom we trusted."

Once again, Afghanistan has become a safe haven for terrorists, giving governing space to terrorist groups, including al Qaeda, ISIS-K, and the Taliban's own Haqqani Network. In a glaring example of the threat this poses to the United States, the leader of al Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, was living openly and freely in downtown Kabul in the summer of 2022. At the time, according to then-Defense Department Spokesperson Rear Admiral John Kirby, al-Zawahiri was "actively encouraging his followers to plot and plan attacks against American interest in the American homeland." He was finally killed in an airstrike in July 2022, but al Qaeda continues to grow in the country. Evidence reveals al Qaeda has set up eight new training camps Afghanistan, propped up madrasas throughout the country, and established a new base to stockpile weapons.

Fears by the military regarding the United States' limited over-the-horizon capabilities post-withdrawal have also come to fruition. The Biden-Harris administration has not conducted a single strike against ISIS-K since 2021. Meanwhile, according to a March 2024 Washington Institute study, "In the past year, [ISIS-K] has planned twenty-one external plots or attacks in nine countries, compared to eight plots or attacks in the previous year and just three between 2018 and March 2022."

The Biden-Harris administration's willful blindness has left the United States once again vulnerable to attacks emanating from Afghanistan.

Indeed, on June 11, 2024, the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force arrested eight individuals with ties to ISIS-K who entered the U.S. illegally through the southern border. That same month, the Department of Homeland Security identified over 400 persons of interest from Central Asia who had illegally crossed the U.S. southern border with the help of an ISIS-related smuggling network. Our adversaries, like Russia, China, and Iran, saw weakness during the chaotic and deadly evacuation, emboldening them. Less than one year later, Russia launched a full invasion of Ukraine. Today, Iran's proxies are conducting a brutal war against our ally Israel, attacking our servicemembers in the region, and threatening global trade in the Red Sea. And China continues to ratchet up aggression in the Indo Pacific, including against Taiwan and the Philippines.

When Kabul fell, many drew comparisons to Saigon as, once again, U.S. helicopters were ferrying Americans off a U.S. embassy, abandoning longtime allies. But this investigation reveals what happened in Afghanistan was far worse — with long-term consequences that are far more dangerous to U.S. national security. It is crucial to fully expose truth so we can learn from the Biden-Harris administration's mistakes. That is the only way to ensure history does not repeat itself.



THE STRATEGIC FAILURE

THE STRATEGIC FAILURE

A Historical Outlook: President Biden's Afghanistan Policy

President Joe Biden's historical record of foreign policy positions contextualizes his decision to withdraw the United States from Afghanistan in 2021. During his decades-long tenure as a Delaware U.S. senator, eight years as vice president of the United States, and nearly four years as president, Mr. Biden has demonstrated distrust of America's military experts and advisors and has prioritized politics and his personal legacy over America's national security interests.

A Lesson Unlearned: A Pattern of Abandoning America's Allies

President Biden's urgency to leave Afghanistan harkens back to his stance at the end of the Vietnam War, while serving as a U.S. senator from Delaware. The parallels between then-Senator Biden's willingness to abandon America's South Vietnamese allies and, more recently, his willingness to abandon America's Afghan allies as president, demonstrate a pattern of callous foreign policy positions and readiness to abandon strategic partners.

The United States' military's campaign in Vietnam was winding down when Mr. Biden was sworn in as Delaware's U.S. senator. On the eve of a fact-finding trip to South Vietnam, freshman Senator Joe Biden made evident no matter what he saw on the ground, he wanted to end all U.S. military aid, stating, "I can't imagine what could change my mind, unless it were proof of communist reprisals against South Vietnamese after a military collapse. ... I question that I would even then." [1] Two weeks prior to Saigon's collapse, Senator Biden advised President Gerald Ford to leave "as quickly as possible," expressing a willingness to leave to chance the fate of U.S. citizens, military, and locals who supported the U.S.-backed South Vietnamese government. [2]

Following the withdrawal, Senator Biden was resistant to American involvement in Vietnam, including assistance to South Vietnamese refugees of the war. As the Republic of Vietnam collapsed in the spring of 1975, he opposed the approval of funds and efforts by President Ford's administration to evacuate thousands of South Vietnamese families out of the country. Senator Biden went on to say, "I am not sure I can vote for any amount to put American troops in for one to six months to get the Vietnamese out." [3]

He later said, “I will vote for any amount for getting the Americans out. I don’t want it mixed with getting the Vietnamese out.” [4] According to Senator Biden, “The United States has no obligation to evacuate one, or 100,001, South Vietnamese.” [5]

In keeping with his opposition to assist the South Vietnamese, on April 25, 1975, Senator Biden voted to oppose the Vietnam Contingency Act of 1975, which sought to send emergency relief funds to South Vietnam, including to facilitate the evacuation. The act passed the Senate despite his objections. [6] Five days later, Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese, and hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese who could not escape were eventually sent to reeducation camps to be abused, tortured, or killed. [7]

Nearly five decades later, President Biden unfortunately failed to learn from Vietnam. At the brink of Afghanistan’s collapse, when asked by a reporter if he foresaw any parallels between Vietnam and Afghanistan, President Biden would respond similarly about his moral responsibility for the Afghan people, in particular, women’s rights, stating, “None whatsoever. Zero.” [8] And his decision to comprehensively withdraw U.S. forces from Afghanistan would, once again, abandon America’s allies — in this instance, to a sweeping reprisal campaign of summary executions, disappearances, and other abuses by the Taliban. [9]

Support for Nation-Building as a U.S. Senator

On September 14, 2001, Senator Biden voted to authorize the U.S. military invasion of Afghanistan to punish al Qaeda and their Taliban sponsors and protectors. [10] Shortly thereafter, in late October 2001, Senator Biden gave a speech stressing the urgency for support of the Afghanistan war, stating, “Our immediate goal is to cut off the head of al Qaeda, break up the network, leave them no safe haven. That means, to state the obvious, the removal of Osama bin Laden, Mullah Omar, and the Taliban leadership.” [11] He argued for establishing “a relatively stable regime in Afghanistan,” a “politically and socially stable” nation. [12]

Senator Biden reiterated his support for Afghanistan’s independence from the Taliban in February 2002 stating, “History is going to judge us very harshly, I believe, if we allow the hope of a liberated Afghanistan to evaporate because we are fearful of the term ‘nation-building’ or we do not steer the course.” [13]

He went on to strongly advocate for nation-building in Afghanistan, saying, “President Bush’s aversion even to rudimentary elements of establishing order and stability because it might put him on the road to nation-building, I think have to be outweighed by our national security need to prevent Afghanistan from backsliding into a lawless safe haven for anti-American terrorists.” [14]

In the years that followed, Senator Biden continued to support nation-building as crucial to the reconstruction and stabilization of Afghanistan — deploying it as a political attack against former President George W. Bush. In February 2004, at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing, Senator Biden criticized President Bush’s Afghanistan policy as not being sufficiently supportive of the country, “In some parts of this administration, ‘nation-building’ is a dirty phrase. But the alternative to nation-building is chaos — a chaos that churns out bloodthirsty warlords, drug-traffickers and terrorists. We’ve seen it happen in Afghanistan before — and we’re watching it happen in Afghanistan today.” [15] Months later, in October 2004, Senator Biden framed the reconstruction of Afghanistan as a missed opportunity, urging the administration to “get involved in genuine, quote, ‘nation-building.’” [16]

In 2007, while serving as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Biden continued to criticize President Bush for not delivering sufficient aid toward nation-building in Afghanistan. [17] When speaking to the United States’ Iraq and Afghanistan policy, he expressed alarm at the administration’s focus on Iraq, which he believed detracted from the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan. “If we should be surging forces anywhere, it’s in Afghanistan, not Iraq. NATO troops are necessary, but not sufficient. We’ve also got to train the Afghan police and army — which means, for starters, paying them decent salaries,” Senator Biden said. [18] He would continue to complain that President Bush was not taking Afghanistan reconstruction seriously enough through 2008. [19]

During his presidential campaign in 2008, Senator Biden ran on his support for increasing Afghanistan reconstruction aid. [20] He also continued to advocate for a troop surge in Afghanistan out of concern “the Taliban appear[ed] to be making a serious comeback.” [21] Senator Biden seemed to recognize a secure and independent Afghanistan would make America safer and the region more stable when he could use it to contrast what President Bush was doing. However, his recognition of Afghanistan’s strategic importance deteriorated, however, when he lost the presidential nomination and assumed his role as vice president of the United States to then-President Barack Obama.

In January of 2009, immediately prior to being sworn in as vice president, Mr. Biden took a trip to Kabul, where a dinner with then-President Hamid Karzai reportedly ended abruptly with tensions running high between the two. [22] Mr. Biden came back to Washington, D.C., with diminished confidence regarding the United States' involvement in Afghanistan. According to President Obama in 2020, "What he saw and heard on the trip convinced him that we needed to rethink our entire approach" and that Afghanistan was a "dangerous quagmire." [23] Mr. Biden's tenure as vice president would see him grow increasingly frustrated with U.S. policy in Afghanistan and begin advocating for the United States to extricate itself from the country.

Commitment Toward a U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan as Vice President

Over 100 American servicemembers had died in Afghanistan in 2008, a greater number in a single year than in any prior year. [24] Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time, called the situation in Afghanistan at the beginning of Mr. Obama's presidency "precarious and urgent." [25] Upon assuming office in January 2009, President Obama ordered a comprehensive review of the United States' Afghanistan policy. [26] That review concluded in the fall of 2009, splitting the administration between those who favored and those who opposed a surge in troops. [27] On one side, senior military leadership — including U.S. Army General Stanley McChrystal, commander of coalition forces in Afghanistan at the time — favored a surge of American troops in pursuit of a comprehensive counterinsurgency campaign against the Taliban and the terrorist threat in Afghanistan. [28] On the other side, then-Vice President Biden viewed Afghanistan as a lost cause and opposed a troop surge — doubting the militaries' counterinsurgency plan and advocating to shift focus to Pakistan. [29] Ahead of a meeting with military leaders during this review, Vice President Biden reportedly urged President Obama to "stand up to these guys, because if you don't, they're going to treat you like you're their puppy." [30]

By November 2009, Vice President Biden became aware that President Obama was inclined to support the military's position. He expressed his frustration, insisting the president "only make this decision if he was sure of it." [31] Despite additional attempts by Vice President Biden to dissuade President Obama, the president announced his plan to call for an additional thirty thousand U.S. troops and ten thousand NATO allied forces to support a counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operation. [32]

Undaunted, Vice President Biden persisted in his attempts to convince the commander in chief to be more wary of his military. “Listen to me, boss. Maybe I’ve been around this town for too long, but one thing I know is when these generals are trying to box in a new president,” Vice President Biden said. [33] He added, “Don’t let them jam you.” [34] Vice President Biden reportedly contended in private that President Obama had been overpowered by the U.S. military and by those to whom he referred as the “five blocks of granite”: then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, Admiral Michael Mullen, General David Petraeus, and General Stanley McChrystal. [35] Defense Secretary Gates would later write Vice President Biden was “relentless ... in pushing his view and in attacking the integrity of the senior military leadership.” [36] According to Gates, Vice President Biden left a June 2009 meeting on Afghanistan “discouraged less about the skepticism regarding more troops than about the total focus on the politics. Biden was especially emphatic about the reaction of the Democratic base.” [37]

In 2010, Vice President Biden began advocating for the Obama administration to pursue a full military withdrawal from Afghanistan. According to then-U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke, Vice President Biden rejected the importance of protecting women’s rights in Afghanistan, insisting “that’s not what [U.S. soldiers are] there for.” [38] Vice President Biden was instead focused on Afghanistan being a “debacle politically” that would harm their positioning in the 2012 election. [39] When Holbrooke raised America’s “obligation to the people who had trusted us,” Vice President Biden responded, “Nixon and Kissinger got away with it,” referencing the abandonment of America’s Vietnamese allies at the end of the Vietnam War. [40] In public interviews in December 2011, Vice President Biden would go on to say, “The Taliban, per se, is not our enemy.” [41]

According to then-U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke, former Vice President Biden rejected the importance of protecting women’s rights in Afghanistan, insisting “[t]hat’s not what [U.S. soldiers are] there for.” Former Vice President Biden was instead focused on Afghanistan being a “debacle politically” that would harm their positioning in the 2012 election. When Holbrooke raised America’s “obligation to the people who had trusted us,” former Vice President Biden responded, “Nixon and Kissinger got away with it,” referencing the abandonment of America’s Vietnamese allies at the end of the Vietnam War.

Fast forwarding to present day, Afghanistan played a prominent role in Special Counsel Robert Hur's 2024 report on President Biden's unauthorized removal, retention, and disclosure of classified documents. According to the report, President Biden "long s[aw] himself as a historic figure" and "believed history would prove him right" in his opposition to the troop surge. [42] He retained "for posterity's sake" a 2009 memorandum he wrote for President Obama as vice president, reflecting his uncompromising commitment toward a full military withdrawal from Afghanistan. [43] President Biden appears to have believed his historic position on Afghanistan would ensure his legacy.

"The Taliban, per se, is not our enemy."

— Then-Vice President Joe Biden, December 2011

The Trump Administration and the Doha Agreement

The South Asia Strategy

On November 8, 2016, Donald J. Trump was elected as the 45th president of the United States. During his campaign, Mr. Trump initially expressed a desire to withdraw all troops from Afghanistan, pointing to corruption and skepticism of overseas military intervention. [44] Nevertheless, after having witnessed the rise of the Islamic State following the United States' withdrawal from Iraq under the prior administration, then-President Trump indicated he was leaning in favor of leaving U.S. troops in Afghanistan. [45] He would go on to publicly state there was a strategic significance of maintaining U.S. troops in Afghanistan, in part to serve as a check on nuclear-armed Pakistan. [46]

At the start of the Trump administration, the United States had roughly 11,000 troops in Afghanistan, representing a significant reduction from the 100,000 present in the country at its peak under the prior administration. [47] Upon assuming office in January 2017, President Trump directed then-Secretary of Defense James Mattis and his national security team to conduct "a comprehensive review of all strategic options in Afghanistan and South Asia." [48]

In August 2017, six months into his presidency, President Trump announced the results of the review, rolling out his administration's Afghanistan and South Asia strategy. [49] That strategy would shift decisions regarding Afghanistan "from a time-based approach to one based on conditions." [50]

“Conditions on the ground — not arbitrary timetables — will guide our strategy from now on. America’s enemies must never know our plans or believe they can wait us out. I will not say when we are going to attack, but attack we will,” he said. [51] The new strategy would be guided by three fundamental conclusions: (1) a need for “an honorable and enduring outcome worthy of the tremendous sacrifices that have been made”; (2) “predictable and unacceptable” consequences of a rapid withdrawal; and (3) immense security threats faced in Afghanistan and the broader region. [52] Ultimately, the objective was to shift from nation-building and, instead, “enable Afghanistan to become a more stable state — one capable of protecting its people with limited outside support — as well as to lay the foundation for bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table, and, ultimately, to end the conflict.” [53] The Trump administration’s National Security Strategy, released in December of 2017, reiterated the U.S.’ commitment to empower the Afghan government and its military to conduct combat operations against the Taliban, and the shift of the U.S. military to a supporting role. [54]

Negotiating with the Taliban

In September 2017, President Trump selected former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad to serve as the Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation (SRAR). Upon his selection, then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced his appointment, stating, “Ambassador Khalilzad is going to join the State Department team to assist us in the reconciliation effort, so he will come on and be the State Department’s lead person for that purpose.” [55] He stated further the ambassador would be “full-time focused on developing the opportunities to get the Afghans and the Taliban to come to a reconciliation.” [56] In his testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Ambassador Khalilzad explained as SRAR he was tasked to pursue a peace agreement with the Taliban, centered on three priorities:

- 1. Allow for a safe and orderly U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan; [57]**
- 2. Ensure Afghanistan would not revert to a safe haven for terrorism; [58] and**
- 3. Include intra-Afghan negotiations, namely, negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government. [59]**

Over the course of the next two years, Ambassador Khalilzad engaged with the Taliban in Doha, Qatar, negotiating an agreement that sought to bring an end to the conflict in Afghanistan. [60] Negotiations, however, were limited to the United States and the Taliban, and excluded the Afghan government. [61] According to Ambassador Khalilzad, the Taliban viewed the Afghan government as illegitimate and refused to meet with Afghan officials until a deal was executed between the U.S. and the Taliban. [62] Ambassador Khalilzad stated he traveled between Doha, Qatar, to Kabul, Afghanistan, to seek input from and keep apprised Afghan government officials. [63]

By acquiescing to the Taliban's demand to exclude the Afghan government from negotiations, Ambassador Khalilzad created significant consternation with President Ghani's administration. President Ghani's National Security Advisor Hamdullah Mohib accused Ambassador Khalilzad of pursuing his own ambitions with the negotiations. [64] Mr. Mohib added, "The perception in Afghanistan and people in government think that perhaps, perhaps all this talk is to create a caretaker government of which [Ambassador Khalilzad] will then become the viceroy." [65]

On February 29, 2020, after nine rounds of discussions, American and Taliban negotiators signed 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" — more commonly known as the Doha Agreement. [66] The Doha Agreement reflected a series of conditions that, if fully satisfied, would result in the complete withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces from Afghanistan. [67] Alternatively, if the Taliban failed to fulfill any commitment in the agreement, U.S. forces were not obligated to leave Afghanistan.

The Doha Agreement was comprised of four parts: (1) a reduction in violence by the Taliban, (2) withdrawal of all NATO forces from Afghanistan, (3) intra-Afghan negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government, and (4) counterterrorism assurances by the Taliban. Subject to the satisfaction of those four parts, the United States committed to withdrawing by May 1, 2021. [68]

As a confidence building measure, the United States committed to work toward the release of Taliban prisoners and to review sanctions against Taliban members, subject to the commencement of intra-Afghan negotiations. [69] Namely, the Doha Agreement contemplated the United States working to secure the "expeditious" release of up to 5,000 Taliban prisoners in return for the Taliban releasing up to 1,000. [70] The Doha Agreement also obligated the United States to reduce troop levels from 13,000 to 8,600 in the first 135 days after its signing. [71]

The Taliban, in return, committed to a series of obligations. The Doha Agreement conditioned the United States' withdrawal on "the commitment and action on the obligations of the" Taliban to cut ties with al Qaeda and other terrorist groups, and to stop those groups from using Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies. [72] It also required the Taliban to reduce violence against Afghan forces and start negotiations with the Afghan government by March 10, 2020, preceding the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces. [73] According to a senior government official, the Trump administration contemplated a safeguard to monitor the Taliban's continued adherence to the Doha Agreement, including leaving behind "some residual force for monitoring and implementing counterterrorism." [74] This was critical in light of assessments by senior U.S. officials — including then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Mark Milley and then-CENTCOM Commander General Frank McKenzie — that a continued U.S. military presence prevented the Taliban from significant military conquests in the country. [75]

President Trump would say on February 29, 2020, that if the Taliban did not comply with the agreed-upon conditions, the United States would hold the Taliban accountable. "I really believe the Taliban wants to do something to show we're not all wasting time. If bad things happen, we'll go back with a force like no one's ever seen," he said. [76] That same day, the Pentagon announced, "Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, Defense Secretary Dr. Mark T. Esper and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg all said today that any withdrawal would be conditions-based, and the Taliban would have to negotiate with Afghan officials for the process to move forward." [77] Secretary Esper would add, "If the Taliban uphold the agreement, the United States will begin a conditions-based reduction in forces." [78]

Implementation of the Doha Agreement

After signing the Doha Agreement in February 2020, the Trump administration commenced a phased military drawdown from Afghanistan. According to General McKenzie in his testimony before the committee, President Trump's withdrawal plan "envisioned the complete withdrawal of all our forces and our diplomats and citizens. It also contemplated the possible withdrawal of Afghans who had served with us. The plan had a number of options, but it was the framework for everything that followed." [79]

The final Commander of NATO's Resolution Support Mission and U.S. Forces Afghanistan, General Austin Scott Miller, was tasked with executing the military retrograde in tandem with then-U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan John Bass. [80] According to General Miller, the military drawdown proceeded in close coordination with the State Department, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. [81]

Ambassador Bass explained to the House Foreign Affairs Committee that, in accordance with orders by the administration, U.S. Embassy Kabul reduced its personnel, decreasing its diplomatic footprint alongside the military. [82] “I would say later in 2019 there was a clear desire to reduce the size and cost of the U.S. commitment in Afghanistan, particularly on the military side but not only on the military side. And we undertook a substantial reduction in consolidation of the embassy footprint throughout 2019, in part to demonstrate that we were getting smaller and costing less operationally,” he said. [83]

The first step toward a phased withdrawal resulted in the reduction of U.S. forces to 8,600. [84] In his testimony before the committee, General Miller conveyed he supported a reduction to 8,600 because this number allowed the United States to maintain a “sufficient footprint to do necessary partnering, protect the force, and where necessary provide military authorities to actions on the ground there.” [85] That drawdown was completed by the summer of 2020. [86]

By 2020, the United States’ objectives in Afghanistan had narrowed, focused now on “safeguard[ing] the United States of America,” “protect[ing] it against terrorist threats,” and “capacity building, trying to develop a standalone Afghan force.” [87] General Miller explained the objectives had shifted, where the United States was now “building and sustaining an Afghan security force” as a “ways and a means to get to [the United States’] overarching objective” of countering terrorism in the country. [88] General Miller described the split between the counterterrorism objectives and supporting the Afghan force objectives as a “60-40” split. [89] Months later, in July of 2020, President Trump pursued another phased drawdown, reducing U.S. troops to 4,500. [90] Given the aforementioned narrowed objectives, General Miller assessed the United States could execute the reduction without risk while continuing to meet goals in Afghanistan. [91]

On October 8, 2020, then-National Security Council (NSC) Advisor Robert O’Brien announced a further reduction in U.S. forces to 2,500 troops. [92] **Senior military officers — including Generals Milley, McKenzie, and Miller — assessed that with 2,500 troops, the U.S. could sufficiently support the Afghan national security forces and prevent the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan.** [93] In his testimony before the committee, General Miller assessed that with 2,500 forces in Afghanistan, the United States could continue to support and sustain Afghan forces in their fight against terrorism. “I thought it was a minimum force that would keep the Afghan military in the fight. Because within that 2,500 came a pretty robust air package, to include our [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance] in country,” he said. [94]

Senior military officers — including Generals Milley, McKenzie, and Miller — assessed that with 2,500 troops, the U.S. could sufficiently support the Afghan national security forces and prevent the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan.

President Trump, however, considered a complete U.S. withdrawal before the end of his presidency. On November 11, 2020, he issued a memorandum to then-Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller, ordering him to withdraw all U.S. forces from Afghanistan by January 15, 2021. [95] According to General Milley, he went to the White House with Acting Secretary Miller to discuss the memo with the president. Reportedly, the two men, along with NSC Advisor (NSA) O'Brien, advised the president against a complete withdrawal. [96] Shortly thereafter, the order was rescinded, and no steps were taken to withdraw forces. [97] On November 13, 2020, Acting Secretary Miller sent a Pentagon-wide memorandum regarding Afghanistan stating, "This war isn't over. We are on the verge of defeating Al Qaida and its associates, but we must avoid our past strategic error of failing to see the fight through to the finish." [98]

By the conclusion of the Trump administration, the United States maintained 2,500 troops alongside approximately 22,000 NATO forces and contractors in Afghanistan. [99] General McKenzie explained to the committee that "ultimately, President Trump selected a branch of the plan that maintained 2,500 U.S. military personnel in Afghanistan by Inauguration Day in January 2021. We had branches to that plan to complete a withdrawal by May of 2021 had we been so ordered." [100]

In accordance with assessments by State Department officials warning about keeping a large diplomatic presence while the U.S. military reduced its presence, Embassy Kabul's footprint was also reduced by 43% by January 20, 2021. [101] General Miller explained it was a "team effort" between he and Ambassador Bass to ensure Afghan security forces and Afghan leadership "didn't see daylight between our diplomatic team and our military team." [102]

U.S. DIPLOMATS IN HARM'S WAY

In accordance with assessments by State Department officials warning against a diplomatic footprint without a reduced U.S. military presence, Embassy Kabul's footprint was also reduced by 43% by January 20, 2021. General Miller explained that it was a "team effort" between he and Ambassador Bass, to ensure Afghan security forces and Afghan leadership "didn't see daylight between our diplomatic team and our military team."

An Assessment of the Doha Agreement: Ambassador Khalilzad's Flawed Process

Despite the Doha Agreement's aim for lasting peace, negotiations with the Taliban led by Ambassador Khalilzad strained the United States' relationship with the Afghan government. By excluding the Afghan government from negotiations at the demand of the Taliban, Ambassador Khalilzad undermined America's ally and, in doing so, likely harmed the legitimacy of the Afghan government and the potential for intra-Afghan negotiations.

According to Ambassador Khalilzad, multiple members of the Taliban delegation negotiating in Doha were members of the Haqqani Network. Further, the Taliban maintained its alliance with al Qaeda throughout negotiations, with al Qaeda swearing its allegiance to the Taliban's Supreme Leader, Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada.



The negotiations also undermined the United States' longstanding policy of refusing to negotiate with terrorists. [103] While the Taliban is not designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) by the United States, the Haqqani Network — an integral component of the Taliban — has been designated as such since 2012. [104] According to Ambassador Khalilzad, multiple members of the Taliban delegation negotiating in Doha were members of the Haqqani Network. [105] Further, the Taliban maintained its alliance with al Qaeda throughout negotiations, with al Qaeda swearing its allegiance to the Taliban's Supreme Leader, Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada. [106] Despite these facts, Ambassador Khalilzad thought it appropriate to continue negotiating with the terrorist group. The Taliban would ultimately celebrate the signing of the Doha Agreement as a “historic victory” and “humiliating defeat” for the United States. [107] When asked about the Taliban's continued ties with al Qaeda and the ongoing terrorist threat imposed by the Taliban, Ambassador Khalilzad attempted to cast doubt on those ties, asserting, “The commitments in writing is what mattered.” [108]

Several sources have also raised serious concerns regarding Ambassador Khalilzad's negotiation methods surrounding the Doha Agreement. General McKenzie described Ambassador Khalilzad's process as “often opaque,” that would leave other officials “in the dark” regarding the exact terms of the agreement. [109]

General Milley explained Ambassador Khalilzad did not consult the U.S. military when developing the terms of the Doha Agreement. [110] Indeed, in his testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Ambassador Khalilzad conceded his lack of understanding surrounding the important need for U.S. contractors to support the Afghan military. [111]

“Chairman McCaul’s investigation into the disastrous U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan has brought to light significant mistakes made during the U.S.-Taliban negotiations from 2018-2021. While Ambassador Khalilzad blames President Ghani for failing to negotiate a peace deal among the Afghans, his narrative is incomplete. Based on my experience participating in U.S.-Taliban talks with Khalilzad in 2019 and 2020, I found that he was naive in his assessment of the Taliban’s willingness to share power with other Afghans.

“Despite the Taliban’s continued campaign of violence against Afghans throughout the negotiations, Khalilzad pressured the Afghan government to make repeated concessions to the Taliban. This included the release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners, some of whom were terrorists with U.S. blood on their hands. Furthermore, he misled other U.S. officials about the Taliban’s interest in peaceful reconciliation and their willingness to sever ties with terrorist groups like al-Qaeda, whose leaders continue to find refuge on Afghan soil.

“Unfortunately, Khalilzad’s approach to negotiations with the Taliban strengthened their position at the expense of the Afghan government. This contributed to Ghani’s lack of trust in Khalilzad as a negotiator and empowered Taliban hardliners, whose crack down on women and girls has been both extreme and unrelenting.”

Lisa Curtis

Senior Fellow and Director
Indo-Pacific Security Program
Center for a New American Security

According to former NSC Senior Director for South and Central America Lisa Curtis, “Ambassador Khalilzad was too willing to make concessions to the Taliban and to throw the Afghan government under the bus.” [112] Ambassador Khalilzad reportedly dismissed concerns from the Afghan government that the Taliban were not negotiating in good faith. [113] When interviewed by the committee regarding this issue, Ambassador Khalilzad said he prioritized the Taliban’s “commitments in writing” over the overwhelming available evidence of the Taliban’s ongoing violations. [114] And while framed as a confidence building measure, many of the 5,000 Taliban prisoners the group demanded be released were guilty of “insider attacks” against the United States, and upon being released over the summer of 2020, rejoined the Taliban as fighters in the violence that ensued in 2021. [115]

Further, Ambassador Khalilzad advocated that Pakistan release Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar — one of the founders of the Taliban — whom he reportedly described as “a man of peace.” [116] The Trump administration sought to bring America’s longest war to an end in a responsible manner; however, flaws in that process had lasting consequences.

“Ambassador Khalilzad was too willing to make concessions to the Taliban and to throw the Afghan government under the bus.”

— NSC Senior Director for South and Central America Lisa Curtis

The Biden-Harris Administration and Execution of the Doha Agreement

The Interagency Review of the Doha Agreement

“The first meeting I had with [Biden] 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.” [117]

— Former SRAR, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad

On November 7, 2020, Joseph R. Biden was elected as the 46 president of the United States. During the presidential transition from the Trump administration into the Biden-Harris administration, President Biden’s principal advisers on U.S. foreign policy — Antony Blinken and Jake Sullivan — reportedly submitted a memorandum notifying him that negotiations with the Taliban in Doha were at an impasse and that Ambassador Khalilzad had failed to get the Taliban and the Afghan government to work together. [118] Nevertheless, Ambassador Khalilzad was retained as SRAR by President Biden, with the now recently confirmed Secretary of State Blinken announcing on January 27, 2021, “with regard to Ambassador Khalilzad, yes, we have — we have asked him to continue the vital work that he is performing.” [119]

Upon assuming office in January 2021, President Biden ordered a comprehensive interagency review of the United States' policy toward Afghanistan and selected NSA Sullivan to lead that review. [120] According to Chief of Staff to Secretary Blinken Suzy George, "the White House ran the Afghan policy review process." [121]

On January 23, 2021, NSA Sullivan informed his Afghan counterpart, then-National Security Advisor of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Hamdullah Mohib, that the United States was reviewing U.S. policy towards Afghanistan and assessing the Doha Agreement and the Taliban adherence to their commitments, including their obligations "to cut ties with terrorist groups, to reduce violence in Afghanistan, and to engage in meaningful negotiations with the Afghan government and other stakeholders." [122] NSA Sullivan committed to Mr. Mohib the Biden-Harris administration would "support the peace process" with the goal of "a durable and just political settlement and permanent ceasefire" in Afghanistan. [123]

It was clear to many as the administration commenced its interagency review process, however, that President Biden was committed to withdrawing from Afghanistan irrespective of their assessments. General McKenzie wrote in his memoir that, during a late February 2021 meeting with President Biden, "the president 'plainly wanted out' of Afghanistan, but he also understood the steep price we would pay for leaving precipitously." [124] Ambassador Khalilzad confirmed General McKenzie's account, saying, "[President Biden's] perspective was clear." [125] According to journalist and author Bob Woodward in his book *Peril*, administration officials — including, Secretary Blinken and then-White House Chief of Staff Ron Klain — knew President Biden was committed to leaving Afghanistan no matter what the interagency review found. [126]

The interagency meetings that occurred were led by NSA Sullivan and his deputies, Deputy National Security Advisor Jon Finer and Homeland Security Advisor Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall. [127] According to then-U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ross Wilson, the chief of mission for Embassy Kabul, the State Department took part in those meetings, its equities led by then-Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources (D-MR) Brian McKeon. [128] Ambassador Wilson explained that while he and then-Acting Under Secretary of State for Management Carol Perez participated in those meetings, D-MR McKeon served as the State Department's lead on Afghanistan policy. [129] D-MR McKeon testified before the House Foreign Affairs Committee he did not receive any briefings from the administration on the Afghanistan withdrawal until April 2021, after he was confirmed by the U.S. Senate in March.

Prior to D-MR McKeon's confirmation in March 2021, the State Department's Afghanistan policy was predominantly led by then-State Department Counselor Derek Chollet. [130] D-MR McKeon testified before the committee following his confirmation that, despite serving as the lead, he split his duties regarding Afghanistan with Counselor Chollet, who focused on "how we would continue to maintain a posture and ability to assess the terrorism threat and continue to take counterterrorism action from outside the country." [131]

When interviewed by the committee regarding his role setting Afghanistan policy throughout 2021, Counselor Chollet was largely uncooperative and repeatedly claimed he could not remember key details regarding his role in the Afghanistan withdrawal. [132] He did admit, however, that he attended the interagency meetings but claimed did not engage in or oversee any planning pertaining to the Afghanistan withdrawal. [133]

During the interagency review, Ambassador Wilson represented Embassy Kabul's equities. In his testimony before the committee, Ambassador Wilson explained he mainly contributed assessments regarding U.S. diplomatic and political capabilities in Afghanistan given the impending U.S. military withdrawal. [134] He testified further the embassy's Regional Security Officer (RSO) was predominately concerned with essential functions they would lose if the military withdrew. [135] The RSO for Embassy Kabul expressed concern to Ambassador Wilson regarding the loss of the situational awareness provided by the U.S. military's surveillance balloon, the lack of medical and medivac support, and the supplemental degree of security provided to the embassy. [136] On February 22, 2021, Ambassador Wilson sent an official cable to Secretary Blinken conveying the RSO's assessment that violence was increasing in Afghanistan and, in particular, in Kabul. [137]

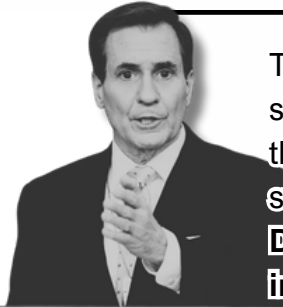
Key officials testified before the committee they were not contacted or their participation during the interagency review was limited. General Miller, who served as the senior military official in Afghanistan throughout the review, testified that throughout 2021 he was only invited to and participated in one initial NSC meeting and one NSC deputies meeting. He had no direct communications with Secretary Blinken. [138] When asked whether he wished his input had been sought at further interagency meetings regarding Afghanistan, he said, "I do. I mean, I thought I had something to offer." [139] Mr. Bass, the last confirmed U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, serving from December 2017 to January 2020, informed the committee that prior to the non-combatant evacuation operation (NEO), he was contacted only once by Deputy NSA Finer. [140] He explained the conversation occurred "in the first couple of months" of the Biden-Harris administration, and it was retrospective, not about "any prospective discussions about [the] way forward." [141]

In February 2021, President Biden held a principals meeting in the Situation Room, which included Secretary Blinken, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, and General Milley. General Milley reportedly advised President Biden to keep American forces in Afghanistan, warning the United States’s withdrawal from Afghanistan would precipitate the Taliban’s seizure of Afghanistan by Thanksgiving or Christmas 2021. [142] General Milley also warned women’s rights in the country would “go back to the Stone Age.” [143] He asserted it would be foolish to abandon Afghanistan after “all the blood and treasure spent” during the two-decade war [144] In that meeting, President Biden asserted what would become one of his common excuses for issuing the go-to-zero order — the Taliban would resume its attacks on American forces absent a withdrawal. General Milley remind him that Afghan security forces were now conducted on-the-ground fighting, with U.S. forces largely operating within secure military bases. [145]

In that same meeting, Secretary Blinken purportedly advocated against a military withdrawal because it would negatively impact the thousands of U.S. government officials who spent two decades seeking to improve conditions in Afghanistan. [146] Mr. Blinken contended, however, that Embassy Kabul should remain open regardless of the military withdrawal and that there was no reason to close the embassy prior to the Taliban taking over. [147] General Milley disagreed, asking, “But if the decision is to withdraw troops to zero, then that means zero, right?” [148] A senior defense official assessed “this was always a friction point in discussions” between the State Department and the Pentagon. [149] According to State Department files obtained by the committee, a February 3, 2021, call sheet between Counselor Chollet and General McKenzie states, “In the meantime, we must continue to signal the United States has not made a decision on troop drawdowns and the May 1 deadline.” [150]

On February 3, 2021, President Biden convened his national security team in the Oval Office to set the stage for withdrawing all U.S. forces from Afghanistan. [151] Despite having long made clear his commitment to get out of Afghanistan, he promised to listen to suggestions in that meeting. [152] He reportedly stated, “Our mission is to stop Afghanistan from being a base for attacking the homeland and U.S. allies by al Qaeda or other terrorist groups, not to deliver a death blow to the Taliban.” [153] After those February meetings, President Biden reportedly informed NSA Sullivan that justifications provided by his advisors to remain in Afghanistan were not “good enough” to convince him. [154] President Biden was “adamant” that it was not worth it to keep troops in Afghanistan. [155]

As committed by NSA Sullivan to Mr. Mohib in his January 2021 communication, the Biden-Harris administration’s interagency review of U.S. policy toward Afghanistan was to allegedly include an assessment of the Taliban’s compliance with the Doha Agreement. Then-Defense Department Press Secretary Rear Admiral John Kirby said on February 23rd that the administration was taking a look “at the issues of compliance,” to make informed decisions for the strategic decisions to come. [156] According to senior State Department and Defense Department officials, the Taliban was in clear violation of those commitments throughout 2021.



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In his testimony before the committee, General McKenzie stated his assessment then was the Taliban would never follow through on its commitment to cut ties with al Qaeda. [157] “Their ties with al Qaeda were deep and profound and there was no way, in my judgment, that they were ever going to separate from al Qaeda,” he said. [158] General Milley echoed that sentiment, testifying before the committee that the U.S. military “pointed out repeatedly that the conditions were not being met” by the Taliban. [159] He believed the Taliban had completely failed to honor their commitments, including, “renouncing linkages with al Qaeda, reducing violence, establishing a ceasefire, or participating in Afghan-to-Afghan negotiations with the Government of Afghanistan.” [160] General Miller concurred, informing the committee that the Taliban did not reduce violence, but rather changed their targets. “What they did is they changed their violence. They went full in on the Afghan checkpoints and trying to dump a body count up.” [161] He testified Ambassador Wilson “agreed that there was lack of compliance with the Doha Agreement.” [162]

Ambassador Wilson testified before the committee that, throughout his tenure as Chief of Mission to Embassy Kabul, the Taliban failed to uphold both the spirit and letter of the Doha Agreement, as evidenced by their violence towards Afghan forces and civilians, and their failure to cut ties with al Qaeda. [163] Mr. Salman Ahmed, Director of the Secretary of State’s Policy Planning Staff, told the committee, “in some ways, yes” the Taliban was living up to its commitments to cut ties with terrorist groups in 2021, but “in some ways, no” it was not. [164]

Notably, former Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Afghanistan throughout 2021, Mr. Mark Evans, explained to the committee President Biden’s decision to unconditionally withdraw all U.S. troops was in fact not contingent on compliance to the Doha Agreement’s conditions, asserting there was no “checklist approach” where the U.S. would refuse to uphold its end of the deal until the Taliban held up theirs. [165]

The State Department’s Acting Assistant Secretary for the South and Central Asian Bureau (SCA) throughout 2021 — the bureau tasked with leading the United States’ foreign policy on Afghanistan, amongst other nations — Dean Thompson, could not recall if his bureau ever offered an assessment of whether the Taliban was meeting their commitments under the Doha Agreement. Instead, Acting Assistant Secretary Thompson stated SCA relied almost exclusively on Ambassador Khalilzad’s assessments – which, as this report will demonstrate, were flawed and often disregarded the on-the-ground realities. [166]

In his testimony before the committee, Ambassador Khalilzad explained there was never a comprehensive assessment by the administration on whether the Taliban was adhering to the Doha Agreement. [167] He noted, however, that intelligence reports determined the Taliban’s adherence to the counterterrorism requirement was “mixed to positive, not completely satisfactory, mixed to positive.” [168]

When asked by committee members about the Taliban’s violations of the Doha Agreement and, in particular, their counterterrorism obligations, Ambassador Khalilzad claimed — without evidence — that the Taliban “made substantial progress in delivering on those commitments.” [169] Ambassador Khalilzad reportedly reached out to the Taliban at the request of Secretary Blinken to inquire about the Doha Agreement’s withdrawal timeline. [170] A few weeks later, Ambassador Khalilzad informed Secretary Blinken of the Taliban’s response: “If you go a day beyond May 1, all bets are off. ... No wiggle room.” [171]

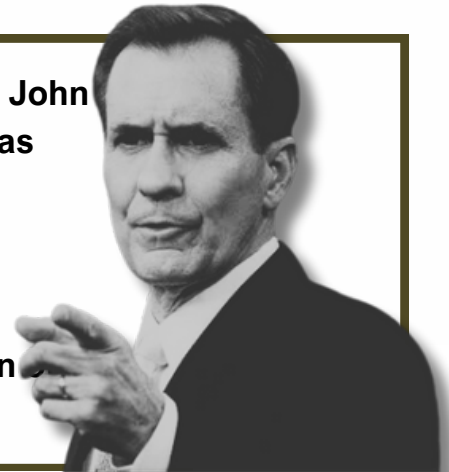
Integral State Department documents, obtained by the committee through enforcement of a subpoena, appear to take Taliban non-compliance with the agreement as obvious. In a March 26, 2021, memorandum from Ambassador Khalilzad’s deputy, then-Deputy SRAR Molly Phee, to Secretary Blinken, she remarks “[A]s is typical, the Taliban do not address their commitments under the [Doha] agreement.” [172]

Nevertheless, despite the administration’s public commitment to assess the Taliban’s compliance with the Doha Agreement, it appears compliance with the agreement’s conditions was not pertinent to their Afghanistan policy.

In a February 12, 2021, press conference, former State Department Spokesperson Ned Price assured reporters the Biden-Harris administration’s review of the Doha Agreement “will include assessing whether the Taliban are fulfilling their commitments relating to counterterrorism, reducing violence, engaging in meaningful negotiations with the Afghan government and other stakeholders.” [173] In his testimony before the committee, however, Spokesperson Price admitted Taliban adherence to the Doha Agreement was “immaterial” to the administration’s decision to withdraw. [174]

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Internal Warnings and Threat of Collapse

Throughout the interagency review, President Biden failed to heed the warnings of his military advisers or listen to advice from across his administration. During the presidential transition from the Trump administration to the Biden-Harris administration, the Pentagon issued a report in December 2020, which stated the U.S. military continued to “maintain 11 bases positioned throughout Afghanistan,” and that “U.S. and NATO objectives remain unchanged, and the United States continues to conduct both the [counterterrorism] and [train, advise, and assist] missions” in the country. [175] President Biden’s top military advisers would go on to recommend that the United States maintain the 2,500 troop level set by the Trump administration.

General Milley testified to the committee that, based on assessments from military commanders and the consensus of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, he recommended President Biden keep 2,500 troops in Afghanistan. “We needed to maintain a minimum force of 2,500 troops on the ground — mostly special forces — with allied troops and contractors in order to sustain the Afghan national security forces and its government until the diplomatic conditions of the Doha Agreement were met,” he said. [176] It was his view that without U.S. troops in Afghanistan, “it was only a matter of when, not if, the Afghan government would collapse and the Taliban would take control.” [177]

He has since testified that he believes Afghanistan would not have collapsed had those 2,500 U.S. troops, along with allied forces and contractors, remained in Afghanistan. [178]

General McKenzie echoed General Milley's concerns. According to him, with 2,500 troops plus a small contingent of special operations forces, the U.S. could have continued its counterterrorism mission, advised and assisted the Afghan military, and held onto eight bases including Bagram Air Base with the support of NATO allies. [179] In his testimony before the committee, General McKenzie affirmed he was unequivocal in his advice to the president, warning him a rapid collapse of the Afghan government and military would follow if the United States went to zero. The Afghans, he believed, were not prepared to stand alone. [180]

General Miller informed the committee he too advised the United States maintain a small troop presence in Afghanistan to support Afghan security forces and complete the United States' counterterrorism mission. Keeping 2,500 troops, General Miller testified, came with robust air and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, enabling the Afghans to continue fighting the Taliban. [181] General Miller stated his recommendation remained consistent throughout his command in Afghanistan. [182]

Colonel Seth Krummrich, Chief of Staff for Special Operations Command Central during the military retrograde, reiterated the military told President Biden, "If you start to withdraw, the Taliban are going to come pouring in and there's nothing that's going to stop them." [183] **According to Colonel Krummrich, "The president decided we're gonna leave, and he's not listening to anybody."** [184]

"If you start to withdraw, the Taliban are going to come pouring in and there's nothing that's going to stop them."

— Colonel Seth Krummrich

Secretary Austin appears to have similarly urged President Biden to keep between 2,500 to 4,500 U.S. forces in Afghanistan during the interagency review. [185] In an effort to convince President Biden, he reportedly told him, "we've seen this movie before," referencing what happened after the United States withdrew from Iraq and the Islamic State overran the country's military. [186]

“The president decided we’re gonna leave, and he’s not listening to anybody.”

In addition to military recommendations during the interagency review, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) John Sopko warned of the imminent threat to the Afghan government and their forces should the U.S. unconditionally withdraw. SIGAR Sopko stated repeatedly in March 2021 that the Afghan government faced an existential threat in the face of a renewed Taliban offensive. He pointed to the key role Pentagon contractors played in sustaining the Afghan Air Force — something Ambassador Khalilzad admitted he did not take into consideration during the Doha Agreement negotiations and an issue that would be one of the key factors to the Afghan military’s collapse. SIGAR Sopko alerted the administration, and the American public, chaos would ensue if these contractors were removed from the battlefield. On March 10, 2021 — one month before President Biden announced the withdrawal — SIGAR cautioned Afghanistan “is under threat” and noted the Afghan government “fears for its survival.” [187]

He warned further, “It is not an overstatement to fathom that, if foreign assistance is withdrawn and peace negotiations fail, Taliban forces will be at the gates of Kabul in short order.” [188] Testifying before the House Oversight Committee on March 16, 2021, SIGAR Sopko reiterated that drawing U.S. forces to zero would cripple the Afghan forces. According to him, “To be quite blunt, [the Afghan government] probably would face collapse.” [189]

Warnings by the military and SIGAR were echoed by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI). In April 2021, prior to President Biden’s withdrawal announcement, ODNI stated, Afghanistan “will struggle to hold the Taliban at bay if the coalition withdraws support. Kabul continues to face setbacks on the battlefield, and the Taliban is confident it can achieve military victory.” [190]

NATO Warnings and Threat of Collapse

In a March 25, 2021, speech, President Biden affirmed that any decision he made with respect to the United States’ withdrawal from Afghanistan would take NATO equities into account. Some State Department officials interviewed by the committee repeated his claim that NATO was consulted. According to Counselor Chollet, “NATO itself didn’t take a position” on the withdrawal, and his “understanding, the gestalt understanding that I recall was, you know, general understanding of our position, I mean, and everybody knew the threat that we were facing and were appreciative of our consultation.” [191]

Spokesperson Price testified before the committee that the administration's decision to withdraw "was coordinated exquisitely" with NATO allies, that "they welcomed the decision that we put forward" and "they, in turn, followed suit." [192]

These State Department employees' description of events, however, is contradicted by NATO allies, who expressed concern and frustration with the president's decision to withdraw. Dating back to January 27, 2021, British Army General Sir Nicholas Carter, who served as Chief of the Defense Staff from June 2018 to November 2021, issued dire warnings at a NATO Chiefs of Defense Meeting. "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 [NATO] Alliance and embolden extremists the world over,**" General Carter said. [193]

On February 15, 2021, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg similarly warned against withdrawing from Afghanistan prematurely, stating, "[O]ur presence is conditions-based. ... We need to find the right balance between making sure that we not stay longer than necessary, but at the same time, that we don't leave too early." [194] "Peace talks remain fragile, and the level of violence remains unacceptably high, including Taliban attacks on civilians," he said. "The Taliban must reduce violence, negotiate in good faith and live up to their commitment to stop cooperating with international terrorist groups." [195]

On March 23 and 24, 2021, NATO held its ministerial meeting in Brussels, Belgium. In that meeting, Secretary Blinken reportedly spent time participating in a "listening session" with NATO allies regarding Afghanistan. [196] A senior official from the Biden-Harris administration present at the meeting claimed NATO representatives "expected that [President Biden] was leaning in the direction of a withdrawal at that point." [197] The representatives — particularly those from the United Kingdom, Germany, and Italy — argued against the United States' withdrawal, informing Secretary Blinken that President Biden's decision should be tied to the conditions on the ground. [198] German Foreign Minister Heiko Mass reportedly stressed that any decision by the United States should be made with buy-in from its NATO allies and argued in favor of a conditions-based approach. [199]

Thereafter, Secretary Blinken appears to have asked his team to put together a new recommendation memo to the president which reflected NATO allies' assessment. [200] Secretary Blinken was purportedly jolted by how strongly NATO officials argued against a complete U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, expressing concern "about the health of the transatlantic alliance." He allegedly relayed those concerns to President Biden, describing the pushback to a complete U.S. withdrawal as coming at him in "quadraphonic sound." [201] **State Department documents obtained by the committee confirm that as a result of these meetings, Secretary Blinken told NATO Secretary-General Stoltenberg in mid-April, "I share your view that it would be preferable to reach a political settlement before foreign troops depart."** [202]

In his testimony before the committee, General McKenzie reiterated America's NATO allies recommended against a full U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. According to General McKenzie, "It was my actual belief that had we stayed at 2,500 we would have probably 5,000 NATO forces, and maybe more than that." [203] He assessed, "Because of the unique capabilities that the United States brings, [NATO] couldn't have stayed without our presence." [204] NATO data published in February 2021 stated that, at the start of 2021, NATO presence in Afghanistan numbered close to 10,000 troops from roughly three dozen nations. [205]

The United States, in contrast, had 2,500 to 3,500 troops in Afghanistan. [206] General Milley informed the committee NATO "would follow our lead" on staying or going. [207] His assessment was echoed by General Miller, who added in his testimony NATO allies were "committed for the long haul in terms of let's get on a conditions-based path." [208]

State Department documents obtained by the committee confirm that as a result of these meetings, Secretary Blinken told NATO Secretary-General Stoltenberg in mid-April, "I share your view that it would be preferable to reach a political settlement before foreign troops depart."

President Biden's Go-to-Zero Order

Ambassador Khalilzad explained in his testimony before the committee the State Department leadership “at the highest level” discussed three options regarding the Doha Agreement. [209] The first option was to “essentially not to insist on conditionality, just emphasize withdrawal and counterterrorism” — meaning the U.S. could withdraw regardless of whether the Taliban was living up to its commitments. [210] The second, he said, was for President Biden to do what President Trump did with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal: “[T]he Trump administration put the agreement on the Iran nuclear deal aside, said we’re not going to honor that. And this administration, the Biden-Harris administration, could do the same with this agreement, saying it’s flawed, we don’t want to do that.” [211] And the third was “conditionality,” meaning the United States would not withdraw forces unless and until the Taliban fulfilled its commitments under the Doha Agreement. [212] When Secretary Blinken suggested the conditional approach, President Biden reportedly responded that he did not want to get “caught in the trap of giving the war one more try,” and the withdrawal had to be done. [213]

On April 6, 2021, during an Oval Office meeting, President Biden conveyed his decision to withdraw all American troops from Afghanistan to his senior national security advisors, including Secretary Blinken, Secretary Austin, and General Milley. He reportedly said, “It’s time to bring the troops home.” [214] Thereafter, Secretary Austin met with General Milley, General McKenzie, and General Miller to begin planning withdrawing from Afghanistan, purportedly stating, “This is not the decision that we wanted, but this is what we got. Now we have to execute it.” [215]

In his testimony before the committee, General Milley explained he received the formal order to withdraw all American forces from Afghanistan on April 11, 2021. [216] General McKenzie similarly received his orders that day from Secretary Austin. [217] “POTUS has made a decision. ... We will leave Afghanistan. The clock starts on 1 May. We will take the necessary time to leave in an orderly manner. I know your planning has called for 120 days; we will be out before the twenty-year anniversary of September 11th,” Secretary Austin said to military leaders. [218] While the military was instructed to draw its forces to zero, President Biden’s order mandated that U.S. Embassy Kabul remain following the withdrawal. According to General McKenzie, “The President’s decision was to maintain an embassy, to not require our citizens to leave, and, of course, to not expedite the extraction of at-risk Afghans. This was not a military decision.” [219]

Vice President Kamala Harris was the last person in the room when President Biden made the decision to withdraw all U.S. forces from Afghanistan.



Vice President Kamala Harris was the last person in the room when President Biden made the decision to withdraw all U.S. forces from Afghanistan; a fact she boasted shortly after President Biden issued his go-to-zero order. [220] Despite warnings against withdrawing by senior leaders, Vice President Harris' aide disclosed the vice president "strongly supported" President Biden's decision. [221] President Biden's former Chief of Staff Ron Klain affirmed Vice President Harris was entrenched in the president's Afghanistan policy. "[Vice President Kamala Harris] advised the president on that. She advised the president on the evacuation," Mr. Klain said. [222] With respect to President Biden's decision to withdraw, Vice President Harris asserted, "He is someone, who I have seen over and over again, make decisions based on what he truly believes ... is the right thing to do." [223] The vice president's position was a disappointment to Afghan officials, including one of Afghanistan's top negotiators in peace talks with the Taliban, Nader Nadery. [224] According to Mr. Nadery, it was clear to Afghan officials President Biden was determined to pull U.S. troops from Afghanistan, but he was hoping he had an ally in Vice President Harris. [225] "I hoped that President Biden listened to her and other voices who advocated for Afghan women," said Mr. Nadery. [226] Vice President Harris, despite publicly championing Afghan women's rights, appears to have been working in lockstep with President Biden behind the scenes to withdraw all U.S. troops no matter the consequence to Afghan women and girls. [227]

On April 14, 2021, President Biden publicly announced his decision to withdraw from Afghanistan, drawing American forces down to zero. He declared, "I'm now the fourth United States President to preside over American troop presence in Afghanistan: two Republicans, two Democrats. I will not pass this responsibility on to a fifth." [228] He went on to say the United States and NATO would "be out of Afghanistan before we mark the 20th anniversary of that heinous attack on September 11 ." [229] When asked by the committee why President Biden chose picked the anniversary of the September 11th terrorist attacks to withdraw from Afghanistan by, then-White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki claimed the date was chosen for operational purposes.

“I think it was the President wanting to send a clear message that this is not going to be an open ended timeline to withdrawing troops. We have had that policy for some time in the past, and he disagrees with it, so he was giving a timeline on when operationally we could move troops out, she said.” [230] However, when asked by the committee regarding the strategic and operational importance of that deadline, General Milley and General McKenzie responded they were not aware of any tactical or military reason for why President Biden picked the anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks. [231]

President Biden also contended his administration “inherited” the Doha Agreement when explaining his decision to withdraw in the announcement. [232] “It is perhaps not what I would have negotiated myself, but it was an agreement made by the United States government, and that means something. So, in keeping with that agreement and with our national interests, the United States will begin our final withdrawal,” he said. [233] That logic, however, is flawed as President Biden took no issue revoking other policies he purportedly inherited from President Trump, including the “Remain in Mexico” policy, requiring asylum-seekers wait in Mexico for hearings in U.S. immigration court. [234] **President Biden also failed to acknowledge the Doha Agreement was predicated on conditions — conditions his senior national security advisors and America’s NATO allies repeatedly acknowledged the Taliban were in violation of.** Indeed, President Biden would later admit that he would have withdrawn American forces from Afghanistan with or without the Doha Agreement, stating, “I would’ve tried to figure out how to withdraw those troops, yes.” [235]

President Biden would add, “I believed that our presence in Afghanistan should be focused on the reason we went in the first place: to ensure Afghanistan would not be used as a base from which to attack our homeland again. We did that. We accomplished that objective.” [236] He also claimed that al Qaeda was “degraded” in Afghanistan. [237] Both those statements would prove false. Testifying before the committee, General McKenzie confirmed al Qaeda was a threat then and remains an ongoing threat in Afghanistan, stating, “[The Taliban’s] ties with al Qaeda were deep and profound, and there was no way, in my judgment, that they were ever going to separate from al Qaeda.”

He added, “Our principle concern with Afghanistan right now should be the fact that al Qaeda and ISIS have the opportunity to gather strength in ungoverned spaces with clear desire to attack our homeland.” [238] These assessments proved true when, following the withdrawal, the Taliban provided sanctuary to al Qaeda leader and one of the perpetrators behind the September 11 attacks, Ayman al-Zawahiri. The jihadist leader was on the balcony of a three-story house owned by senior Haqqani members in Kabul when an American drone strike killed him on July 31, 2022. [239] The administration would later concede that “Zawahiri continued to pose an active threat to U.S. persons, interests, and national security.” [240]

“Our principle concern with Afghanistan right now should be the fact that al Qaeda and ISIS have the opportunity to gather strength in ungoverned spaces with clear desire to attack our homeland.”

— Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr.



Reactions and Consequences of President Biden’s Decision to Unconditionally Withdraw

The reaction to President Biden’s unilateral decision to withdraw all U.S. troops from Afghanistan was swift. The United States’ NATO allies were dismayed and blindsided by the lack of consultation. According to reporting, NATO Secretary-General Stoltenberg was “livid,” informing Secretary Blinken and Secretary Austin he, “strongly disagreed with the decisions and felt that NATO’s collective position hadn’t been taken into account.” [241] Given that NATO went into Afghanistan after 9/11 in support of the United States, Secretary-General Stoltenberg reportedly felt the alliance deserved more courtesy than being forced to pack up — given their dependence on the American military — once President Biden decided to leave. [242] In his testimony before the committee, General Miller confirmed NATO allies’ disapproval, testifying “they certainly were unhappy, and they voiced that unhappiness.” [243]

The United States’ Afghan allies were unsurprisingly, devastated. General Hibatullah Alizai — former Afghan Army general — informed the committee majority staff that he pleaded for more time from American commanders on the ground, saying, “Just tell your leadership to stay with us for two more years. ... We’re going to take the initiative ... it’s in our favor and we can defeat the Taliban.” [244]

General Miller described how, after President Biden’s announcement, “it [the U.S. withdrawal] became a reality, that, you know, certainly affected the psychology and the morale of the people of Afghanistan.” [245] Nader Nadery, a member of the Afghan government’s delegation at the Doha intra-Afghan negotiations, affirmed President Biden’s announcement had a significant impact on morale. [246] Matin Bek, former chief of staff to President Ghani and negotiator in Doha, told the committee that President Biden’s announcement declared to Afghans, “everything was finished.” [247]

President Biden's Go to Zero Order for US Troops and its impact on success of the Taliban

When President Biden was making the announcement to go-to-zero for U.S. troops, I was in southwestern Afghan leading an operation, I watched it with interest. It felt like a dagger into my heart, that day he looked like a tyrant, he sounded like a tyrant and he acted as a tyrant. What followed next was a rapid withdrawal of the U.S. forces from the country while the Taliban rapidly deployed against the Afghan troops, politically there was immense pressure by Secretary Blinken and his envoy on our president to resign office.

President Biden not only betrayed the U.S.-Afghan Strategic agreement but also betrayed the wishes to his own troops, causing a strategic defeat to Afghans and Americans from the very White House that held the highest realm of the U.S. military.

Personally I lost my U.S. friends and our edge on the battlefield as the U.S. removed its air force and the contractors supporting our air and ground forces. Taliban would have never been able to defeat the Afghan troops if it was not for a careless and heartless decision of President Biden ordering immediate, unconditional and un-coordinated withdrawal. This act made the world less secure, less harmonized and more vulnerable by every measure.

Lt. Gen Sami Sadat

Former Commander of Afghan National Special Operation Corps

According to General Sami Sadat, President Biden's April 14 announcement immediately impacted the morale of Afghan security forces. In his testimony before the committee, he stated, "The bad moment was when the announcement came in ... The truth of the matter is that after President Biden announced the withdrawal, the U.S. forces and Afghan forces were in complete disarray with each other" and "it was excruciating to separate two war brothers ... two militaries that worked for twenty years." [248]

The Foundation for Defense of Democracies' Long War Journal had been tracking the Taliban's attempts to gain control of territory since NATO ended its military mission in Afghanistan and switched to an "advise and assist" role in June 2014. In his testimony before the committee, the Long War Journal's author Bill Roggio the data showed President Biden's announcement "was directly responsible for the collapse of the Afghan government and military and the Taliban's immediate takeover of Afghanistan." [249] With 2,500 troops, according to General Miller, the U.S. kept "the Afghan military in the fight," and after President Biden's announcement, there was a "loss of confidence in the security forces and some radical security force adjustments as a result." [250]

According to SIGAR Sopko, “single most important factor in the ANDSF’s [Afghan National Defense and Security Forces]’ collapse in August 2021 was the U.S. decision to withdraw military forces and contractors from Afghanistan through signing the U.S.-Taliban agreement in February 2020 under the Trump administration, followed by President Biden’s withdrawal announcement in April 2021.” [251]

President Biden’s announcement also undermined the Afghan negotiating team’s peace talks with the Taliban in Doha. [252] General Miller affirmed that, following President Biden’s announcement, the Taliban’s mindset shifted to, “Why even talk to this group of Afghans that are here talking about a power sharing agreement? We have what we want here now. We don’t need a power sharing agreement.” [253] Ambassador Wilson also acknowledged the announcement impacted the Afghan government’s leverage in seeking peace, asserting, “Their job absolutely became harder after [April] 14. ... And their ability to achieve an agreement that was acceptable to, not just Ghani, but other political leaders, and for that matter the Afghan people, got smaller.” [254]

Fawzia Koofi, a former Member of the House of the People of Afghanistan and member of the Afghan delegation to the Doha negotiations, also confirmed President Biden’s withdrawal announcement had a direct negative impact on the negotiations. [255] Matin Bek recounted that the Taliban was “relieve[ed]” about the announcement which “killed the little available window for an imagined peace.” [256] In his testimony before the committee, General Milley asserted, “Don’t put date certain on things. Don’t announce them and don’t put a date certain. You lose whatever leverage you have in negotiation.” [257]

The Taliban, in response, celebrated President Biden’s go-to-zero order, interpreting it as a victory for the jihadist movement. Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid later said, “When President Biden won the election, we suspected that he might insist on continuing the war, but when he announced that he was withdrawing his forces from Afghanistan, it was a source of joy.” [258]

In the weeks after the signing of the Doha Agreement, the Taliban issued a fatwa — a religious decree — claiming the withdrawal would not end its “armed jihad” and that “[u]ntil the occupation is completely severed from its roots and an Islamic government formed, the mujahideen shall continue waging armed jihad and exerting efforts for the implementation of Islamic rule.” [259] SIGAR later revealed that, in the weeks after President Biden’s announcement, USAID-funded monitoring of the Taliban’s public communications “found the Taliban’s tone to be resoundingly triumphant in April and May following the announced withdrawal.” [260]

Steve Brooking, the former Chief of Mission to the British Embassy in Kabul and Special Adviser to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, assessed the impact of President Biden's speech was immediate, saying, "It emboldened the Taliban, seriously damaged the morale of the Republic's security forces, and persuaded many Afghans to think about switching sides to the Taliban, who were now perceived as likely winners." [261] Put simply, President Biden's decision to not enforce the Doha Agreement conditions and to unilaterally withdraw from Afghanistan enabled the collapse of the Afghan government and the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan.

"Chairman McCaul's investigation into the disastrous U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan has brought to light significant mistakes made during the U.S.-Taliban negotiations from 2018-2021. While Ambassador Khalilzad blames President Ghani for failing to negotiate a peace deal among the Afghans, his narrative is incomplete. Based on my experience participating in U.S.-Taliban talks with Khalilzad in 2019 and 2020, I found that he was naive in his assessment of the Taliban's willingness to share power with other Afghans.

"Despite the Taliban's continued campaign of violence against Afghans throughout the negotiations, Khalilzad pressured the Afghan government to make repeated concessions to the Taliban. This included the release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners, some of whom were terrorists with U.S. blood on their hands. Furthermore, he misled other U.S. officials about the Taliban's interest in peaceful reconciliation and their willingness to sever ties with terrorist groups like al-Qaeda, whose leaders continue to find refuge on Afghan soil.

"Unfortunately, Khalilzad's approach to negotiations with the Taliban strengthened their position at the expense of the Afghan government. This contributed to Ghani's lack of trust in Khalilzad as a negotiator and empowered Taliban hardliners, whose crack down on women and girls has been both extreme and unrelenting."

Lisa Curtis

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TACTICAL FAILURES: PART I

The Military Retrograde and Taliban Takeover

THE U.S. MILITARY RETROGRADE **FROM AFGHANISTAN**

The U.S. Military Retrograde: “Speed Brought Safety”

Pursuant to President Biden’s April 14, 2021, order to withdraw all troops from Afghanistan, the U.S. military began to execute a rapid retrograde from the country. In their testimony before the committee, the United States’ senior military generals explained that once President Biden ordered all U.S. forces be withdrawn from Afghanistan, executing the retrograde safely meant executing the retrograde with speed. [262] Put simply, they believed “speed brought safety.” [263] In his transcribed interview before the committee, General Miller explained that, as the commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, his primary concern was getting those servicemembers out safely. [264] General McKenzie testified in his public hearing before the committee, “It was by design, from the very beginning. We wanted to get out as quickly as we could, because we believed speed brought safety.” [265] When asked what was driving that speed, General McKenzie responded, “Concerns about the Taliban attacking us. Concerns about ISIS being able to carry out attacks. But also, a desire to have room at the back end in case we had trouble. We had weather problems, we had aircraft problems that slowed us down.” [266] General McKenzie explained that the military accomplished its withdrawal by July 12, 2021, when he relieved General Miller from his post. [267]

By July 5, 2021, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) announced it had completed 90% of the entire withdrawal process, pursuant to President Biden’s go-to-zero order. [268] In doing so, “it removed all of its air support assets and the vast majority of its advisors, and it collapsed its footprint in the country to a small presence at the U.S. embassy and the airport in Kabul.” [269] Going into August 2021, the U.S. military had fewer than 1,000 troops on the ground and no major bases after Bagram Air Base was shuttered. As U.S. forces executed a speedy retrograde in response to the go-to-zero order, their planning was also underway for worst-case scenario contingencies. General McKenzie in mid-May ordered CENTCOM to prepare for a potential NEO, and U.S. troops began to preposition themselves in the surrounding region roughly two weeks later. [270] The preparations taken by CENTCOM included positioning forces and placing them on higher alert, prepositioning some supplies, and beginning work on intermediate locations in Qatar. [271]

Come August, according to Colonel Matt Hardman, there was only one “ground maneuver unit in Afghanistan in early August” and that “the only security element on the ground from the Department of Defense” was “a rifle company from 4-31 out of the 10th Mountain Division.”[272]

While the U.S. military’s strategy sought to minimize the risk to U.S. troops, the rapid retrograde had devastating and lasting consequences, including diminishing U.S. counterterrorism capabilities, abandoning the Afghan military in their fight against the Taliban, and handicapping the eventual NEO conducted out of HKIA.

Loss of Air Support Leads to Degraded Counterterrorism Operations

On April 20, 2021, in the aftermath of President Biden’s withdrawal order, General McKenzie warned that the United States’ ability to target terrorists in Afghanistan would diminish following the withdrawal. [273] He explained, “If you leave Afghanistan and you want to go back in to conduct these [counterterrorism] operations, there are three things you need to do. You need to find the target. You need to fix the target. And you need to be able to finish the target. So those three things — the first two require heavy intelligence support. And if you’re out of the country and you don’t have the ecosystem that we have there now, it will be harder to do that. It is not impossible to do that. It will just be harder to do it.” [274] Two days later, he stated direly, “We will lose the abilities that we have now to see completely into Afghanistan.” [275]

General Miller later attested that his recommendation against a complete withdrawal was based on the harmful consequences of a complete withdrawal to the counterterrorism mission in Afghanistan. He assessed if the United States had kept 2,500 troops on the ground, Afghan forces — particularly its air force — could stay in the fight against the Taliban and terrorism. [276] Describing the challenges posed by the loss of air support to counterterrorism operations, General Miller explained, “If you’re in close contact, you can kind of, you know, collapse your timelines, your response times, everything. You know, that’s where I want to be as a military commander, where I have resources that I can move quickly. As you move them over, it doesn’t mean it’s impossible, but it does get harder.” [277]

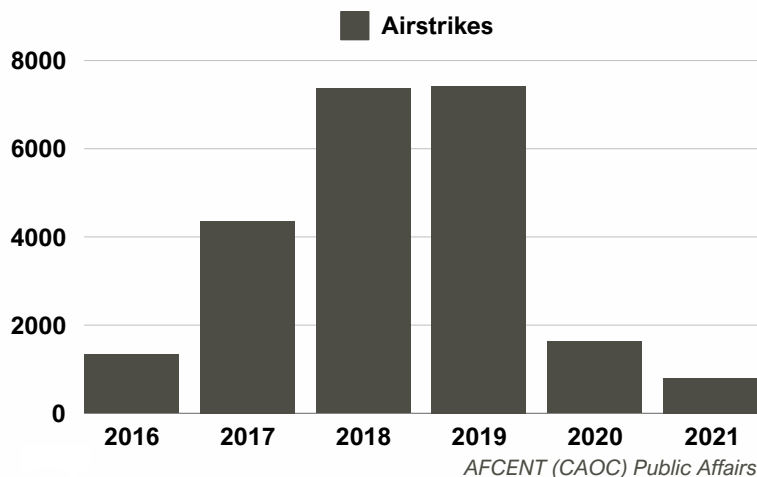
Those warnings were brought to fruition shortly thereafter.

General Miller testified to the committee that, in early July 2021, the Afghan Minister of Defense, General Bismillah Khan Mohammadi, requested continued U.S. air support, but General Miller said it was not something he could promise because so many U.S. air assets had now been moved over the horizon. [278] General Miller recalled their conversation, “So then Mohammadi comes over and sees me, and I’m literally a week out, and he knows I’m leaving. And he says, ‘Just promise me that you’re going to give me air support.’ And all the air support was already — it was now over the horizon. So, I said, ‘Listen, you’re going to get the air support that we can provide.’ But it’s a different dynamic if something takes off at Bagram Airfield or down at Dwyer in Helmand Province, because now, to launch an aircraft, you have to get through weather.” [279]

Those assessments were echoed by General McKenzie, who has since shared that he was forced to explain to Defense Minister Khan in a July 2021 meeting that “it was going to be extremely difficult to get the air support he was used to from the past.” [280] Minister Khan was not the only Afghan official concerned about the lack of air support. Then-President of Afghanistan Ashraf Ghani also asked General McKenzie about air support in a late July 2021, requesting an expansion of U.S. airstrikes. General McKenzie explained, “I told him that we were limited to strikes in direct support of his forces; we could not go against deep targets. Any change there would require new policy guidance from my chain of command.” [281]

General McKenzie informed the committee that, by the time of the Taliban takeover of Kabul on August 15, 2021, the United States had not conducted a specific, targeted air strike against an ISIS-K or al Qaeda suspect in Afghanistan for some time. [282] “It had been quite a while before we had actually struck any deep targets. It had been a lengthy period of time. I couldn’t give you the exact date, but it was probably a matter of many weeks since we had struck a target that you would develop and strike as a personality target or a deep strike target,” he said. [283]

Airpower statistics released at the conclusion of 2021 by CENTCOM support that assessment. [284] Those statistics show U.S. airstrikes in Afghanistan dropped dramatically in 2021. [285] According to the released numbers, the United States conducted a total of 801 airstrikes in 2021 — the lowest in over a decade and less than half of the 1,631 airstrikes conducted in 2020. [286]



The United States also lost its intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities as a result of the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan. MQ-9 drones served as the backbone of U.S. surveillance of terrorist activities in Afghanistan and the region. [287]



Almost 1,108 miles. That's around the same distance as Miami, FL, to New York City, NY (1,091.65 miles). A flight from Dubai to Kabul takes more than three hours.

With no boots on the ground, their ability to fly over Afghanistan and gather intelligence was critical. By early July 2021, the U.S. military's MQ-9 drones had been moved to the United Arab Emirates, where they would have to fly vast distances to get to Afghanistan. [288] Due to weather, heat, and cloud cover increasing operational friction, it was unfeasible for the United States to consistently deploy the MQ-9s over Afghanistan without a military presence on the ground. [289]

General McKenzie would later explain, “We were learning that flying the MQ-9 at extreme range resulted in many canceled missions. Weather was always going to be a factor, but the combination of searing heat at the runways from which we launched, inclement weather during the transit, and more cloud cover over the places we wanted to look at all increased the friction exponentially. We were going to struggle to keep MQ-9s over Afghanistan with any degree of predictability.” [290] CENTCOM’s publicly released airpower statistics support this assessment as well, outlining only 5,013 ISR sorties in Afghanistan in 2021, relative to 14,834 ISR sorties in 2020. [291]

Rear Admiral Vasely was tasked with leading on-the-ground operations in Afghanistan following the transfer of authority from and dissolution of U.S. Forces-Afghanistan, led by General Miller, to CENTCOM, led by General McKenzie on July 12, 2021. [292] According to him, “Everything was Kabul-centric. So our scope of responsibility was much less in terms of area, numbers of bases, and what we were asked to do. But that was challenging. In going from 2,500 to 650 personnel, we lost visibility and sensors.” [293] “Not being on the ground at eleven different bases made it difficult to get information back from what was going on in real time on the ground as the Taliban were executing their campaign plan,” he emphasized. [294]

Loss of Contractor and Military Advisor Support for Afghan Forces

President Biden’s order to withdraw all U.S. forces resulted in the removal of not only troops from Afghanistan, but also the American and international contractors Afghan forces had become reliant on over the last two decades. This had a devastating impact on the Afghan military, particularly the Afghan Air Force. [295]

In January 2021, CENTCOM published data on contractor support of U.S. operations within its area of responsibility for the first quarter of FY2021, reporting 18,214 contractors in Afghanistan for the first quarter of fiscal year 2021. [296] Of those contractors, there were 6,346 U.S. contractors, 7,123 international contractors, and 4,745 local contractors. [297] These contractors provided a multitude of services including conducting maintenance on aircraft and weapons, running air defense systems, working construction, and supporting logistics of operations. [298]

In April 2021, CENTCOM published updated data, reporting a reduction in contractor support in Afghanistan, now consisting of 16,832 contractors in the second quarter of fiscal year 2021. Of those, there were 6,147 U.S. contractors, 6,399 international contractors, and 4,286 local contractors. [299]

CENTCOM's Operational Contract Support Integration Cell Afghanistan (OCSIC) explained it was working on “go-to-zero planning,” and [SL5] its “major focus areas” included “base optimization, contractor accountability, facilitation of new contract requirements, and addressing scheduling backlogs.” [300]

That same month, General McKenzie testified before the House and Senate Armed Services Committees, explaining the withdrawal from Afghanistan would mean all U.S. contractors would also depart, diminishing the United States' ability to support Afghan forces. [301] Further, while the United States was “examining alternatives,” it had yet to resolve how to make up for the challenges posed by the withdrawal of contractors. [302] **General McKenzie would later testify before the House Foreign Affairs Committee that the negative effect of contractors withdrawing was both “foreseeable” and “a significant factor in the collapse of the Afghan military.”** [303]

Leaders of U.S. contractor companies in Afghanistan expressed grave concern regarding the impact of their departure on their two-decades-long Afghan partners. On May 13, 2021, in an effort to stave off a disaster, they sent a letter to Secretary Blinken, Secretary Austin, and USAID Administrator Samantha Power warning about the damaging impact the removal of contractors — and lack of planning to adequately replace them — would have in Afghanistan. [304] They stressed the “impact and support” provided by U.S. contractors to the Afghan government and their armed forces was at risk during the military retrograde — a risk that was “exacerbated by the current lack of USG-industry collaboration in both Kabul and Washington.” [305] The letter urged “better communications and prudent planning” with contractors to “help protect our people while executing the drawdown and achieving defense, development, and diplomatic goals.” [306]

By July 2021, U.S. contractor support in Afghanistan had been drastically reduced, as reflected in CENTCOM's publication of its figures for the third quarter of fiscal year 2021. There were now only 7,795 total contractors remaining in Afghanistan, consisting of just 2,656 U.S. contractors, 2,291 international contractors, and 2,648 local contractors. [307] Indeed, the Pentagon informed SIGAR that the published numbers were taken from a census in early June 2021 and had “since decreased due to ongoing redeployment and related drawdown activities in accordance with the President's direction.” [308] The July CENTCOM report explained that upon President Biden's order to withdraw all U.S. forces from Afghanistan, CENTCOM conducted a “a comprehensive review of the entire USG contract portfolio within the Combined Joint Operations Area (CJOA).” [309] This review found that the Afghan Air Force depended on U.S. contractor support for logistics and maintenance and concluded, without that contractor support, the Afghan Air Force would risk inoperability. [310]

That same month, President Biden promised Americans and our international allies the United States was giving the Afghan military “all the tools, training, and equipment of any modern military.” [311] Then-Defense Department Spokesperson Rear Admiral John Kirby, now White House national security communications adviser, asserted the Afghan military had “capacity” and “capability.” [312] Contrary to President Biden and his administration’s public commitments, evidence reflected below reveals that, by the time the Taliban captured Kabul on August 15th, the Biden-Harris administration had yet to formulate a plan to provide Afghan forces with contractor and advisor support.

President Biden proceeded to withdraw all U.S. forces, cognizant that U.S. and NATO contractor support would perish once American forces left. According to the July CENTCOM report, “following the POTUS-directed, Afghanistan go-to-zero (GTZ) orders,” its contractor efforts were now “focused on Afghanistan contractor retrograde and mission transition” rather than enabling the Afghan military, calling the retrograde the “highest priority.” [313] General Milley would later inform the House Foreign Affairs Committee, “**I think everybody recognized — it was general consensus — that nothing is going to replace the contractors on the ground. ... The contracting piece is a really significant factor in the collapse of the [Afghan National Defense and Security Forces].**” [314]

As noted above, the loss of contractor support had particularly devastating consequences on the Afghan Air Force. In an April 2021 press conference, General McKenzie explained the critical role of the Afghan Air Force, asserting, “the Afghan Air Force remained a very important force multiplier for the Afghan military,” who served as a “deal-changer” in the fight against the Taliban. [315] That sentiment was echoed by State Department and Defense Department officials who testified before the committee, affirming the Afghan Air Force served as the backbone of the Afghan military’s advantage over the Taliban. [316]

In his interview with the committee, Ambassador Wilson conceded to the critical role of the Afghan Air Force, testifying, “[The Afghan security forces] had a big comparative advantage, it’s called the Air Force, but the Talibs couldn’t really compete very effectively with that.” [317] He added, “The revocation of U.S. air support, and the sustainability issues with Afghan air support, removed an effective comparative advantage from the Afghan government’s military arsenal. This had a direct effect — negative effect — on the Afghan security forces’ morale.” [318] According to Ambassador Wilson, the U.S. military sought to mitigate the damage removing contractors would cause by providing contractor support outside of Afghanistan. [319] He admitted the problem was never fully resolved by the time the Taliban seized Kabul, testifying, “It was a little late.” [320]

Between June and July 2021, the Afghan Air Force reportedly lost the ability to utilize one out of five of its flyable aircraft. [321] A report by SIGAR released in July 2021 issued grave warnings regarding the Afghan Air Force's sustainability without contractor support, finding, "Aircraft platforms are overtaxed due to increased requests for close air support, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance missions, and aerial resupply now that the ANDSF largely lacks U.S. air support. All airframes are flying at least 25% over their recommended scheduled-maintenance intervals." [322] According to a former Afghan National Army senior officer, the Afghan military's breaking point "came when U.S. aircraft maintenance contractors left the country in May and June." [323] He explained to SIGAR, "[E]very aircraft that had battle damage or needed maintenance was grounded. ... In a matter of months, 60 percent [SL8] of [the US-provided UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters] were grounded, with no alternative plan by the Afghan government or U.S. government to bring them back to life." [324]

In August 2021, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Afghanistan David Sedney asserted, "We built the Afghan army in our image to be an army that operates with air support and intelligence [and] whose backbone is contractors." [325] General Miller informed the committee in his testimony that the administration had yet to resolve the contracting piece by the time the Taliban seized Afghanistan on August 15, 2021. "There was an option to get pilots and [contractor logistics support] to UAE for continued training," but the effort was still "in the works" when the Afghan military collapsed and the Taliban took over, at which point "it all became a moot point," he said. [326]

Like U.S. contractors, U.S. military advisors also played a key role in assisting the Afghan security forces. They trained Afghan military commanders and units, shared intelligence and advice in combat, and worked with Afghan government leaders at the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of the Interior. [327] Those functions were performed primarily by NATO's Resolute Support Mission, led by General Miller from September 2018 until July 12, 2021. NATO's Resolute Support Mission was a non-combat mission, established at the invitation of the Afghan government and in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2189 of 2014 to help the Afghan security forces and institutions develop the capacity to defend Afghanistan and protect citizens in the long term. [328] Following President Biden's April 14th go-to-zero order, NATO's Resolute Support Mission announced it would be withdrawing alongside U.S. forces. [329]

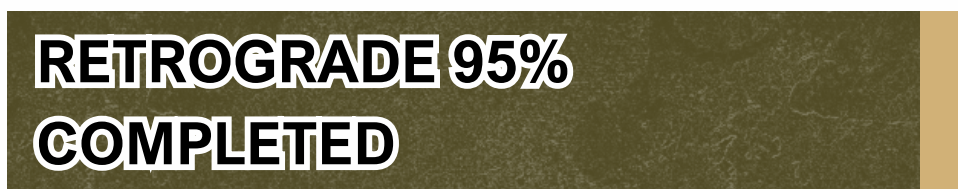
General Miller testified before the committee that once President Biden ordered American troops to leave Afghanistan, U.S. military resources on the ground shifted from supporting the Afghan security forces in their fight against the Taliban to focusing on the retrograde and getting U.S. military personnel out. [330]

He testified that, by the summer of 2021, “There [was] no advise-assist-and-accompany going on at this point, and there hadn’t been for a while, because we’d been in the withdrawal of forces.” [331] General Miller’s testimony is supported by a July 2021 report issued by SIGAR, which affirms that NATO’s Resolution Support Mission informed SIGAR that “Coalition forces [had] been reducing their footprint in Afghanistan in concert with U.S. forces.” [332] Amongst those coalition forces, Germany and Italy concluded their Afghanistan mission at the end of June 2021, the United Kingdom announced the end of their mission on July 8, 2021, and Australia announced on July 11, 2021, that their last personnel left Afghanistan “in recent weeks.” [333] According to the July 2021 report, “At least 16 smaller contingencies reportedly withdrew earlier in June or May [2021].” [334]

The impact of these withdrawals on Afghan security forces was immediate. The NATO Resolution Support Mission ended its train, advise, and assist (TAA) missions with Afghan security forces “at the corps and provincial chief of police levels” in early May 2021. The Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (CSTC-A), which led most the TAA missions with the Afghan military, “significantly reduced TAA staffing at the Ministries of Defense and Interior” in early May 2021 as well. The CSTC-A was dissolved completely on July 12, 2021, when General Miller transferred responsibility from U.S. Forces-Afghanistan to CENTCOM, then led by General McKenzie. [335]

Throughout the summer of 2021, as U.S. troops, contractors, and advisors pulled out, U.S. military bases previously supporting Afghan security forces were shuttered and handed over to the Afghan Ministry of Defense. On June 1, 2021, U.S. forces handed over Camp Stevenson in Mazar-i-Sharif. [336] On June 15, 2021, U.S. forces handed over Camp Dwyer in the Helmand River Valley. [337] On June 28 and 29, 2021, U.S. Forces handed over Camp Arena in Herat and Camp Lincoln next to the primary airport in Mazar-i-Sharif. [338] And finally, on July 1, 2021, U.S. forces handed over Bagram Airfield — the United States’ largest military base in Afghanistan. [339] On July 13, 2021 — a mere two and a half months after President Biden gave the order — CENTCOM announced more than 95% of the retrograde was complete, with nearly all its bases in Afghanistan shuttered and handed over to Afghan forces. [340]

Military Retrograde in Afghanistan



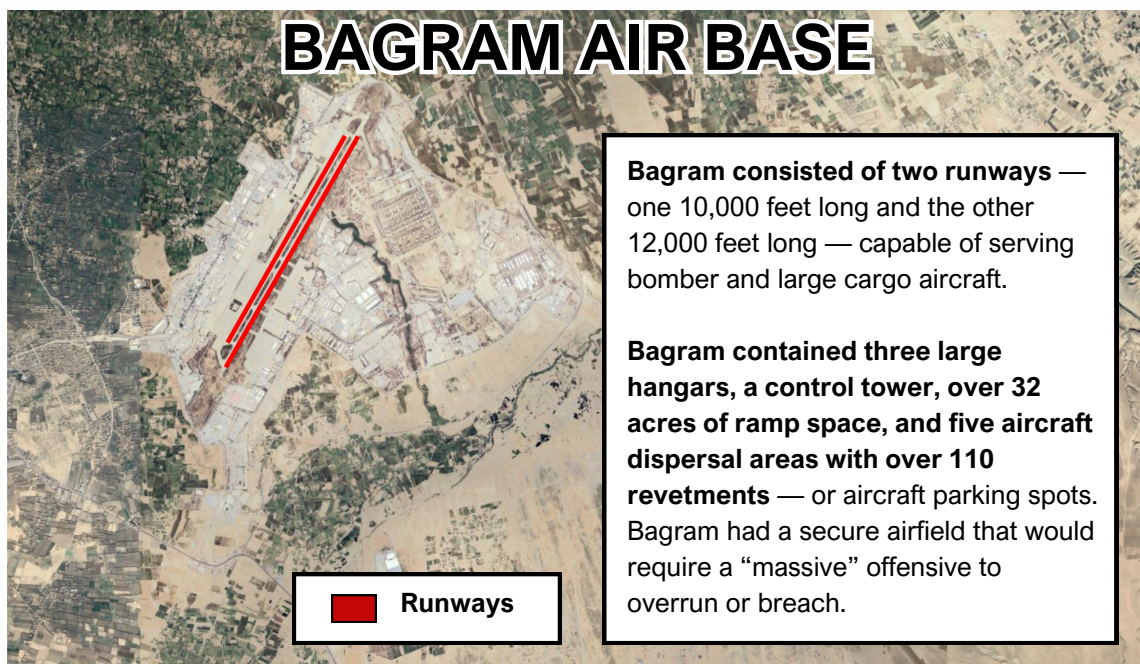
● Completed retrograde

● Remaining retrograde

Closing Bagram Air Base

The United States had been operating out of Bagram Air Base since October of 2001, staffed by the 455th Air Expeditionary Wing of the U.S. Air Force, along with rotating units of the U.S. and coalition forces. As the largest military base in country, Bagram was situated approximately 27 miles north of Kabul and spanned approximately 30 square miles. [341] At its height in 2012, Bagram saw more than 100,000 U.S. troops pass through its compound. [342] **Bagram operated not only as the nerve center for U.S. and NATO operations, but also as a vital counterterrorism base for the region.** In June of 2014, the Department of Defense announced that Bagram was its “busiest single runway airfield,” with 46 types of aircraft used and an average of 700 operations a day. [343]

Bagram consisted of two runways — one 10,000 feet long and the other 12,000 feet long — capable of serving bomber and large cargo aircraft. The 12,000 ft long runway, completed in 2006, cost over \$96 million to construct. Bagram contained three large hangars, a control tower, over 32 acres of ramp space, and five aircraft dispersal areas with over 110 revetments — or aircraft parking spots. [344] Bagram had a secure airfield that would require a “massive” offensive to overrun or breach. [345] With open terrain to the north, east, and west, Bagram could detect and control surrounding movement, and maintained secure control points. [346] Bagram had four industrial-sized incinerators and two industrial-sized material shredders, giving it the mechanical capability to destroy sensitive equipment on an industrial level. [347] In addition to the military operational infrastructure, Bagram had a 50-bed hospital with three surgical operating rooms, a trauma care unit, and a dental clinic, in addition to four dining facilities. [348]



Notably, Bagram also housed the Parwan Detention Facility — Afghanistan’s main military, maximum-security prison — built by the United States in 2009. [349] In 2021, Parwan Detention Facility held around 7,000 prisoners belonging to various insurgent and terrorist organizations. [350] General Miller testified to the committee that the prison housed hardened members of the Taliban, al Qaeda, and ISIS-K — with terrorist groups occupying separate floors. [351] He added that prisoners who may have previously not been sympathizers were likely radicalized in the prison, testifying, “And, in the prisons, it’s a hotbed and always has been for ... terrorists – you know, between a mosque or a prison, you’re going to get more radicalization in a prison.” [352]

Pursuant to President Biden’s go-to-zero order, the U.S military rapidly closed its bases throughout the summer of 2021, including Bagram. There were, however, concerns regarding the closing of Bagram Air Base. Then-Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Afghanistan Mark Evans informed the committee that U.S. military leaders raised the importance of Bagram with interagency leadership and the challenges of operating without it. “They did raise with interagency leadership the fact that once Bagram was closed...their resources on the ground would be lessened compared to beforehand, and they talked about the challenges that that would pose,” he testified. [353]

On June 11, 2021, U.S. forces in Afghanistan — led by General Miller — “paused” Bagram’s closure. [354] According to reporting, the 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.” [355] NSA Sullivan was reportedly questioning whether Bagram should be closed so soon, due to U.S. Embassy Kabul’s large staff footprint and fresh intelligence suggesting the Afghan government was weakening. [356] NSA Sullivan appears to have called Secretary Austin and General Miller for their assessment, inquiring whether Bagram could be kept open longer. [357] Both military officials asserted that Bagram could not be defended while trying to leave the country and maintain force protection. [358]

General Miller informed the committee that the United States could have maintained Bagram, however, with 2,500 American troops in Afghanistan. His assessment was shared by General Milley and General McKenzie, who testified that Bagram would have been defensible with that number. However, it was not an option given President Biden’s decision to withdraw all U.S. forces. [359] According to General McKenzie, “A course of action that retained Bagram was something that the president had specifically decided not to pursue.” [360] And on June 14, 2021, Command Sergeant Major Smith received orders to close Bagram by July 4, 2021. [361] The U.S. military turned over Bagram Air Base to the Afghan military, with the last of the U.S. forces leaving on July 2, 2021, around 3:00 a.m. local time. [362]

The U.S. military airlifted thousands of pieces of equipment out of Bagram in the days and weeks prior to departure. [363] Nevertheless, the Biden-Harris administration left behind \$7.1 billion of transferred defense articles and equipment in Afghanistan. [364] When questioned about the weapons left behind, General Miller informed the committee those were the property of the Afghan government and had been provided pursuant to U.S. security assistance to the Afghan forces. The idea was that those weapons were “going to be used, not abandoned.” [365]

However, it was clear to the administration at that point in time, that it was not a matter of *if* Afghanistan would fall to the Taliban, but a matter of *when*. When asked about this issue, General Milley similarly contended those weapons had not been the United States’ responsibility in the first place — representing they were part of the security assistance sold to Afghan forces over the course of two decades. [366] Both generals implied the Afghan government was ultimately responsible for the subsequent seizure of those weapons by the Taliban. [367] Their assertion, however, ignores General Milley’s own admission, “If we went to zero in U.S. military forces, then there was a high likelihood of a collapse of the government of Afghanistan and the ANSF (sic), with the Taliban taking over.” [368] Similarly, General Miller testified, “It was more a ‘when’ [the Afghan government] going to fall.” [369] Further, Counselor Chollet conceded there was concern about “the ability of the Afghan Government and [the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces] to keep up the fight with the Taliban without sustained U.S. support.” [370] Greg Sherman, the deputy assistant secretary of state and assistant director of High Threat Programs Directorate — the security and law enforcement arm of State Department — stated, “it did not take a crystal ball,” even in May of 2021, to see “the Afghan Government would fall apart.” [371]

There are conflicting reports over whether Afghan military officials were informed by the United States of the Americans departure from Bagram. Afghan General Mir Asadullah Kohistani — who took over command of Bagram for the Afghan military — asserted he heard a “rumor that the Americans had left Bagram ... and finally by seven o’clock in the morning, we understood that it was confirmed that they had already left Bagram.” [372] Darwaish Raufi — Afghanistan’s district administrator for Bagram — confirmed General Kohistani’s account, stating the U.S. departure from Bagram had occurred without proper coordination with local Afghan officials. [373] Reports also convey that following shuttering of the base, looters made their way to Bagram before the Afghan military became aware of the American departure. [374] General McKenzie disputed these claims, asserting, “We did this in close coordination with our allies and partners. Every departure of every element was carefully synchronized across the coalition and with our Afghan partners. On no occasion were they caught unaware by our movements.” [375]

Regardless of those disputed accounts, the shuttering of Bagram further degraded U.S. counterterrorism capabilities and devastated the United States' ability to support the Afghan forces in those efforts. [376] All manned airstrikes in the country were being operated out of U.S. bases in the Gulf region rather than being flown directly from Bagram Air Base. [377] According to General Miller, the retrograde and closing of Bagram took the last of the United States' fixed-wing aircraft over the horizon, keeping only limited capabilities and resulting in a "a reduction in strike." [378] Shuttering Bagram also eliminated the possibility of operating a NEO from the base, should the embassy, U.S. civilians, and Afghan allies needed to be evacuated from Afghanistan.

General McKenzie informed the committee that maintaining Bagram would have helped with conducting a NEO but reiterated that, logistically, it was not possible because it could not have been kept open with fewer than 2,500 troops in the country. [379] General Miller explained the Biden-Harris administration gave the military a cap of 600 people, which forced them to "shut it down." [380] He added, "You had to make a choice on where you were going to operate from." [381]

In his testimony before the committee, Command Sergeant Major Smith noted that "all talks of conducting a NEO [at Bagram] were ceased" once the order to close Bagram was given in mid-June. [382] He assessed that Bagram would have been a "much safer location" to conduct an emergency evacuation. He explained to the committee that he met with Embassy Kabul planners in advance of Bagram's closure in the spring of 2021. "Roughly four planners came to Bagram to conduct a sight survey to determine if Bagram was the appropriate spot to conduct a Non-Combatant Evacuation or NEO," he said. Those planners told him HKIA "was the other option for conducting a NEO." Command Sergeant Major Smith testified he "advised the embassy team against using HKIA" for a NEO for multiple reasons: (1) Bagram could house 35,000 people, HKIA could only house 4,000; (2) HKIA was a shared civilian airfield that was not controlled by the U.S. military, (3) HKIA was surrounded by an urban environment, making it "exceptionally difficult to undertake and control"; (4) Bagram had the logistical capability to hold 130,000 people, and HKIA did not; (5) Bagram had a Role 3 hospital, whereas HKIA had a Role 2 hospital with degraded capabilities; and, finally, (6) Bagram had two operating industrial incinerators to destroy U.S. equipment, and HKIA did not. [383] The NEO conducted in August 2021 would bring to fruition many of Command Sergeant Major Smith's concerns.

How Many Troops Were Needed to Hold Bagram?

In the months after the Taliban takeover, questions arose regarding the use of HKIA for the NEO and the decision to close Bagram. In October 2021, Ms. Psaki claimed it would have taken 5,000 troops to protect Bagram. [384] However, military officials familiar with the country and the military base dispute that claim. General McKenzie testified to the committee that “at 2,500 U.S. forces, if you also assume that will allow the Afghans to stay in the fight, you can maintain a viable base at Bagram. And I considered Bagram critical.” [385] Command Sergeant Major Jacob Smith also said that Bagram could have been maintained with a force level of “2,000” troops in Afghanistan. [386]

Taliban Attacks on U.S. Bases Continue

A report from the Defense Department’s lead inspector general found that from April through June of 2021, the Taliban “were believed to have executed a few ineffective indirect fire attacks in the direction of U.S. or NATO bases.” [387] The inspector general affirmed the Taliban conducted limited attacks on coalition bases, including attacks immediately preceding President Biden’s go-to-zero order. [388]

On April 2, 2021, the Taliban fired rockets toward a coalition military base in the Khost province, situated in the eastern part of Afghanistan and sharing a border with Pakistan. [389] The rocket missed the base but hit a nearby village. [390] The Taliban also fired rockets at an airport in Khost where U.S. troops were based. [391] On April 7, 2021, the Taliban launched a rocket attack against Kandahar Air Base, where several hundred troops were still located. [392] Rear Admiral Kirby acknowledged the attacks but refused to provide an assessment of whether they violated the Taliban’s commitments under the Doha Agreement. [393]

On May 1, 2021, in the aftermath of President Biden’s go-to-zero order, there was an attack on Bagram Air Base, killing one and wounding 24 Afghan personnel.[394] That same day, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid asserted that the Taliban could “take every counteraction it deems appropriate against the occupying forces.” [395] On May 2, 2021, the Taliban “launched two rocket attacks against coalition forces at Kandahar Airfield.” [396] Rear Admiral Kirby repeatedly referred to the attacks as “small, harassing attacks,” asserting they had no impact on the withdrawal. [397] In his transcribed interview, General Miller acknowledged to the committee that the Taliban conducted “at least a couple indirect fire attacks” on U.S. forces. [398]

These indirect fire attacks continued throughout the military retrograde, with the Taliban conducting one against Bagram Air Base on June 28, 2021, just a few days before the United States ended its presence there. [399] General McKenzie suggested such attacks were carried out by “low-level Taliban commanders who didn’t get the word,” thereby attempting to excuse the Taliban as a group. [400] Ambassador Khalilzad testified to the committee that central Taliban authorities claimed to have never authorized any of the attacks, instead blaming local commanders. [401]

Transfer of Command

On July 2, 2021 — the same day Bagram was shuttered — Rear Admiral Kirby announced that Secretary Austin would be moving forward with transitioning authority in Afghanistan from General Miller to General McKenzie. “As part of our ongoing draw down process, the Secretary approved a plan today to transfer command authority over our mission in Afghanistan from General Scott Miller to General Frank McKenzie. We expect that transfer to be effective later this month,” he stated. [402] Rear Admiral Kirby also announced Secretary Austin had approved the dissolution of U.S. Forces-Afghanistan and the establishment of U.S. Forces Afghanistan-Forward, which would be led by Rear Admiral Vasely out of Kabul. [403] Rear Admiral Vasely was to be supported by Brigadier General Curtis Buzzard, who would lead the Defense Security Management Office Afghanistan, based in Qatar and charged with funding the Afghan military. [404] Rear Admiral Kirby proclaimed, “This change in leadership structure and the turnover today of Bagram airbase to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces are key milestones in our draw down process, reflecting a smaller U.S. force presence in Afghanistan.” [405]

General Miller handed over command to General McKenzie during a ceremony at Resolute Support headquarters in Kabul on July 12, 2021. [406] At that point, the U.S. military had 650 personnel in Afghanistan whom General McKenzie said were “solely designed to provide security for the U.S. embassy and Karzai International Airport.” [407] In his testimony before the committee, General McKenzie explained the United States had “substantially accomplished the military withdrawal by July 12.” [408] General Milley affirmed that assessment, testifying to the committee that “the uniformed military understood that our mission was to conduct a retrograde of the remaining U.S. military forces and equipment while leaving a small contingent to defend the American Embassy while diplomatic outcomes were negotiated. That mission was successfully accomplished under the leadership of General Scott Miller” in July 2021. [409] With General Miller’s departure from Afghanistan, the United States no longer had a four-star general in Afghanistan commanding American forces.

THE STATE DEPARTMENT DURING THE **RETROGRADE**

“The Fatal Flaw”: Maintaining a Diplomatic Presence without U.S. Troops

Despite the military’s rapid retrograde throughout the summer of 2021 and grave security environment, President Biden decided to maintain a U.S. diplomatic presence in Kabul following the departure of American forces. The commander-in-chief’s go-to-zero order only applied to the military and not diplomats in Afghanistan.

In his April 14, 2021, withdrawal announcement, President Biden explained that his administration would determine “over the next few months” what “U.S. diplomatic presence in Afghanistan will look like, including how we’ll ensure the security of our diplomats.” [410] General Miller testified to the committee that upon President Biden’s announcement, he recommended U.S. Embassy Kabul leave along with the military, explaining that the longer they lingered in the theater, the greater the risk to their presence. [411]

Less than a week later, on April 20, 2021, then-State Department Spokesperson Ned Price announced that, while U.S. forces would be withdrawn, Embassy Kabul would continue operations in Afghanistan following their departure. He asserted, “What we have said and what President Biden announced last week is that by later this year, by September, all American service members will be out of Afghanistan except for those required for the continued operation of our embassy in Kabul. We believe it is important to continue the partnership between the United States and the Afghan Government as well as the Afghan people.” [412]

Spokesperson Price failed to mention, however, that once U.S. forces were withdrawn from Afghanistan, the embassy would only be secured by a residual force of approximately 650 servicemembers. [413] Colonel Krummrich informed the committee this “reduced the U.S. footprint to the U.S. Embassy and its support missions at HKIA. I termed it as ‘the island’ — a space that included the embassy compound and the roads leading to the airport, and HKIA.” [414] According to Colonel Krummrich, when the plan to withdraw U.S. forces “was received by the CENTCOM team, a grim cloud of impending doom hung over the staff.” [415]

As the summer progressed and Afghanistan’s territories fell into the hands of the Taliban, President Biden reiterated his commitment to keep U.S. Embassy Kabul open — it appears no matter what the cost would be. On July 8, 2021, he announced, “I intend to maintain our diplomatic [presence] in Afghanistan, and we are coordinating closely with our international partners in order to continue to secure the international airport.” [416]

Despite warnings from the U.S. military, President Biden and the State Department remained steadfast in keeping U.S. Embassy Kabul open. Evidence uncovered in the investigation reveals that it was not until early August 2021 — mere weeks before the Taliban marched into Kabul on August 15th — that President Biden and his State Department even entertained shuttering Embassy Kabul. [417] General Milley testified before the committee that to this day, his “biggest regret” in the Afghanistan withdrawal was not doing more to get Embassy Kabul out along with the military in July. [418]

The State Department’s Skewed Risk Assessments

Despite warnings by U.S. military leaders, throughout the spring and summer of 2021, State Department officials strongly advocated for and supported U.S. Embassy Kabul remaining open following the military’s departure from Afghanistan. Consequently, the State Department’s planning centered on maintaining the embassy, rather than laying the groundwork for a potential NEO alongside the military.

At the State Department, D-MR McKeon and Counselor Chollet split the responsibilities for Afghanistan policy. [419] Testifying before the committee, D-MR McKeon affirmed, “the position of the president and the secretary was that we sought to maintain a presence with the United States Embassy in Kabul after the military withdrawal,” and that position drove the planning efforts being undertaken after the President Biden’s go-to-zero order. [420] Counselor Chollet similarly asserted, “certainly there was a desire to maintain the embassy in Afghanistan and a belief that it could be done,” stemming from the fact that, “the U.S. operates embassies in many, many dangerous environments around the world, without the U.S. military present and so I had confidence the State Department could do that.” [421] Counselor Chollet, despite serving as Secretary Blinken’s primary advisor, claimed was not aware of whether the secretary thought keeping the embassy open would be too risky at any point throughout 2021 — from the issuance of the go-to-zero order to the completion of the withdrawal. [422]

In his testimony before the committee, General Milley explained there was a consensus amongst U.S. military leaders that “the embassy should be coming out roughly speaking the same time we should be coming out.” [423] **According to General Milley, military leaders informed the Biden-Harris administration during the spring and summer of 2021 that it was not feasible to maintain a diplomatic presence in Afghanistan without U.S forces. “We strongly thought at the time that the embassy should come out and that it was not tenable to keep an embassy in a war zone. And so, we thought they should be coming out,” he said. [424] He asserted that keeping U.S. Embassy Kabul open was the “fundamental flaw” in the administration’s withdrawal. [425]**

General McKenzie agreed and also criticized the decision to remove U.S. troops before getting U.S. civilians out of Afghanistan. In his testimony before the committee, he explained, “that particular decision was the fatal flaw that created what happened in August” and “the alternative was, of course, as we began to drawdown in mid-April, to begin to bring our embassy and our citizens out.” [426]

After President Biden’s go-to-zero order, Secretary Blinken went to Kabul and told President Ghani and Ambassador Wilson the president’s intention to keep U.S. Embassy Kabul open even after the last of the American troops left. [427] Ambassador Wilson then understood his orders to “ensure that steps necessary to continue our diplomatic presence and support for Afghanistan got taken.” [428] Spokesperson Price, who accompanied Secretary Blinken on this trip, confirmed the State Department’s position at this point was “to maintain a diplomatic presence in Afghanistan after the U.S. military withdrawal.” [429]

Acting Under Secretary of State for Management Carol Perez was the State Department official responsible for maintaining a safe platform for the ongoing presence in Afghanistan. Acting Under Secretary Perez attested that, after the president’s decision, the State Department was “focused on an enduring diplomatic presence.” [430] Her Chief of Staff, Jonathan Mennuti, described how, upon returning from a trip to Kabul, “[Acting Under Secretary Perez] was very energized to make sure that the Department, in cooperation with the interagency, was able to do whatever was necessary to ensure that the embassy could continue to operate after the military withdrew.” [431]

Interview notes from the State Department’s AAR reveal there was a lack of understanding in the State Department regarding how it fulfills its responsibilities under 22 U.S.C. 4802, a federal law which relates to the secretary of state’s responsibilities for providing for the security of diplomatic missions, such as the U.S. Embassy in Kabul. [432] The interview notes further show that, according to Deputy Secretary Sherman, there was a “pressure to get to yes” in the security assessments so that U.S. Embassy Kabul could remain open. [433]

Disagreement over Embassy Kabul’s ability to safely operate without a U.S. military presence was a point of contention during a May 8, 2021, Rehearsal of Concept (ROC) drill including State Department and Defense Department officials. [434] From the Defense Department, General Milley, General Miller, and Secretary Austin were in attendance. [435] From the State Department, D-MR McKeon was in attendance, while Secretary Blinken did not appear or participate. [436] NSA Sullivan and CIA Director William Burns also joined. [437]

General Miller informed the committee that during the ROC drill, military officials warned that all U.S. personnel had to leave with the military. [438] They assessed that the more people who remained at the embassy and, more broadly, in Kabul, the more people the military would have to evacuate in a crisis situation. [439] The State Department rejected the military's warnings. In response to those concerns, D-MR McKeon said to military officials, "We at the State Department have a much higher risk tolerance than you guys." [440] When asked by the committee about this exchange, General Miller affirmed its occurrence and explained that the State Department did not have a higher risk tolerance, but instead exhibited "a lack of understanding of the risk" in Afghanistan. [441]

Following the ROC drill, General Miller shared the military's assessment with Ambassador Wilson in Kabul, who, like D-MR McKeon, disagreed. [442] General Miller testified to the committee that Ambassador Wilson appeared to have received direction from senior administration officials and was committed to maintaining the embassy. "Obviously he got direction from higher to maintain an embassy presence there, so he's intent on executing that. Likely a position a little bit different than mine, that this is – we're not prepared for a security or a political failure of the government," General Miller explained. [443] A U.S. military officer recalled Ambassador Wilson saying, "I am maniacal about the Embassy remaining in Kabul." [444] When asked why Ambassador Wilson would make such statements, the officer explained, "The State Department and the president were saying it. Consequently, [Wilson] and others start saying it, thinking that they will make it work." [445]

The State Department nevertheless consistently represented to the American public that it planned for all contingencies. [446] In reality, the department's skewed risk assessments of the security situation in Afghanistan contributed to and are indicative of its failure to plan for those contingencies, including the eventual NEO.

The State Department's Refusal to Reduce its Diplomatic Footprint

State Department leaders not only insisted on keeping U.S. Embassy Kabul open against military warnings, but they also refused to reduce their diplomatic footprint as a security measure. According to Rear Admiral Vasely, senior officials at Embassy Kabul — including Ambassador Wilson — opposed the military's request to scale back staff. [447] Ambassador Wilson's primary focus was keeping the embassy open.

At the end of April 2021, the State Department placed Embassy Kabul on ordered departure status. Ordered departure is "[a]n evacuation procedure by which the number of U.S. government employees, eligible family members, or both, at a Foreign Service post is reduced." [448] And once issued, it is mandatory. [449]

State Department AAR investigators found, however, that the order “did not result in a notable immediate reduction of the embassy’s footprint.” [450] One State Department employee informed AAR interviewers there was “no clear-eyed view of the situation on the ground,” and that “people felt that more action was needed to withdraw people, but instead we were expanding.” [451] Deputy Assistant Secretary Greg Sherman told AAR investigators that Ambassador Wilson actually made the embassy larger after the ordered departure status was implemented. [452]

A State Department employee confirmed to AAR interviewers that Ambassador Wilson and his leadership team believed ordered departure status was an “overreaction” and began playing “shell games” to get around it. [453] The employee said the embassy’s front office forced embassy personnel to come back after Rest and Recuperation, or R&R, which the employee explained increased the embassy’s footprint. [454] R&R “provides temporary relief for employees and eligible family members from posts with distinct and significant difficulties.” [455] The employee added that there were more people at the embassy in August 2021 than in April 2021 as a result of Ambassador Wilson’s shell games. [456] Deputy Secretary Sherman said Ambassador Wilson also warned the embassy’s Regional Security Officer (RSO) that he would not discuss staffing with the RSO. [457]

According to the State Department’s AAR, in response to the ordered departure status, Ambassador Wilson sent an action request to Acting Under Secretary Perez on May 8, 2021, saying the embassy “requests that the Department favorably consider requests — even while Ordered Departure is in place — for the return of Mission-Critical Staff from R&R and other travel.” [458] This was only three days after the ROC drill where Defense Department officials stressed their concerns about the safety and security of embassy personnel remaining in Afghanistan without a military presence. A State Department employee informed AAR investigators that “more should have been done to prepare for the eventuality of the military departure.” [459] The employee said there was complete inaction by the embassy. [460]

U.S. Embassy Kabul also decided to proceed with its summer staff turnover in the weeks and days ahead of the Taliban takeover, with experienced embassy staff departing the country and new staff coming in as the Taliban was on the verge of taking control of the country. [461] The senior RSO and two deputies, in addition to the consular chief and some consular officers — all of whom had been at the embassy for the prior year — departed in early August 2021. [462] The State Department’s AAR confirmed the fall of Kabul “occurred while the embassy was experiencing a major staff transition.” [463] The AAR found, “The decision to proceed with a normal rotation rested on overly optimistic assessments of the situation in Afghanistan, which some questioned.” [464]

The impact of key officials rotating out and new officials rotating in “meant that a significant number of officers, including some in key crisis leadership positions like the senior RSO and the head of the Consular Section, had arrived only weeks and in some cases days before the Taliban entered Kabul.” [465] The fact that “so many personnel were new placed a tremendous burden on them to get up to speed on post-specific crisis planning and responsibilities as the situation in Afghanistan deteriorated.” [466] And the fact that the embassy decided to do a massive summer staff turnover at the same time the Taliban was marching toward Kabul “made everything more difficult for those involved.” [467] According to the State Department inspector general, the timing of the staff rotations and turnover resulted in “for a brief time, the embassy allow[ing] some personnel who were ordered to depart in April to return, increasing the overall number of employees at the embassy.” [468]

Sanitized Security Assessments at the State Department

The differing risk assessments and assumptions regarding the situation in Afghanistan would inform the State Department’s planning over the course of the spring and summer of 2021. In addition to warnings surrounding the embassy’s footprint, Deputy Assistant Secretary Sherman told AAR interviewers the State Department wanted to paint a rosy picture of the situation in Afghanistan. [469] In the aftermath of the NEO and Taliban takeover, he informed them the State Department’s Diplomatic Security Bureau edits to memoranda regarding security threats in Afghanistan were watered down by the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, before being sent to Secretary Blinken. [470] He believed this was done pursuant to the pressure imposed by State Department leaders to keep Embassy Kabul open despite the Taliban’s rapid territorial gains in the spring and summer of 2021. [471]

Deputy Assistant Secretary Sherman was not the only State Department official concerned about reports being watered down to achieve the administration’s objectives in Afghanistan. The State Department’s Political-Military Bureau — which was responsible for bridging the gap between the State Department and the Defense Department — faced issues as well. A State Department official informed AAR investigators that leaders within this bureau were watering down reports from the Defense Department. [472] **The official explained there were “times, depending on the commander, when [the Political-Military Bureau] would completely rewrite a reporting cable that essentially changed the entire direction of the report.”** [473]

A U.S. military officer involved in planning for the NEO told Defense Department investigators that Embassy Kabul’s RSO wrote a statement providing an assessment on Afghanistan that “said provincial capitals failing was imminent and that the ANDSF would fail.” [474] But “the writer of that statement was told to change the statement, likely by [Deputy Chief of Mission Scott Weinhold],” the officer said.

“The writer would not change the statement. It was therefore sidelined and buried. A watered-down timeline was eventually pushed out. It was a total clash of policy and things not being done.” [475]

Information being watered down or softened was not happening in a vacuum. Ambassador Dan Smith, who led the State Department’s AAR, testified to the committee “there was a concern” from members of Diplomatic Security “that sometimes, in the broader context, some of their warnings may have been more muted than they should have been.” [476] Members of Diplomatic Security informed Ambassador Smith their inputs “might have been softened or they were not fully articulated” and they were “potentially” watered down. [477] Ambassador Smith conveyed to the committee that “they were, at times, concerned that people were not paying enough attention to what they were saying” regarding security concerns in Afghanistan. [478] One State Department employee told AAR interviewers the Biden-Harris administration brought Diplomatic Security into the loop, but that it went from too little to too much bureaucracy. [479] This employee said, “We would highlight our security concerns and we would see our language had been softened.” [480]

According to a State Department employee, at least some of the disconnect regarding State Department threat assessments could be attributed to the “skewed” views of those at Embassy Kabul who had dedicated their professional lives to Afghanistan and “could not see what was going on.” [481] Deputy Assistant Secretary Sherman informed AAR interviewers that Ambassador Wilson would tell him the Taliban were “rational and logical” and “won’t attack the embassy.” [482] Another State Department employee told AAR interviewers that Ambassador Wilson was downplaying intelligence community assessments following the Doha Agreement’s May 1, 2021, withdrawal deadline. [483] Ambassador Wilson also admonished his staff for presenting forthright situation reports on Afghanistan. [484] Back in Washington, D.C., the Consular Affairs office became concerned about the embassy’s ability to function under Ambassador Wilson’s leadership. [485]

Confusion of Leadership at the State Department

The State Department’s desire to maintain a diplomatic presence in Kabul contributed to their lack of urgency and their delays in planning for the worst-case scenarios. Once the withdrawal was announced, D-MR McKeon charged Acting Under Secretary Perez with planning for “a safe platform for the ongoing presence.” [486] Acting Under Secretary Perez testified to the committee she began talks with the Bureau of Diplomatic Security in April 2021, [487] traveling then to Kabul to assess the needs of the embassy. [488]

Under Secretary Perez, however, admitted to the committee, “I am not an expert,” and she “relied upon the people who had more experience than [she] did and expertise to, you know, help [her] assess whether or not this was a good thing or not.” [489] She informed the committee that “everyone” thought “Kabul itself would stay safe.” [490] The emphasis on Kabul led her to be “very much surprised by what happened” across Afghanistan, saying, “I think we were all like, how did this happen?” [491]

As the situation devolved in Afghanistan, State Department employees confessed to AAR investigators there was confusion about who at the State Department was in charge of the overall situation. [492] Indeed, Acting Under Secretary Perez informed AAR investigators that she did not know who at the State Department was in charge of the crisis in the country. [493] One State Department employee told investigators Under Secretary for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland, given her bureau’s jurisdiction, “was supposed to be in overall charge, but that was not really the case.” [494] When that same employee asked State Department leadership who was in charge of Afghan policy, leadership informed them D-MR McKeon and the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs (SCA) were leading the State Department’s Afghanistan policy, including a potential NEO. [495]

A State Department employee informed AAR investigators, however, that D-MR McKeon’s office was not actually set up to properly deal with the nuts and bolts of a NEO. [496] Another State Department employee told AAR investigators D-MR McKeon conducted NEO planning without input from U.S. Embassy Kabul leaders, and his staff were instructed not to bother the embassy. [497] And finally, a State Department employee told AAR investigators there was no coordinated planning body within the State Department, and it was unclear who owned contingency planning on Afghanistan. [498]

In his testimony before the committee, D-MR McKeon sought to rebuff those claims, asserting that he and Counselor Chollet split responsibilities on Afghanistan. [499] He testified he was the senior leader in the State Department who had overall responsibility for planning the withdrawal and potential NEO from Afghanistan. In that capacity, he stated he also worked on foreign assistance issues, Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs), and Embassy Kabul security issues. [500] Nevertheless, key decisions regarding Embassy Kabul, including its shuttering, remained with President Biden’s NSC, according to D-MR McKeon. “Well, it’s a corporate decision. And what I mean by that is it’s an interagency decision led by the NSC and the White House that we should close the embassy.”[501]

Counselor Chollet, according to D-MR McKeon, predominately focused on “how we would continue to maintain a posture [in Afghanistan] and ability to assess the terrorism threat and continue to take counterterrorism action from outside the country.” [502] In his testimony before the committee, Counselor Chollet downplayed his role in the State Department’s Afghanistan policy, claiming he did not oversee any planning pertaining to the Afghanistan withdrawal and that no one person at the State Department was responsible for that planning. [503]

Acting Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs (SCA) Bureau Dean Thompson testified to the committee that, despite leading the regional policy bureau responsible for Afghanistan, he largely deferred to Ambassador Khalilzad on the Taliban’s conduct in the country. “Again, I don’t remember us making kind of a score sheet for [the Taliban] separate from what Ambassador Khalilzad was doing. The discussion about what the Taliban was doing, how the negotiations for the Doha Agreement and beyond were working, that was very much in his lane,” Acting Assistant Secretary Thompson said. [504] However, according to multiple State Department sources, including D-MR McKeon, Ambassador Khalilzad was not transparent in his assessments and did not share information. It remains unclear what equities in the State Department the SCA Bureau took ownership of.

Confusion reigned across all levels at the State Department on roles and responsibilities regarding Afghanistan. Despite tasking D-MR McKeon and Counselor Chollet with leading the State Department’s Afghanistan policy, Secretary Blinken remained largely absent throughout the State Department’s withdrawal planning and eventual NEO. Indeed, witnesses interviewed, and documents produced by federal agencies pursuant to the investigation, confirm Secretary Blinken likely ceded his responsibility to subordinates on Afghanistan.

Failure to Determine Eligible Evacuation Populations

While planning for U.S. Embassy Kabul’s continued operations following the military withdrawal, the State Department remained responsible for determining and establishing eligible evacuations populations in the event of a NEO. [505] The State Department was required to categorize eligible evacuees from Afghanistan, formulate a plan for their departure, and coordinate efforts on the ground to ensure U.S. diplomats could identify and clearly communicate with U.S. citizens, legal permanent residents (LPRs), and Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders. [506] The State Department failed in those responsibilities.

“At-Risk Afghans”

In his testimony before the committee, D-MR McKeon explained that, although he was responsible for the State Department’s SIV program, decisions pertaining to who was eligible for evacuation were ceded to President Biden’s NSC. [507] Nevertheless, Ambassador Dan Smith confirmed that no one “had answered the question of, what is the universe of people, in extremis, in a worst case -scenario, for whom we are going to be responsible in that environment? How many people are we going to take out?” [508] Outside of Americans, LPRs, and SIV holders, the category of “at-risk Afghans” was never defined by the time NEO operations began. [509] Embassy Kabul staff never received an official definition of “Afghans at risk,” “vulnerable Afghans,” or the criteria for determining Afghans’ eligibility for evacuation. [510]

Despite recognizing that the situation in Afghanistan was deteriorating as early as April 2021, according to Consul General Jim DeHart, Ambassador Bass’ deputy lead during the evacuation, “From his perspective, [it] seemed like we hadn’t scoped the issue properly.” [511] While the State Department focused on the queue of Afghans in the SIV process, that was just “the tip of the iceberg.” [512] Consul General DeHart asserted that, due to a lack of policy decision, the issue of who the U.S. was responsible for evacuating and where “the line is drawn,” was never resolved. [513]

Ambassador Bass further confirmed he had never received a list of which Afghans qualified for evacuation nor any instruction on criteria for evacuation eligibility, but based on his tenure as ambassador, he “understood broadly what the categories were and the kinds of people who would be at risk in that environment at that time.” [514] Consul General Jayne Howell — lead consular officer on the ground during the evacuation — testified the Afghans at-risk group “was obviously the most difficult to define.” [515] During the evacuation, D-MR McKeon described to the committee that the guidance provided to foreign services officers regarding who qualified to be evacuated was, “people who could show some nexus to our commitment and the American program and projects, there was more latitude given in the guidance to the field.” [516]

The State Department AAR concluded the failure to determine the criteria and universe of “at-risk Afghans” added significantly to the challenges faced by the State Department and Defense Department during the evacuation. [517] The State Department inspector general further explained that “without clear criteria the embassy was unable to holistically plan for potential Afghan evacuees, which may have contributed to the underestimation of potential evacuees.” [518]

Americans in Afghanistan

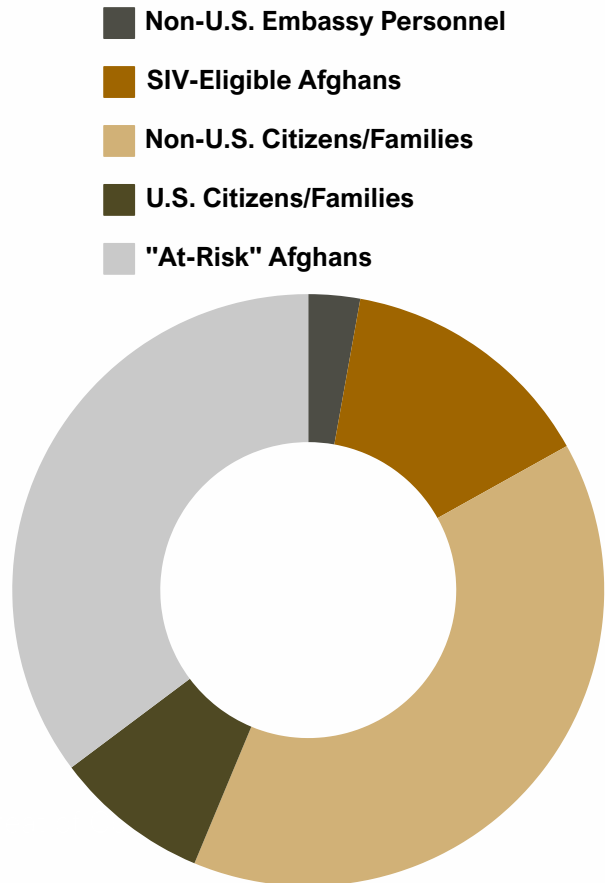
The United States does not obligate American citizens to register with the U.S. government when they travel abroad, making it difficult to calculate how many Americans are overseas. The State Department, nevertheless, made no effort throughout 2021 — despite the high-threat environment developing in Afghanistan — to adapt and improve State Department processes to address this issue for the country. D-MR McKeon admitted to the committee he made no effort to change or improve the State Department’s ability to track Americans in Afghanistan — even as the security situation deteriorated in the country. [519] He also admitted no extra efforts were made to help the problem of not knowing how many LPRs were in Afghanistan in 2021. [520]

The State Department’s failure to mitigate this issue resulted in inaccurate F-77 Reports of Potential Evacuees. The purpose of the F-77 Report is to estimate the total number and location of U.S. citizens and other potential evacuees, which plays a central role in evacuation planning. [521] The State Department inspector general found that Embassy Kabul updated its F-77 Report of Potential Evacuees first in February 2021 and then in June 2021. [522] Surprisingly, the embassy’s June update “reduced the estimated number of potential evacuees,” at a time when the Taliban were rapidly sweeping across Afghanistan and visa inquiries were on the rise. [523] The inspector general found, “The numbers of individuals the embassy considered to be potential evacuees in both the February 2021 and the June 2021 F-77 Reports were far fewer than the number of individuals that Secretary Blinken later indicated had been evacuated.” [524] The inspector general attributed the underestimation to unreliable data sourced by Embassy Kabul, which depended on user input. [525] The inspector general concluded, “Embassy Kabul was unprepared to account for the individuals evacuated.” [526]

D-MR McKeon admitted to the committee the State Department never confirmed the number of Americans in Afghanistan throughout 2021. [527] Ms. Psaki further testified, because the U.S. government does not keep a record of American citizens overseas, the administration never had a full picture of the number of Americans in Afghanistan throughout the withdrawal. [528] Yet, despite these officials now acknowledging the administration did not have a clear accounting of Americans in Afghanistan, a U.S. military officer recalled Embassy Kabul “provid[ing] an estimate that 40,000 evacuees would be the requirement” for a NEO at an August 2021 planning meeting. [529]

Scope of Evacuation

Although the State Department and the administration failed to accurately assess the evacuation population, the military attempted to estimate the number of evacuees in the event of a NEO. General McKenzie explained the U.S. military determined there was a “potential requirement for 141,920 people to bring out” of Afghanistan. [530] The State Department’s June 2021 F-77 list for Afghanistan “identified 12,044 potential American citizens and family members eligible for evacuation” and “also identified 13,304 non-American citizens who would be evacuated, which, when a coefficient for family members was applied, yielded a total of 55,876. Added to the U.S. citizens, we reached a total of 67,920.” [531] The military estimated “4,000 personnel from other embassies would need to be evacuated” as well. [532] General McKenzie said the military was “working off of a projected total of 20,000 Afghans for the SIV program,” but “we were getting conflicting guidance about what this category” of at-risk Afghans would entail.” [533] In the end, General McKenzie directed his team to assume an additional 50,000 Afghans would fall under the at-risk Afghan category. [534]

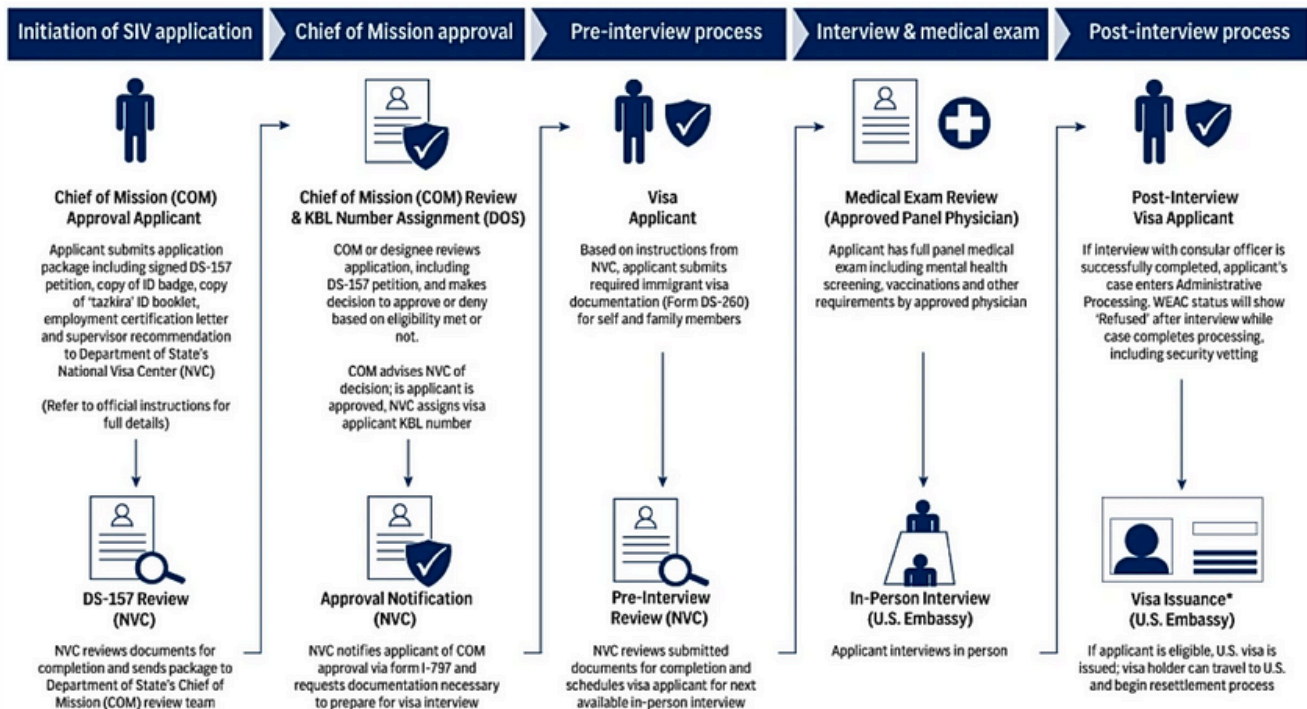


The Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Program

“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.” [535]

— General Milley, May 26, 2021

Special immigrant visa (SIV) application vetting and approval process



*Visa application denial can occur at any step in this process. For official instructions go to <https://travel.state.gov/afghan>

Source: afghanevac.org. Based on U.S. government guidance as of July 20, 2022

AP

The United States' SIV Program is a legal pathway to lawful permanent residency in the United States available to Afghans nationals who worked for and supported the U.S. mission there. As a special immigrant category, the SIV program is designed to provide Afghan nationals the opportunity to apply for a visa and, after a comprehensive process, obtain authorization from the U.S. government to enter and live in the United States. The SIV program is intended to benefit America's allies by providing a direct pathway to a green card. The visa aims to serve as recognition of their assistance to the United States, as well as to ensure their safety from retaliation by America's enemies for that support. Applicants to the SIV program, however, have to complete a thorough process before becoming eligible for this benefit. The number of SIVs available to Afghan nationals was set by U.S. Congress when the program was first begun in 2009, and Congress has since increased that number over time as the program has grown. [536]

The application process for Afghan SIVs takes years and requires evidence to establish that the applicant worked for the U.S. government, including a written recommendation from a general or flag officer in the chain of command of the U.S. Armed Forces unit the applicant supported, or from the chief of mission at U.S. Embassy Kabul. [537] Completing this first step — known as Chief of Mission or COM approval — was necessary to begin the SIV application process. [538]

The COM approval would ensure that the Afghan applicant (1) worked for the United States, (2) faced a threat due to their employment, and (3) they were of Afghan nationality. [539] The National Visa Center (NVC) would then verify the information and recommend for approval to U.S. Embassy Kabul, which was responsible for final COM authorization. [540] Applicants were also required to submit additional family records, including birth and marriage certificates for eligible family members. [541]

Once the COM authorization and additional documents were processed by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), applicants had to undergo a background check and an in-person interview at U.S. Embassy Kabul with any eligible family members, where wait times could last months. [542] The applicants, and their eligible family members, were then required to have a medical examination. [543] Eligible family members only included the applicant's spouse and unmarried children under the age of 21. [544] Only then would the visa be granted. Once the SIV holder immigrated to the United States, they could apply to have their status adjusted to receive green cards. [545]

The SIV program is managed by the State Department, primarily the NVC, the Afghan SIV (ASIV) Unit, and the U.S. Embassy Kabul. [546] The ASIV Unit was responsible for determining eligibility, verifying submitted documentation, and providing the embassy a recommendation on approval. [547] U.S. Embassy Kabul was responsible for providing final COM approval. [548]



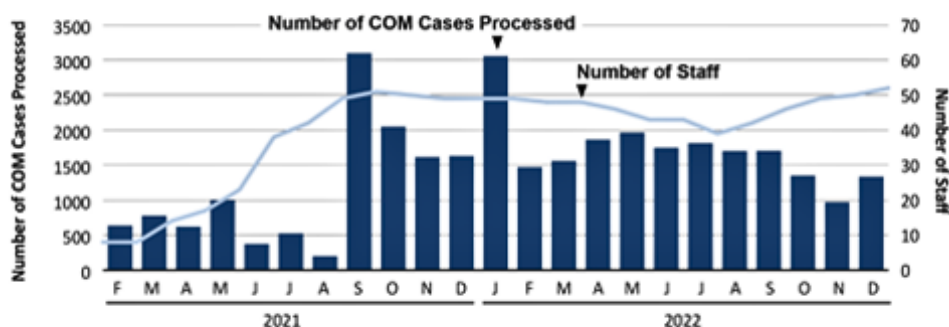
Reuters

According to congressional mandate, SIV applications had to be adjudicated within nine months. [549] Over time, however, the program developed a backlog, which was exacerbated by COVID-19. This meant by May 20, 2021, there were 18,000 applicants in the SIV pipeline, not including dependent family members, with the process taking an average of 996 days or three years. [550] State Department witnesses interviewed by the committee, including D-MR McKeon, who was responsible for the SIV program, pointed to COVID-19, staffing, and a late coordination in 2021 by the State Department with Defense Department as causes of the backlog. [551]

D-MR McKeon testified to the committee, prior to announcing his go-to-zero order, President Biden issued an order in February 2021 to increase the number of Embassy Kabul employees processing SIV approvals to expedite the application process. [552] According to D-MR McKeon, the order increased in embassy staff processing SIV applications from 10 individuals to 40 to 50. [553] This confirmed Secretary Blinken’s testimony to Congress from June 2021 that the State Department planned to add an additional 50 personnel to help expedite SIV application processing. However, Secretary Blinken made it clear this new staff would only be in place by “the end of July” 2021. [554]

Yet, at a time when Afghan SIV applicants were most desperate to depart because of the imminent U.S. withdrawal and Taliban advances, the committee’s investigation has revealed the State Department processed significantly fewer COM approved cases in June, July, and August 2021 than in the earlier months of 2021: from 3,000 in January to less than 2,000 in July. [555] In June and July 2021, Embassy Kabul stopped all of the required in-person visa interviews due to a rise in COVID-19 at exactly the time the SIV-related emails rose significantly from 200 per day pre-June 2021 to 1,500 per day by July 2021. [556]

Figure 4: ASIV Unit’s Staffing Levels and COM Cases Processed From February 2021 Through December 2022



Source: OIG generated based on information provided by ASIV Unit officials regarding ASIV Unit’s staffing levels and COM cases processed from February 2021 through December 2022.

D-MR McKeon testified to the committee one contributing factor to this delay was that a significant number of U.S. employers of Afghan SIV applicants no longer existed or failed to provide the applicants with the appropriate paperwork. [557] Yet, despite being aware of this issue for years, the Department of Defense inspector general uncovered the State Department waited until June 1, 2021, to request the Defense Department for help to verifying SIV applicants' qualifying employment. [558] D-MR McKeon admitted he did not know "why it was not done before June." [559]

The Defense Department's Director of Afghanistan Strategy and Policy Hila Hanif launched a team aimed at speeding the processing of SIVs once the State Department finally made the request. [560] By the summer, the team reached an agreement with the State Department which allowed the Defense Department to submit Afghan names directly to the State Department's Priority 1 (P-1) refugee referral system. [561] The State Department's delays in addressing longstanding issues within the SIV program necessitated the use of alternate pathways, like the P-1 and Priority 2 (P-2) programs, to provide vulnerable Afghans the opportunity to relocate to the United States. So finally, in response to delays in SIV processing, at the beginning of August 2021 —mere weeks before Afghanistan's collapse — the State Department established a new P-2 refugee designation to provide an additional pathway for at-risk Afghans who could prove affiliation with the United States. [562]

However, the P-1 and P-2 designation presented its own hurdles. First, to begin the process, referral applicants had to be outside Afghanistan and in a third-party country where processing was possible. [563] Afghans being considered for refugee status were required to demonstrate they were persecuted or had a well-founded fear of persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. [564] Applicants then had to successfully complete an interview, security check, and background examination. [565]

In addition to their efforts regarding P-1 designation, the Defense Department coordinated with the State Department to create Project Rabbit, which sought to "expedite and streamline the pre-Chief of Mission (pre-COM) portion of the SIV process for Afghan nationals who were reportedly employed by Defense Department contractors." [566] The pre-COM portion of the process included collecting proof of employment by the U.S. government or by U.S. government contractors. [567] D-MR McKeon admitted it would have been helpful for the State Department to have stood up operations like Project Rabbit sooner. [568] He, however, could not explain why such efforts were not undertaken until Afghanistan was near collapse. [569]

In order to address the persistent issues within the SIV process at Embassy Kabul, in early July 2021, the State Department created two task forces to relocate Afghan SIV holders to the United States who had (1) nearly completed the entire SIV process and received conditional SIVs, or had (2) previously been issued an SIV but were still in Afghanistan. [570] Conditional SIVs were issued to those applicants who had completed their visa interview and administrative screening and passed an abbreviated medical examination to determine if they were fit to fly. Conditional SIV holders were required to complete their comprehensive medical examinations upon arrival in the United States. [571] On July 15, 2021 — one month before the Taliban seized Kabul — the State Department stood up the Afghanistan Coordination Task Force (ACTF) to oversee the State Department’s planning, management, and logistics of relocating Afghan SIV applicants with conditional SIVs. [572]

Operation Allies Refuge

On June 24, 2021— one day before President Biden was scheduled to meet with President Ghani at the White House — the Biden-Harris administration reportedly decided to start evacuating some Afghan SIVs. [573] It appears Deputy NSA Finer held a private call on July 8, 2021, during which he stated the administration planned to begin moving some Afghan SIVs out of the country in the coming weeks. [574] On July 14, 2021, Ms. Psaki officially announced the Biden-Harris administration was launching “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.” [575] Ms. Psaki did not provide specific numbers on how many Afghan allies would be evacuated but said that “flights out of Afghanistan for SIV applicants who are already in the pipeline will begin in the last week of July and will continue.” [576]

The launch of Operation Allies Refuge came two days after CENTCOM announced 95% of the retrograde had already been completed and three months after President Biden announced the withdrawal. [577] On July 30, 2021, Ambassador Tracey Jacobson, who was leading the ACTF, told reporters, “I’m not timing this according to the military’s withdrawal. It’s really hard to predict the future because we just started this pipeline ... so I can’t say exactly what it’s going to look like two months from now.” [578] As a part of Operation Allies Refuge, the administration was to transport 750 principal SIV applicants who already completed their COM approval and security check, along with their eligible family members, to complete the rest of the process in the United States. The 4,000 other principal SIV applicants who had not yet completed the security screening would be transported to a third-party-country, along with eligible family members, to continue their visa process. [579]

The first Operation Allies Refuge flight did not depart until July 29, 2021 — about two weeks before Afghanistan fell to the Taliban. D-MR McKeon testified to the committee flights did not begin sooner because the administration had not determined where the SIV applicants would go or the logistics of how to get them out. [580]

State Department Delays Planning and Deprioritizes SIVs

In an August 2023 evaluation of the Afghan SIV program, the State Department inspector general concluded the issues persistent in the SIV program were longstanding. [581] Consul General Jayne Howell affirmed this, testifying, “There have been significant backlogs in the Afghan SIV process since the day it started.” [582] And although efforts were purportedly made to streamline processing, the State Department inspector general concluded these actions were not successful. [583]

The former acting director of the National Counterterrorism Center and the former senior deputy homeland security advisor on the NSC in 2021, Russ Travers, who played a key role in the administration’s SIV coordination efforts admitted in December 2021, **“There was no way we were getting all those [Afghan allies] out. We threw a ton of resources at it to make the problem smaller. From my perspective, it was a slow-moving train wreck. We were going to fail; the question was how badly we were going to fail.”** [584] Notably, when it came to assessing how many SIV applicants would be eligible for evacuation, the State Department never determined an estimate. [585] When speaking on the SIV process and P-1 and P-2 designations, Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Afghanistan Mark Evans admitted to the committee, “Even once those universes were defined, it wasn’t entirely clear to us how many people we were talking about.” [586]

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In addition to neglecting to address the SIV processing backlog, several witnesses interviewed over the course of this investigation revealed the Biden-Harris administration’s policies regarding eligible evacuee guidance and planning during the evacuation likely resulted in the de-prioritization of SIVs and P-1 and P-2 designees. According to General Milley, the guidance and planning for evacuee categories was the responsibility of the State Department; the Defense Department would “do whatever the leadership decides to execute,” regarding who would be eligible to be evacuated. [587]

The State Department team leading the NEO, including Ambassador Bass, Consul General DeHart, and Consul General Howell, arrived in Kabul after the Taliban had already taken over the city. That team was asked to support the State Department's NEO with only 24 to 48 hours' notice and described fluctuating guidance regarding those they were tasked to evacuate. Upon arrival, Consul General DeHart stated, "When I hit the ground ... the guidance changed at different times depending on circumstances." [588] Ambassador Bass confirmed evacuation populations changed "day to day, sometimes hour to hour." [589] Consul General Howell, who served as the consular lead, confirmed the guidance she gave to her subordinates shifted in real time. [590]

During the evacuation, Ambassador Bass, Consul General DeHart, and Consul General Howell confirmed the highest priority category of evacuees should have been American citizens and LPRs throughout the NEO. [591] In addition to that category, eligible evacuation population included SIVs and the vague category of "at risk" or "vulnerable" Afghans, which encompassed Afghans with potentially cognizable claims to enter the United States. [592] When adjudicating evacuation eligibility, Consul General Howell spoke to how claims were assessed by consular officers, stating, "If we thought there was a credible reason to believe someone was in the SIV process, and could be approvable that they would be boarded." [593] She testified to the committee that consular officers maintained discretion as to what a credible reason constituted. [594]

Consul General Dehart provided additional context, speaking to the breadth of what constituted "at risk" or "vulnerable," beyond the SIV and P-1 or P-2 designations and the frustrations of consular officers as a result. [595] He testified to the committee, "And so, initially, at the very start of the evacuation, the guidance was --that we should not leave women and children outside the gate. If they had made it all the way through the crowd and they had gotten all the way to the gate, we should let them in from a humanitarian perspective." [596] He noted, however, this guidance was narrowed as the situation worsened on the ground, "rais[ing] the bar on who [they] could allow into the airport." [597] He explained the changing guidance was "very difficult" for consular officers, as they may have turned away someone under previous guidance who would have been admitted later. [598] **"[T]hat was very difficult also for ... consular officers, you know, to ... realize that maybe they ... just turned away somebody that ... now could be admitted, or had admitted somebody that now would be turned away. On a human level, that's quite frustrating, but ... it was required because of the circumstances and that we were dealing with in the dynamic situation, that the circumstances were constantly changing,"** he said. [599]

Later in the evacuation, for approximately 36 hours, Consul General Howell informed the committee she was instructed, “[W]e should only board people who had a fully approved special immigrant visa in their passport.” [600] Regarding the priority evacuees list, according to Sam Aronson, a volunteer State Department foreign service officer on the ground, there were times when “SIVs who were supposedly or allegedly approved but had not yet received the visa foil were at some points taken off that list. And at-risk Afghans were on multiple occasions taken off that list.” [601] The guidance, however, was broadened once more, and Consul General Howell attested, of the 11 days she was on the ground, “Nine of the days the guidance was the more broad criteria.” [602] She confirmed that consular officers tried to be as “inclusive” as possible in their adjudication of SIV-eligible evacuees. [603]

Despite the push for inclusivity in the eligible evacuee populations, Consul General DeHart explained, “The fact is that there were tradeoffs, and we did prioritize different people and different groups. We didn’t want to deprioritize anybody, but we did prioritize certain groups.” [604] On August 18th, the guidance from the White House became, “fill all planes.” [605] Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary Evans testified he was aware of “some individuals that got onto those airplanes under those crisis circumstances that didn’t meet the criteria that we were working from ... and that just represented the situation on the ground. It was a matter of filling airplanes.” [606]

According to one State Department employee, when D.C. started to exert more control, things got worse.” [607] Embassy consular staff relayed to the State Department inspector general that “establishing consular operations at HKIA was extremely difficult because there was immense pressure to evacuate as many people as possible.” [608] A U.S. official based at Ramstein Air Base told AAR interviewers that at the end of the NEO, most of the evacuees were not SIVs. [609]

The vague definition and shifting guidance for SIVs at HKIA, along with pressure from the White House to “fill all seats,” contributed to Afghans evacuating with no legally recognized claim while SIV-eligible Afghans got left behind. [610]



Defense One

The Afghans eligible for the SIV programs had dedicated years of their lives to working with the U.S. government, even when such work placed them in harm's way during their service and resulted in them being targeted and persecuted by the Taliban thereafter. [611]

Mounting Worries in Kabul and the Dissent Channel Cable

As the situation in Afghanistan devolved following President Biden's go-to-zero order, a disconnect between Embassy Kabul staff and its leadership became apparent. In contrast to Embassy Kabul leaders, evidence collected in this investigation reveals foreign service officers expressed worry regarding State Department leaders' steadfast commitment to keep the embassy open in the face of unfolding disaster in Afghanistan.

According to the State Department's AAR interview notes, an Embassy Kabul employee informed AAR investigators they were stunned "our posture had not shifted to a point that we could get out relatively easily," given developments in the country. [612] Another employee described there was a "disconnect between sense of urgency the news world outside was telling us and what we were hearing from post." [613] Staff at the embassy "tried to raise these issues in various ways, but post leadership never wanted to hear it." [614] **Not only did Embassy Kabul leadership not want to "hear it," but State Department documents suggest Ambassador Wilson and his leadership team actively discouraged embassy staff from using the word "NEO" and planning for worst-case scenarios.** [615]

On July 13, 2021, those unheard warnings manifested into an internal Dissent Channel cable signed by 26 U.S. Embassy Kabul officials and staffers, warning that Kabul would collapse soon after the military withdrawal. This cable — sent to senior State Department leaders, including Secretary Blinken and State Department Director of Policy Planning Salman Ahmed — foreshadowed the collapse of the Afghan military and a near-term Taliban takeover. The cable urged the State Department to take seriously its evacuation planning, address the backlog of SIV applications, secure the safety of those who aided the U.S. mission in Afghanistan, and appropriately condemn Taliban violence. [616] The cable was authored by Anton Cooper, chief of Embassy Kabul's Political Section, and Elisabeth Zentos, deputy political counselor of the Political Section. [617]

In his testimony before the committee, Director Ahmed explained regarding the cable, "On the day it was received in our system, I read it and made sure that it got to the people who needed to get it." [618] He affirmed that Dissent Channel cables are read and cleared personally by Secretary Blinken. [619] He testified this cable was also shared with D-MR McKeon, Under Secretary for Political Affairs Nuland, Ambassador Khalilzad, and Deputy Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Tom West. [620]

Mr. Ahmed admitted, “There wasn’t a formal meeting to discuss the cable. But there was an opportunity to acknowledge it.” [621] He noted that those who received the Dissent Channel cable acknowledged the dissenters had “raised important points,” and the State Department would “need to make sure we tackle each one and to get a thoughtful, correct response out as soon as we can.” [622]

When asked what course of action the State Department took in response to the cable, D-MR McKeon testified before the committee the cable did not trigger a shift in course, stating, “I think we were generally aware of many of the concerns outlined in the cable, so I’m not sure it changed any work streams or activity we were undertaking.” [623] D-MR McKeon also affirmed that he at no point met with the dissenters. [624] Embassy Kabul’s chief of mission, Ambassador Wilson, testified similarly, saying, “I’ll be honest; I didn’t really take any actions that I wasn’t already taking. Matters had moved on significantly in the couple of weeks, as I’m sure it was at least 10 or 12 days after they sent that cable before I read it, and I think it was longer. Matters had moved on.” [625] According to Ambassador Wilson, the State Department remained committed to keeping U.S. Embassy Kabul open despite this warning. Indeed, it was not until August 12th when the Taliban captured 10 of 34 provinces in Afghanistan that State Department leaders agreed to shutter the embassy. [626] “The Talibs’ capture of a remote provincial capital on August 6th did not immediately change Afghanistan’s outlook, but the fall of nine more over the following 5 days did,” he said. [627]

The Contingency and Crisis Response Bureau

The Contingency and Crisis Response (CCR) Bureau was created under former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo during the Trump administration. [628] The CCR Bureau was tasked with development and implementation of “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.” [629] Its primary goal was to establish the State Department’s capacity to protect Americans and vulnerable groups in global crises.

Despite the CCR Bureau’s mandate for emergency crises and the unfolding catastrophe in Afghanistan, the Biden-Harris administration placed a hold on fully establishing it in order to review its need upon assuming office. [630] Secretary Blinken delegated responsibility of that review to D-MR McKeon. In May 2021, shortly after President Biden announced the withdrawal, Coordinator of the CCR Bureau Dr. William Walters approached Acting Under Secretary Perez about the need for greater contingency planning in Afghanistan. [631] Acting Under Secretary Perez later admitted to the committee she did not foresee his warnings as applying to a mass evacuation of people with the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban. [632]

D-MR McKeon ultimately recommended Secretary Blinken terminate the CCR Bureau. [633] A State Department source familiar with the internal discussions told the committee D-MR McKeon opposed the bureau in part because he believed “we don’t do operations here, we do foreign policy.” [634] And by July 2021 — only weeks before Kabul would fall — Secretary Blinken terminated the plan to shift personnel and resources into the CCR Bureau. [635] Dr. Walters subsequently resigned, specifically noting the need for the CCR Bureau in light of the events in Afghanistan. [636]

A State Department source familiar with plans for the CCR Bureau told the committee the underlying purpose of the bureau was to help the State Department develop and execute contingency plans, so that the United States would not be caught flat-footed in the event of a catastrophe or crisis. [637] A senior participant in the CCR process lamented on August 30, 2021, that “if State had put half as much energy into evacuation planning for Afghanistan as it put into ... abolishing a bureau devoted to contingency planning and crisis response, maybe we wouldn’t be in this mess.” [638]

Afghan Government Peace Deal Negotiations

A key condition of the Doha Agreement was intra-Afghan negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan Government. The Doha Agreement stipulated several conditions, including a review by the United States of sanctions against the Taliban, on these negotiations. [639] On January 27, 2021, Secretary Blinken announced the architect of the Doha Agreement, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, would be retained as U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation (SRAR) by President Biden to pursue this effort. [640] Secretary Blinken praised Ambassador Khalilzad for his prior work as the Special Representative for Afghanistan, stating he and President Biden asked Ambassador Khalilzad to continue his “vital work” from the Trump administration. [641]

In his testimony before the committee, Ambassador Khalilzad explained he received no additional priorities from President Biden or Secretary Blinken but for two tasks. First, to extend the timeline for the Afghanistan withdrawal by four months to allow the military more time to depart from Afghanistan and, second, to effectuate a power-sharing agreement between the Taliban and the Afghan government. [642]

Pursuant to that instruction, throughout 2021, Ambassador Khalilzad pursued a power-sharing agreement between the Taliban and the Afghan government. Ambassador Khalilzad presented his initial proposal — signed and supported by Secretary Blinken — on February 28, 2021. [643]

That proposal, entitled “Afghanistan Peace Government Plan,” reflected several components, including, but not limited to, a transitional government, headed by a president agreeable to the Taliban and the Afghan government. [644] That transitional government advanced a power sharing arrangement between the Taliban and the Afghan government, in which the Afghan government would have to cede 50% of its authority to the terrorist group. [645] The transitional government was to exist until it transferred powers to a permanent government “following the adoption of a new Constitution and national elections,” which would similarly be dictated by the Taliban. [646]

That new government was to include a “High Council for Islamic Jurisprudence (the ‘Islamic Council’)” responsible for “provid[ing] Islamic guidance and advice to all national and local government structures.” [647] The Islamic Council would consist of 15 members, seven of whom would be picked by the Afghan government, the other seven by the Taliban, and the final member by the selected president. [648] The Islamic Council would “review all draft laws, decrees and regulations prior to adoption to ensure compliance with the beliefs and provisions of Islam.” [649] Similarly, the transitional government’s executive branch, national parliament, and judiciary would also need to be filled by both Taliban members and Afghan government officials. The proposal further specified the “Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission” would have to include Taliban members. [650]

Actions by the Taliban during this period, as well as testimony from State Department and Defense Department officials, made evident the Taliban were biding their time for the eventual takeover of Afghanistan. In addition, the Taliban made their intentions regarding the Afghan government known in their publicly issued fatwas. In March 2020, the Taliban issued a fatwa in the Voice of Jihad stating, “As this 19-year jihad against the foreign occupation was waged under the command of a legal emir, the termination of occupation agreement does not mean that [Haibatullah’s] rule is absolved. The mujahideen must work to establish an Islamic government ruled by an emir. That obligation is the next step after U.S. and its allies (sic) troops leave.” [651] The Taliban added, “Until the occupation is completely severed from its roots and an Islamic government formed, the mujahideen shall continue waging armed jihad and exerting efforts for the implementation of Islamic rule.” [652] Their March 2020 fatwa is consistent with prior fatwas, including one issued in January 2016, wherein the Taliban stated, “**The Islamic Emirate has not readily embraced this death and destruction for the sake of some silly ministerial posts or a share of the power.**” [653]

Despite the Taliban's stated intentions, Ambassador Khalilzad proceeded with negotiations, advising NSA Sullivan and Secretary Blinken there was a "roadmap for implementation," in which the United States could leverage money and political recognition to get to peace deal with the Taliban. According to Ambassador Khalilzad, a peace deal was in the Taliban's best interests because allowing the Afghan government to remain, even in part, could help the Taliban receive international legitimacy and aid. [654] When pressed by the committee regarding the Taliban "waiting out the clock," he conceded there were times he believed they did so, but ultimately, he believed they "preferred to have a political deal." [655] Ambassador Khalilzad added, "If they don't have a government that's negotiating that meet the standards, they won't be recognized. They won't receive economic assistance. They won't achieve or get the things they want." [656]

In March 2021, the Taliban and the Afghan government rejected the Biden-Harris administration's initial proposal. According to Ambassador Khalilzad, there was disagreement among Taliban leaders on whether to secure a power sharing agreement with the Afghan government or continue fighting. [657] When asked about the Biden-Harris administration's peace government plan, General Miller — the senior U.S. military official on the ground at the time — testified to the committee the Taliban viewed the Afghan government as "illegitimate" and would not have accepted a power-sharing agreement with them. [658]

On April 16, 2021, the Taliban and the Afghan government were scheduled to attend an Afghan peace conference in Istanbul, Turkey, set up by the Biden-Harris administration. The conference was demanded by Secretary Blinken in a sharply worded letter to President Ghani in which he warned Afghanistan's president to pursue a political settlement with the Taliban. [659] "Although we have not yet completed our review of the way ahead, we have reached an initial conclusion that the best way to advance our shared interests is to do all we can to accelerate peace talks and to bring all parties into compliance with their commitments," Secretary Blinken said. [660] On April 12, 2021 — four days before the planned conference — the Taliban announced they would no longer participate in the peace conference. Following President Biden's go-to-zero order, attempts by the administration for another conference failed.

In his testimony before the committee, Ambassador Wilson explained, "They weren't going to go anywhere in the trajectory they were on, they were bogged down in theological details, and that we had to find a way to get them to talk about practical things, that that might unlock the door to a settlement." [661] He added the State Department began planning for "a transfer [of power] to a government that had a large and possibly preponderant Taliban role." [662]

As the Taliban offensive saw success throughout the spring and early summer of 2021, the terrorist group increasingly demanded more in negotiations, now rejecting proposals affording them equal power with the Afghan government. [663] **Ambassador Khalilzad conceded to the committee the power-sharing demand increased from 50-50, to 60-40 in favor of the Taliban, to 70-30 in favor of the Taliban.** [664] He noted, **“As the balance shifted on the ground ... the negotiations on the government continued, but the dollar demand with it increased.”** [665]

In late June 2021 — while the U.S. military retrograde was well underway — the Taliban celebrated their victories on the battlefield in Afghanistan, stating their territorial advances “will be the beginning of the end of the ills birthed by the occupation.” [666] Despite the Taliban’s increased demands and stated intentions, the Biden-Harris administration continued to press for a power-sharing agreement throughout the summer of 2021.

In mid-July 2021, the DIA assessed “the Taliban seeks to replace the Afghan government with a Taliban-led Islamic Emirate,” with its focus on “overrunning key provincial capitals to set the stage for a military takeover of Kabul.” [667] **The DIA explained, “A reduction in U.S. offensive operations, specifically airstrikes and raids, has likely provided the Taliban greater freedom of movement and enabled it to broaden the scope of its military operations and make widespread territorial gains.”** [668] Afghan government officials similarly warned of the Taliban’s intentions. Then-Afghan National Security Adviser Hamdullah Mohib stated, “They have used the peace process as a way to advance their military agenda.” [669] General Miller agreed, testifying to the committee he believed at the time the Taliban “were going to try to take over.” [670]

President Biden and President Ghani held a call on July 23, 2021 — three weeks before Kabul fell. On the call, President Ghani said to President Biden, **“We can get to peace only if we rebalance the military situation.”** [671] On the call, President Ghani repeatedly begged President Biden for more U.S. airstrikes to hold off the Taliban, but President Biden refused, saying U.S. airstrikes would not work without a new military strategy from the Afghans. [672]

By August 1, 2021, Taliban negotiators in Doha stated, “total victory is more important than legitimacy,” all but ending any realistic peace talks. [673] But again, despite the terrorist group’s clearly stated intentions, Ambassador Khalilzad and his team continued to pursue negotiations with the Taliban. In his testimony before the committee, Ambassador Khalilzad admitted, “Even on August 15th, we were still working it to bring a team from Kabul to negotiate a transition government.” [674]

That same day, the Taliban would march into Kabul, seizing Afghanistan in whole through military conquest. When offered by the committee the opportunity to reassess his pursuit of a power-sharing agreement in hindsight, Ambassador Khalilzad instead blamed the Taliban and the Afghan government, stating he doubted the seriousness of both sides. [675]

The Biden-Harris administration's pursuit of the Afghan government peace deal throughout 2021 reflected their misplaced hope, in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, that the Taliban would not pursue a military takeover, as well as their unwillingness to face the realities on the ground.

Size of the Afghan Military

“And along with our partners, we have trained and equipped a standing force of over 300,000 Afghan personnel today and hundreds of thousands over the past two decades.”

— President Joe Biden, April 14, 2021

In his April 13, 2021, go-to-zero announcement, President Biden represented to the American people there were “nearly 300,000 current serving members of the military — of the Afghan National Security Force.” [676] The Biden-Harris administration would use this number repeatedly over the next four months to justify President Biden's decision to withdraw. But those numbers were deceiving.

General Milley testified before the committee he estimated the Afghan security forces needed to be 600,000 to 700,000 to challenge the Taliban. The general noted “half of those were police” — unfit for counterinsurgency — “so you're looking at about 175,000 army.” [677] Jonathan Schroden, research director for the Afghan War Commission, said just after the Taliban takeover the real number for the Afghan military and police prior to its collapse was likely in the range of just 150,000 to 200,000 forces. [678]

Other U.S. officials assessed that only 50,000 Afghan troops were ultimately in combat against the Taliban by summer of 2021. [679] A report authored by the Center for Strategic and International Studies estimated approximately 40% of Afghanistan's forces consisted of police, unprepared to take a meaningful part in holding back the Taliban. [680]

Furthermore, of the military forces available, “only a small fraction of the 182,071 personnel supposedly in the Army and Air Force could be used effectively, and the total force suffered a 25% annual turnover rate due to losses and desertions by 2020.” [681] The report assessed the United States “understated the degree that even these forces were dependent on U.S. support from air strikes, elite cadres of U.S. land troops, and intelligence advisors at the forward advisory level.” [682]

In February 2023, SIGAR published a report outlining another issue which plagued Afghan forces throughout 2021: “ghost soldiers,” namely, individuals who do not actually exist but were listed on the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces’ (ANDSF) payroll. According to SIGAR, “one of the most persistent forms of corruption in the ANDSF has been the fabrication of nonexistent personnel” and “the removal of U.S. advisors from Afghan units enabled this corruption.” [683] **Pentagon officials later acknowledged that force strength data was not reliable.** [684]

A 2022 analysis by NATO’s Defense Education Enhancement Program concluded ANDSF could only provide evidence of 254,000 troops. [685] The NATO-funded analysis found the “mishandling of resources,” resulting in months-long deployments with no pay, coupled with Taliban advances “led to a fall in morale and high attrition rate.” [686] This attrition reached 5,000 troops a month. [687] The analysis stated the “ANDSF had nowhere near the capacity necessary to protect the country from the Taliban.” [688]

Taliban Territorial Advances

Afghanistan is comprised of 34 provinces and 421 districts, akin to states and counties within the United States. According to Bill Roggio, editor of FDD’s *Long War Journal*, who mapped the Taliban’s territorial advances in real time throughout 2021, the Taliban made sweeping advances across Afghanistan following President Biden’s go-to-zero order on April 14, 2021. [689] On April 13, 2021 — one day prior to the go-to-zero order — the Taliban controlled 77 districts, the Afghan government controlled 129 districts, and 194 districts were contested. [690] General Miller, as the senior military official in Afghanistan, recalled being “extremely worried from May 2nd onward, especially as he was seeing key districts fall.” [691] In testimony to the committee, he said, “My view was that, going to zero, things would go very bad, very fast.” [692] He also remembered expressing concern that intelligence assessments regarding the stability and longevity of the Afghan security forces were “overly optimistic.” [693]

By June 9, 2021, the Taliban increased its control to 94 districts, the Afghan government's control was reduced to 97 districts, and the number of contested districts increased to 208 districts. [694] A June 24, 2021, cable from Embassy Kabul to Secretary Blinken warned that “as of June 24, the Taliban have captured approximately 107 district centers since the launch of their spring offensive on May 1.” [695] By the end of June 2021, the Taliban had increased their control to 137 districts; the Afghan government now controlled only 86 districts and 175 were contested. [696] *The Long War Journal* warned on June 29th, “The Taliban has largely gained ground in districts that were previously contested.” [697]

In assessing the Taliban's territorial advances, it appears there was a disconnect between those military officials on the ground and the people in Washington, D.C. At the end of June 2021, General Milley assessed the Taliban maintained control of only 81 districts. [698] That number, however, as evidenced by publicly tracked data, was significantly larger. General Miller informed the committee the *Long War Journal's* estimates at the time assessing the Taliban's control at nearly 140 districts were indeed accurate. When asked about whether there was a potential disconnect between those who were on the ground and those in Washington, D.C., he responded, “Almost certainly, yeah.” [699] He added, “It was clear to me that, you know, this was happening, and I was trying to get people to understand this tidal wave that was happening.” [700] As the investigation has uncovered, they were not listening.

Colonel Krummrich testified before the committee, “By late June it was apparent that the Taliban achieved serious momentum taking villages, districts, then entire provinces. I called their advance the ‘red blob’ as on our large Operations Center map, we tracked the Taliban front line advance daily, looking like a red blob gobbling up terrain at the speed of their logistics.” [701] He added the shock of the departure “stunned and de-moralized our Afghan allies,” leaving them “unnecessarily vulnerable” as the Afghan fighting season began. [702] Afghanistan's well-known fighting season — which typically runs from early spring to late fall — is characterized by suicide bombings, assassinations, attacks on security forces, and clashes between those forces and the Taliban. [703] During the “fighting season” or “spring offensives,” the Taliban's ranks swell with fighters on recess from madrassas in Pakistan and workers who would otherwise be harvesting poppy. [704] The end of winter makes maneuverability in hard-to-reach areas more accessible. [705]

The Taliban continued a rapid pace of conquest into the summer of 2021. By July 15, 2021 — three days after CENTCOM announced 95% of the military retrograde was complete — the Taliban had tripled the districts under its control since President Biden's go-to-zero order, increasing its control from 77 districts to 221 districts. [706]

“Afghanistan was not lost in 11 days, as General Milley has repeatedly said. The Taliban’s victory was years in the making, executed with a careful strategy of seizing rural districts, with the ultimate goal of taking over urban areas, provinces, and then the country. But the Taliban was far from achieving these goals – until President Biden announced the withdrawal on April 14, 2021. From that moment on, the Taliban capitalized on the rapid exit of U.S. forces, seizing control of key districts starting in May 2021.

“At FDD’s Long War Journal, we carefully tracked the Taliban’s progression, primarily using open-source intelligence. By June 23rd, the Taliban controlled 139 of Afghanistan’s 407 districts and contested just over half – demonstrating their significant gains. Yet, in his defense of the administration, General Milley claimed on June 26 the Taliban controlled only 81 districts.

“He was wrong. Milley either didn’t understand the situation on the ground, or he misled the American public in the interest of defending President Biden’s withdrawal.

“He was wrong. Milley either didn’t understand the situation on the ground, or he misled the American public in the interest of defending President Biden’s withdrawal.

“In reality, the Taliban controlled far more land – more than half of Afghanistan’s districts while contesting an additional 25 percent by July 10th.

“How did the U.S. government, with billions of dollars of resources and thousands of employees, ultimately get this wrong? This question must be answered. Otherwise we are destined to make these same mistakes in the future.”

Bill Roggio

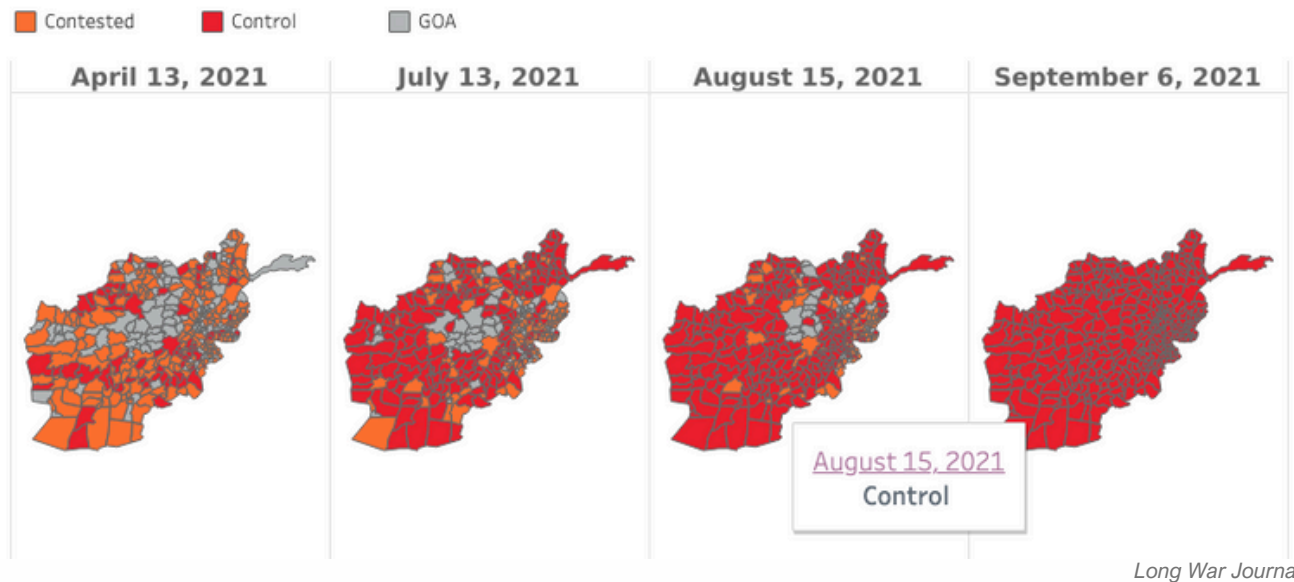
Author of the Foundation for Defense of Democracy’s Long War Journal

General Miller testified to the committee that once President Biden issued his go-to-zero order, there was very little he, as commander of U.S. Forces-Afghanistan, could do to stop districts from falling to the Taliban without a reversal of the withdrawal order. [707] “I’d be kind of looking at the phone, going, if you reverse the policy, you can reverse this, but, you know, if you’re asking me if I have something in the toolkit to, you know, save a district that’s being surrendered, I said, no, I don’t have any, I don’t have that,” he said. [708]

Despite the Taliban’s swift advances, State Department leadership failed to acknowledge the dire situation on the ground. Instead, their efforts continued to focus on keeping U.S. Embassy Kabul open. In his testimony before the committee, Ambassador Wilson asserted Secretary Blinken never pushed the embassy to evacuate until it was eventually ordered in mid-August 2021. [709]

Additionally, Ambassador Wilson was on leave for vacation during early July 2021. [710] According to a U.S. military officer involved in NEO planning, “There were no decisions made in the Embassy until [Ambassador Wilson] returned in mid-July. This made action impossible.” [711]

In addition to earlier calls to action, General Miller issued warnings of the dire situation in Afghanistan through his chain of command in July 2021. “We’re starting to create conditions here that won’t look good for Afghanistan in the future if there is a push for a military takeover,” he said. [712] He believed the United States should be concerned by Taliban advances from a tactical and psychological viewpoint, assessing Afghanistan had a history of districts and provinces rapidly falling once local leaders realized the tides were shifting. [713] Before turning over command of Afghanistan to CENTCOM in mid-July 2021, General Miller issued a public warning that the Afghan military was facing a serious crisis amid the continued Taliban offensive. [714]



In his testimony before the committee, General Milley affirmed General Miller’s predictions were more dire and accurate than most, suggesting a collapse by October or November 2021. [715] General Milley explained the “consensus intelligence view” estimated an Afghan military fracture and Taliban takeover of all Afghan provincials except for Kabul “by early to late fall or at the latest December, assuming the last U.S. troops were out by 31 August.” [716]

U.S. intelligence community assessments in the summer of 2021 concluded the Afghan government might collapse within six months to a year after the U.S. military withdrawal. [717] Some intelligence agencies had been predicting the Afghan government might hold on two years after the U.S. withdrew. [718] A U.S. military officer involved in the NEO spoke of how the decisionmakers and, particularly, the administration's NSC, believed the ANDSF could last another two years, saying, "There was no acknowledgement of the threat on the horizon. The military and civilian thought within the NSC was that the ANDSF was getting beat up but would recover. They were thinking that the ANDSF could hold for at least two years." [719] Military intelligence assessments "weeks prior to the fall" of the Afghan government, however, found it was in "a downward spiral and likely not recoverable." [720]

Public and private warnings from Defense Department officials and the intelligence community were also being conveyed to members of Congress. Then-Ranking Member of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence Congressman Mike Turner (R-Ohio), who received classified briefings on Afghanistan throughout 2021, said he believed "both the Department of Defense and the intelligence community were much more concerned and cautioning of both withdrawing and the manner of withdrawal." [721] Ranking Member Turner blamed the NSC for "failing to listen to what the intelligence community and the Department of Defense was clearly saying to the administration." [722] Ranking Member Turner's warnings were echoed by then-Ranking Member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee Michael McCaul (R-Texas), who described "stark" differences between assessments provided by the State Department, Department of Defense, and the Intelligence Community. [723] He said, "Both DOD's and the IC's outlook were very grim. While the State Department – mimicking the White House – consistently painted a rosy picture, ignoring the realities on the ground." [724]

Behind the scenes, the Taliban cut secret deals with local Afghan leaders and negotiated potential surrender agreements with local Afghan police and security forces in anticipation of a quick sweep of the country. [725] U.S. and Afghan officials have affirmed the Taliban presented ceasefire offers to local Afghan officials, police, and military units throughout 2020, which cemented the terrorist group's territorial seizures upon President Biden's April 2021 announcement that the U.S. was leaving for good. [726]

The Taliban used a combination of bribes and threats of violence to convince Afghan forces to lay down their weapons or abandon their posts, easing the Taliban advance. Those Afghan troops who did not comply died in large numbers in 2021. [727]

The Afghanistan Analysts Network later said negotiations and surrender played a major role in the Taliban victory. [728] Biden-Harris administration officials have testified they were purportedly caught unaware of the negotiated surrenders. [729] General Miller, however, affirmed to the committee this was a longstanding practice by the Taliban in Afghanistan. He explained the terrorist group took over partially by targeting villages and village leaders, thereby unraveling stability in those villages. [730]

By August 4, 2021, President Ghani reportedly informed U.S. officials he no longer had faith the Afghan military could continue its fight against the Taliban, asserting roughly three dozen Afghan battalions had reportedly collapsed near the start of the month. [731] From then onward, the Taliban not only seized districts, but also swept through Afghanistan's provinces.

Between August 6 and August 12, 2021, the Taliban captured Nimroz, Samangan, Jowzjan, Sar-e Pol, Kunduz, Takhar, Baghlan, Farah, Badakhshan, and Ghazni.[732] In a last-ditch effort, President Ghani issued an order making Afghan General Alizai the chief of the Afghan army and General Sami Sadat the head of Afghan special forces. [733] This change in leadership failed to stop the tidal wave of provinces that fell to the Taliban on August 14, 2021 — Kandahar, Helmand, Herat, and Badghis. [734]

By August 15, 2021, the Taliban took Paktika, Zabul, Uruzgan, Logar, and Ghor. The Taliban had taken control of 19 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces. [735]

STATE DEPARTMENT NEO PLANNING

State Department Failure to Plan for Worst-Case Scenarios

On April 6, 2023, the White House issued a release outlining “the key decisions and challenges surrounding the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.” [736] That document represented that the Biden-Harris administration had been planning for a potential U.S. withdrawal “from the beginning.” [737] It also claimed that in March 2021, before President Biden made his final decision to unilaterally withdraw U.S. forces, “the President directed his top national security officials — including the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, the National Security Advisor, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Director for National Intelligence — to begin withdrawal planning and account for a full range of contingencies.” [738]

Testimony from administration officials responsible for the withdrawal and contingency planning reveal they never planned for the worst-case scenario of an emergency evacuation with the Taliban in control of Kabul. State Department witnesses admitted most of their planning was dedicated to ensuring Embassy Kabul remained open — with or without the Afghan government in power.

State Department witnesses interviewed by the committee claimed the administration planned for multiple contingencies. In their transcribed interviews, however, D-MR McKeon and Ambassador Wilson admitted none of the administration's contingency planning included the contemplation of conducting a NEO with the Taliban controlling Kabul and, more broadly, most of Afghanistan. [739] D-MR McKeon testified, "I don't think there were discrete elements of the plan, [with the] Taliban in Kabul or not." [740] Ambassador Wilson admitted, "I'm not aware of anything like that that the State Department did." [741]

Acting Under Secretary Perez similarly told the committee she did not recall any discussions concerning a potential Taliban takeover of Embassy Kabul, HKIA, or Kabul, saying, "I don't think we ever thought — you know, nobody ever talked about, 'Well, what's going to happen when the Taliban come over the wall?'" [742] She also stated the State Department never contemplated that HKIA would be breached or overrun. [743] Echoing the failure to plan for every contingency, Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary Evans conceded in his testimony the State Department never formulated a plan for conducting a NEO with the Taliban controlling all of Kabul except HKIA. [744] "In hindsight, I think the [State] Department could have been more aggressive in, well, there's a thing that we reference, red teaming possible outcomes, and when those things might occur. The objective, if you're not familiar with a red team approach, is to basically put a team in the role of placing before you the most negative outcomes, as improbable as they might be, so that you can then consider everything that is necessary in response to those challenging situations. I think we could have done a better job, in hindsight, in taking that sort of approach," he said. [745]

In his testimony before the committee, Colonel Krummrich stated he was not aware of any contingency planning to conduct a NEO in a scenario where the Afghan government had collapsed. [746] He said, "It became very painfully obvious under extreme duress how big of a gap that was." [747] According to General McKenzie, the military "struggled to gain access to that [Emergency Action] plan and work with [the State Department] over much of July until we finally got a decision to execute the NEO." [748] Further, Brigadier General Farrell Sullivan, who oversaw Marines sent to Kabul in the final days of the withdrawal and for the evacuation, attested, "Ultimately, our staff prepared for a NEO and knew that interest from the [U.S. embassy] and coalition partners would be last minute." [749]

According to the State Department inspector general, one of the primary reasons the State Department failed to perform critical contingency planning was because Embassy Kabul leaders — including Ambassador Wilson — were worried taking these steps to prepare for a NEO would cause panic in Afghanistan. [750] The embassy management officers wrote in an after-action report, “Embassy Leadership did not wish to create panic and ... ensured that Management Notices and informational emails did not address the truly dire situation.” [751]

Brigadier General Sullivan stated while the military was planning a NEO, “The Embassy didn’t fully participate in NEO planning until a week prior to the fall. The embassy’s focus was on if [they] could maintain a presence post 31 August.” [752] These findings are corroborated by Acting Under Secretary Perez, who testified before the committee her focus did not shift from maintaining a U.S. diplomatic presence to a NEO until the evacuation began. [753] “My focus shifted when the evacuation started and all of a sudden it was like how do we get people out and move them to the United States quickly and safely and that kind of thing,” she said. [754]

NEO Planning Does Not Begin in Earnest Until August 2021

“We were still in planning when [Kabul] fell.” [755]

— Acting Under Secretary Carol Perez

The Biden-Harris administration’s preparations for a potential NEO did not begin in earnest until early August 2021. On August 6, 2021 — less than two weeks before Kabul fell — a Rehearsal of Concept (ROC) drill involving U.S. military leaders on the ground in Afghanistan, U.S. Embassy Kabul leaders, and members of the NSC was held. [756] According to Brigadier General Sullivan, the State Department presented a plan during the ROC drill that was vague and demonstrated “a disconnect between what we were seeing on the ground and the urgency they were displaying.” [757] During that same exercise, an NSC official reportedly revealed the administration’s motives, saying, “If we execute [a] NEO, we have failed.” [758] Put simply, the administration was more concerned about the optics of NEO than the dangers associated with failing to call a NEO in.

The concern that a NEO equated to failure was a consistent theme in the administration’s approach to the Afghanistan withdrawal. As a result, some in the administration — especially leaders within the NSC and the State Department — were loathe to plan for one.

A State Department employee informed AAR interviewers no one at the department wanted to use the word NEO and the word “was taboo.” [759] Brigadier General Sullivan corroborated this perception, confirming that even into early August 2021, attempting to talk to embassy leadership about a potential evacuation was “like pulling teeth.” [760] One U.S. military officer affirmed, “We had [an] ad hoc meeting with the Embassy but they didn’t want to talk about [a] NEO.” [761] The officer added because Embassy Kabul was “so worried about spooking,” the military was not able to speak with partners or the State Department. [762] Another officer recounted State Department officials repeatedly saying during planning meetings “don’t say NEO” and “this is not a NEO for Afghanistan.” [763] According to the AAR interview notes, Ambassador Wilson admonished the consul general for “giving honest assessments,” and pressure from leadership made it so that staff were “hesitant to use the [word] NEO.” [764]

The State Department inspector general echoed those accounts, concluding, “communication with embassy personnel about the timing and scope of a potential evacuation was unclear,” and “the lack of clarity caused confusion and made some personnel less prepared for an evacuation.” According to a military officer, it was not until August 11, 2021, that the Embassy Kabul assistant chief of mission changed posture and asked for help. [765] These sentiments were shared by Embassy Kabul employees as well, with one employee telling AAR interviewers the planning for the NEO came “too little too late.” [766] The State Department’s Crisis Management and Strategy office — the team within the Secretary of State’s Executive Office responsible for 24/7 management of global crises — only became involved once “they were allowed to call it what it was – i.e. a NEO/suspension of ops.” [767]

Ambassador Wilson was identified repeatedly as someone who refused to discuss the possibility of a NEO. According to a State Department official, Ambassador Wilson “reprimanded embassy personnel during a meeting when they expressed concerns about their safety given the deteriorating security environment.” [768] The investigation also revealed Embassy Kabul employees were forced to contemplate a NEO in secret given their leadership’s posture, stating, “We started having subversive NEO meetings.” [769]

It appears military officials on the ground attempted to get Ambassador Wilson to understand the dire situation on the ground. **A U.S. military officer asserted Rear Admiral Vasely “was trying to get [Ambassador Wilson] 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.”** [770]

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."

Embassy Kabul staff added that State Department leaders should have realized the Taliban was going to defeat the Afghan military when northern provinces started falling in early August. [771] In his testimony before the committee, Ambassador Wilson instead asserted the first province to fall was not relevant. "The first to fall was Zaranj, right on the Iranian border. It was small. It was far away. It wasn't an important trading conduit point. You know, per se, it really wasn't all that important in the cosmic scheme of things," he said. [772]

Ambassador Wilson conveyed to the committee he participated in two ROC drills on a potential NEO, though he could not identify what the dates of those were. [773] However, after testifying that he was in both ROC drills, he then claimed he was not directly involved in the NEO planning and, instead, he relied on staff updates. [774] According to testimony from Brigadier General Sullivan, Ambassador Wilson participated in the August 6th NEO ROC drill, where there "seemed to be a disconnect between what we were seeing on the ground and the urgency they were displaying." [775] Ambassador Wilson disputed accounts of resistance within his embassy and, more broadly, the State Department. [776] He testified he was simply being sensitive to NEO planning out of concern it would endanger the U.S. military withdrawal and reduce Afghan morale, amongst other things. [777] Ambassador Wilson said, "I did not want loose language being floated around outside of our classified settings about our plans ... I was concerned about leaks." [778] His explanation, however, does not explain why he and other State Department leaders refused to seriously engage with the U.S. military to plan for a NEO.

On August 6, 2021, the same day as the ROC drill with military and State Department leaders, NSA Sullivan reportedly asked NSC Homeland Security Advisor Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall to convene an NSC deputies meeting for August 8, 2021. Despite the Taliban's accelerated gains throughout Afghanistan, Biden-Harris administration officials — including Ms. Sherwood-Randall — unanimously agreed at that meeting it was too early to declare a NEO. [779]

The Decision to Request the NEO

The debate over whether and when to initiate the NEO proceeded until August 11, 2021. On August 9th, Secretary Austin reportedly met with key Pentagon officials — including then-Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl — to discuss the need for a NEO. [780] In that meeting, Under Secretary Kahl purportedly advised Secretary Austin, “The Taliban had yet to place pressure on Kabul, giving the U.S. and its allies more time to decide.” [781] That same day, another meeting was held by NSA Sullivan and senior Biden-Harris administration officials, including, but not limited to, Secretary Blinken, Secretary Austin, General Milley, and CIA Director Burns. Those officials, it appears, advised NSA Sullivan it was still too early to reposition U.S. forces to assist in a likely NEO. [782]

Finally, on August 11, 2021, President Biden reportedly held a meeting in the Situation Room with his senior advisors, including Vice President Harris. [783] In that meeting, he ordered Secretary Austin and General Milley to prepare deploying troops to the region. [783] He also reportedly directed the State Department to expand the evacuation of Afghan allies to include the use of military aircraft, not just chartered civilian planes. [785] Still, he had yet to order a NEO.

Within those five days of inaction — from the August 6th ROC drill to President Biden’s August 11th meeting — the Taliban seized their first provincial capital, swept through Kunduz, Herat, Lashkar Gah and Kandahar, and took control of an additional nine districts throughout Afghanistan. [786] On August 12, 2021, General Milley reportedly learned the Taliban had conquered the Ghazni, a city strategically located alongside a highway connecting Kandahar and Kabul. General Milley appears to have raised alarm bells to NSA Sullivan in a call, saying, “Call Blinken and tell him to start the NEO.” [787] NSA Sullivan recalled thinking, “To have a city that close to Kabul in Taliban hands meant that a lightning strike on the capital could unfold very, very quickly, and we knew we had to move.” [788]

By August 14, 2021, the Taliban controlled 269 districts. [789] Still, the State Department had yet to request a NEO, and President Biden had yet to order a NEO. In fact, leaked notes from an NSC deputies meeting on the eve of the Taliban takeover of Kabul — at 3:30 PM EST on August 14th — reveals critical details for a NEO had yet to be resolved, including, amongst other things:

1. **The participants did not have a grasp on the number of people who need to be evacuated; [790]**
2. **The Defense Department had not yet contacted partners eligible for P-1 and P-2 referral programs; [791]**
3. **Embassy Kabul had not yet directed its Locally Employed (LE) staff to register interest in relocation to the United States; [792] and**
4. **The State Department had not yet identified countries to serve as transit points for evacuees. [793]**

Meanwhile, that same day, Secretary Blinken continued to cling to the Biden-Harris administration's Peace Government Plan with the Taliban. "Productive call with Afghanistan High Council for National Reconciliation Chairman Abdullah Abdullah to discuss the developments in Afghanistan and our urgent diplomatic and political efforts to reduce violence. I thanked him for the Afghan Government's every effort to reach a political settlement," he posted. [794]

It was not until August 15, 2021, that NSC officials addressed whether immediate family members of U.S. citizens in Afghanistan who are foreign nationals could be evacuated to the United States. [795] **With the exception of third-country transit, none of the outstanding NEO considerations were resolved before Kabul fell to the Taliban that day. The Biden-Harris administration's refusal and failure to contemplate these critical issues had devastating consequences in the days to come.**

No NEO Plan as Evacuation Begins

Throughout this investigation — including assessment of State Department and Defense Department documents acquired through discovery — witness after witness spoke to the Biden-Harris administration's failure to plan for a NEO, with particular emphasis on the State Department. According to a volunteer consular officer at HKIA, "[The] first thing that struck me when [REDACTED] arrived was how unprepared post felt for any sort of real, kinetic event, or crisis, such as an evacuation." [796] The volunteer added, "If there had been NEO plans, it was not apparent." [797] Another volunteer consular officer described the situation as, "DoD was filling a pool with a firehose and State was emptying it with a straw." [798] An Embassy Kabul employee asserted that on August 12, 2021, they witnessed a colleague being "asked to write a NEO plan, which hadn't been done before." [799]



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One State Department employee assessed that in a crisis with a six-month notice like the Afghan withdrawal, “more should have been done to prepare for the eventuality of the military departure.” [800] The employee added there was complete inaction by the embassy, and that not making a decision was the embassy’s decision. [801] According to Ambassador Wilson, he never saw or was in possession of a finalized NEO plan produced by the State Department. [802] This issue would later be affirmed by Ambassador Bass, Consul General Howell, and Consul General DeHart — all of whom were flown in after Kabul fell to take over the State Department’s evacuation operations. [803] According to their testimony, the State Department was not operating off a plan when conducting the NEO.

In his testimony before the committee, **Colonel Krummrich assessed, “All of this — this lack of planning, this hubris — by Blinken and the president and these folks, it just showed this incredible lack of geopolitical aptitude that was stunning. The Department of State was criminally incompetent.”** [804] Indeed, the State Department’s own AAR found, “there was not a sufficient sense of urgency” with respect to planning and preparing for a NEO by the time Kabul fell to the Taliban in August 2021.” [805]

“All of this — this lack of planning, this hubris — by Blinken and the president and these folks, it just showed this incredible lack of geopolitical aptitude that was stunning. The Department of State was criminally incompetent.”



TACTICAL FAILURES: PART II

The August 2021 NEO Operations, Failures, and Consequences

THE EVACUATION

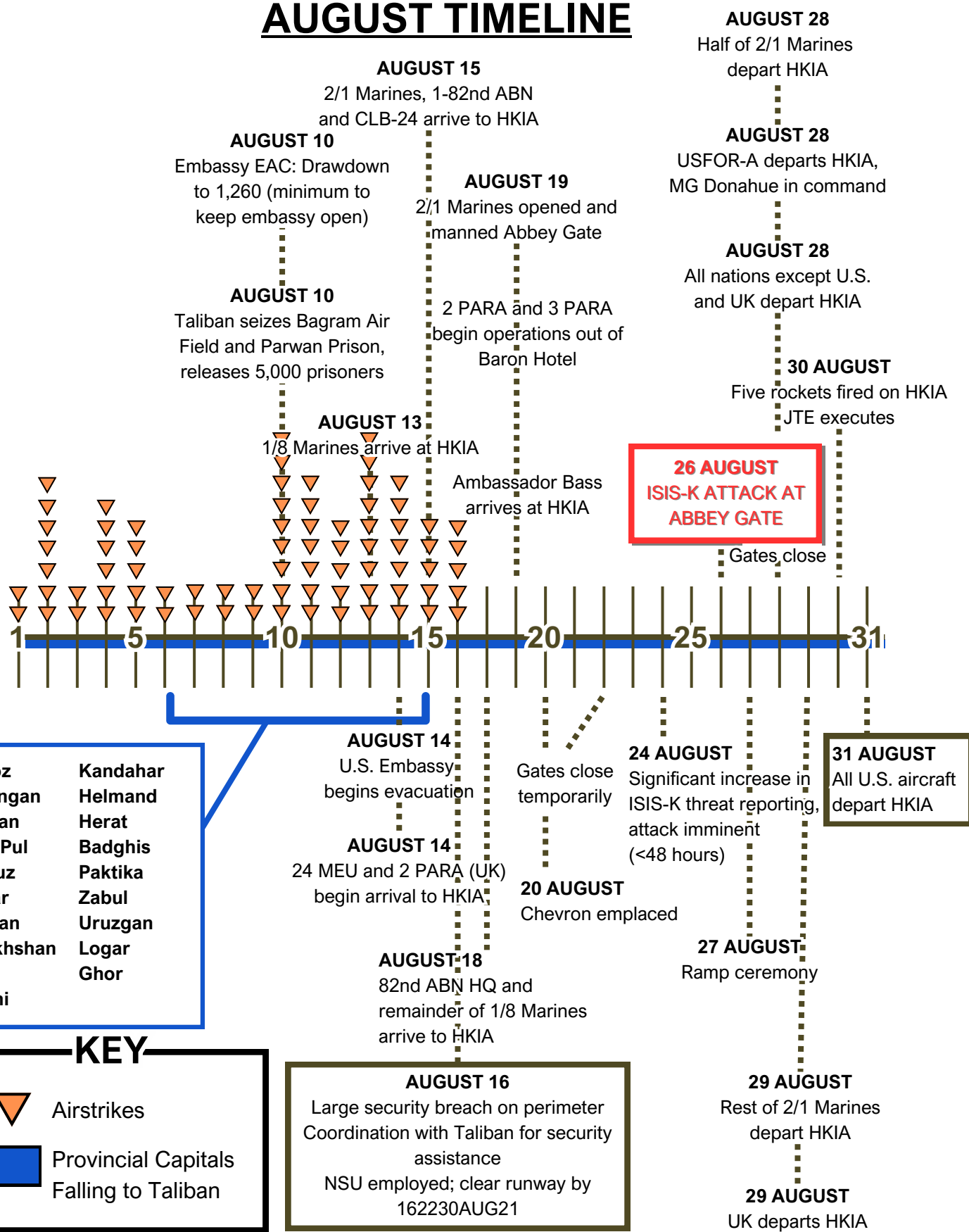
“The history of failure in war can almost be summed up in two words: 'Too late.' Too late in comprehending the deadly purpose of a potential enemy; too late in realizing the mortal danger; too late in preparedness; too late in uniting all possible forces for resistance, too late in standing with one's friends.” [806]

— General Douglas MacArthur

Daily Timeline of the NEO:

- **August 15** — Taliban enters Kabul, Ambassador Ross Wilson first requests a NEO
- **August 16** — Afghans gather at HKIA under Taliban security and overrun the airport
- **August 17** — General McKenzie comes to Kabul
- **August 18** — President Biden tells George Stephanopoulos, “If there’s American citizens left, we’re gonna stay to get them all out”
- **August 18** — DoD Press Conference Describes Goals of NEO
 - Maintain security at the Kabul International Airport;
 - Evacuate all American citizens from Afghanistan who desire to leave;
 - Evacuate any third country national along with U.S. allies and partners;
 - Evacuate personnel with State Department-designated Special Immigrant Visas;
 - Evacuate any others designated for evacuation by the State Department.
- **August 19** — Consular processing begins at HKIA, Abbey Gate opens and Afghan crowd swells
- **August 19** — Ambassador John Bass and his deputy, Consul General DeHart, arrive in Afghanistan
- **August 20** — Supplemental consular officers arrive in HKIA
- **August 23-24** — Crowd is dispersed, U.S. military shift crowd back to footbridge, chatter on ISIS-K attack increases
- **August 25** — Crowd pushes back to foot of Marine sniper tower
- **August 26** — Abbey Gate Bombing
- **August 27** — U.S. strikes ISIS-K planners
- **August 29** — U.S. mistakenly strikes and kills 10 civilians
- **August 30** — Final C-17 airplane and General Chris Donahue leave Afghanistan
- **August 31** — American troop and diplomatic presence officially gone from Afghanistan

AUGUST TIMELINE



Nimroz	Kandahar
Samangan	Helmand
Jowzjan	Herat
Sar-e Pul	Badghis
Kunduz	Paktika
Takhar	Zabul
Baghlan	Uruzgan
Badakhshan	Logar
Farah	Ghor
Ghazni	

KEY

- Airstrikes
- Provincial Capitals Falling to Taliban

AUGUST 16
Large security breach on perimeter
Coordination with Taliban for security assistance
NSU employed; clear runway by 162230AUG21

An Overview of the NEO

To summarize, the State Department, under the failed leadership of Ambassador Ross Wilson and the absence of Secretary Blinken, delayed ordering a NEO until Kabul fell to the Taliban. This inexcusable delay was exacerbated by the department's failure to formulate an emergency evacuation plan. The magnitude of the evacuation necessary became untenable, and departmental inaction condemned thousands of Afghan allies and Americans to a life under Taliban rule. The chaos that ensued served as an invitation to ISIS-K to exploit security weaknesses at HKIA, tragically resulting in the death of 13 U.S. servicemembers by an ISIS-K suicide bomber.

As previously discussed, the Taliban marched into Kabul on August 15, 2021, after months of territorial gains throughout Afghanistan. At that point, pursuant President Biden's go-to-zero order, U.S. forces in Afghanistan had been reduced to fewer than 1,000 troops. [807] Of those 1,000 troops, 650 provided security for U.S. Embassy Kabul. [808] The U.S. military retrograde was deemed complete by the time the Taliban seized Afghanistan's capital.

On August 13th — 48 hours prior to the fall of Kabul — Secretary Austin had called on the State Department to transfer all U.S. Embassy Kabul personnel to HKIA. General McKenzie testified that despite the military's warnings of imminent collapse, the State Department and the NSC remained indecisive on the necessity of a NEO. [809] The NEO announcement was critical. Per the JP 3-68, official evacuation assistance by the Defense Department could be provided only upon official order by Secretary Blinken or by President Biden. [810] At the time, Secretary Blinken was on vacation in East Hampton, New York, leaving the decision to Ambassador Wilson. [811] Ambassador Wilson, in response, told Secretary Austin he needed more time before he could request a NEO and evacuate to HKIA. [812]

On August 15, 2021, with Secretary Blinken still on vacation, Ambassador Wilson finally requested a NEO be ordered by President Biden. [813] The NEO request triggered a series of events, including the overdue destruction of classified materials at Embassy Kabul, shuttering and evacuating the embassy, U.S. forces securing HKIA, and beginning evacuation flights out of Afghanistan. As chief of mission to Embassy Kabul, Ambassador Wilson was responsible for the evacuation, the successful completion of the NEO, and safety of evacuees. [814]

In the 24 hours following Ambassador Wilson's NEO request, crowds of desperate civilians fled to HKIA, overrunning the airport, grounding evacuation flights, and breeding chaos.

On August 16, 2021, the Biden-Harris administration resorted to relying on the Taliban to coordinate security at HKIA, given the lack of U.S. forces on the ground. President Biden's rapid military retrograde had left the U.S. military with insufficient troops to maintain order at HKIA. [815] The Biden-Harris administration's failure to plan for a NEO or heed military warnings regarding an imminent Taliban takeover created a situation ripe for tragedy. [816]

Documents subpoenaed by the committee reveal President Biden officially ordered a NEO in Afghanistan only on August 16, 2021. [817] Following his NEO order, U.S. forces were surged into the country to secure HKIA and provide support to the State Department. The next day, General McKenzie traveled to Kabul to oversee military operations. [818] Reinforcements from the U.S. Marine Corps 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit, the U.S. Army's 82nd Airborne Division, several National Guard units, and other U.S. military groups arrived at HKIA between August 18th and 19th, bringing the number of U.S. forces "from less than 1,000 to almost 6,000." [819]

On August 18, 2021, General Milley announced the goals of the NEO at a Department of Defense press conference: (1) establish and maintain security at HKIA, (2) defend HKIA from attack, (3) evacuate all American citizens who desire to leave Afghanistan, (4) evacuate any third country nationals, or allies and partners as designated by the secretary of state, (5) evacuate personnel with State Department-designated Special Immigrant Visas (SIV), and (6) evacuate any other evacuees that the State Department designates. [820] This investigation reveals Secretary Blinken neither publicly nor privately outlined the State Department's goals for the NEO. He, instead, vaguely communicated through his spokesperson, Mr. Price, asserting, "The safety and security of U.S. Government employees and U.S. citizens overseas is our top priority." [821]

That same day, President Biden falsely promised, "If there's American citizens left, we're gonna stay to get them all out." [822] State Department and Defense Department leadership testified to the committee they did not operate under any impression that the president intended to get all Americans out of Afghanistan before leaving on August 31st. [823] Consul General Howell attested while she "understood the goal was to get every American who wanted to be repatriated," it was simply not true that "we would not leave until every American who wanted to be evacuated was evacuated." [824] General McKenzie further testified to the committee, "I never thought we would get everybody out." [825]

By August 19, 2021, the U.S. military had sufficient troops on the ground to open entry gates[MB1] [MB2] at HKIA — including North Gate, South Gate, East Gate, and Abbey Gate — and process evacuees surrounding the airport in coordination with the State Department. [826]

That same day, Ambassador John Bass and his deputy, Consul General Jim DeHart, arrived at HKIA at the request of Deputy Secretary Wendy Sherman. They were given only 24 to 48 hours' notice of the task. [827] By August 20, 2021, the last of the consular officers who had volunteered to assist with processing of evacuees arrived at HKIA. [828]

Over the next five days, U.S. servicemembers served as sentries at HKIA's gates, jointly tasked with controlling crowds in the thousands, while filtering through eligible evacuees. [829] Those two tasks — keeping the crowd at a safe distance from the airport gates, while allowing eligible evacuees through — were at odds. [830] Their challenge was significantly exacerbated by having to rely on Taliban checkpoints to stymie the flow of civilians. Although the Biden-Harris administration instructed the military to treat the Taliban as security partners, they were anything but. The Taliban fired into the crowds, brutalized civilians, and turned away eligible evacuees, including U.S. citizens and LPRs. [831] Once inside HKIA, State Department consular service officers processed evacuees so that they could board evacuation flights. However, constantly shifting State Department eligibility criteria rendered that processing inconsistent and challenging.

On August 24, 2021, U.S. intelligence and military noted “significant increase in ISIS-K threat reporting.” [832] HKIA's South, North, and East Gates were closed to evacuees by August 25th due to increased threats, leaving Abbey Gate as the only major and publicly known avenue for escape from Afghanistan. [833] From August 25 through August 26, 2021, U.S. servicemembers on the ground received warnings of an imminent IED attack, and intelligence reports anticipated an ISIS-K attack on August 26th at Abbey Gate. [834] Crowds “swelled exponentially the evening of the 25th and into the 26th.” [835] At 4:00 am Kabul time that day, the State Department sounded the alarm, using its Messaging Alert System for Citizens Overseas Tool, or MASCOT, to warn Americans not to approach HKIA. [836]

On August 26, 2021, at 5:36 pm local time, an ISIS-K suicide bomber detonated himself at Abbey Gate, killing 13 U.S. servicemembers and at least 170 Afghan civilians, and injuring 45 U.S. servicemembers and countless civilians. [837] This was the third deadliest day in the United States' 20-year presence in Afghanistan. According to Major General Chris Donahue, the attack did not come as a surprise. “I think on the 26th we knew [the attack] would be at Abbey Gate. We were not surprised. I do not think it was a generic threat, we knew that it would be a suicide vest and it would be at Abbey Gate,” he said. [838]

One hour after the attack, although military officials were still assessing casualties, servicemembers at the gates communicated they were ready to start processing evacuees again. Around two hours later, evacuees were boarding planes again. [839]

On August 27, 2021, the U.S. military conducted an airstrike killing an ISIS-K planner and facilitator in the Nangarhar province of Afghanistan. [840] On August 29th, the U.S. military announced a strike in Kabul, claiming to have killed ISIS-K planners behind the Abbey Gate attack. [841] This proved false. Instead, the strike killed a humanitarian aid worker, Zemari Ahmadi, and nine members of his family. The Biden-Harris administration presented this strike as a success. [842] It was not until after an internal investigation by the Defense Department that General McKenzie would label the strike a mistake, stating, “Having thoroughly reviewed the findings of the investigation and the supporting analysis by interagency partners, I am now convinced that as many as 10 civilians — including up to seven children — were tragically killed in that strike.” [843]

On August 30, 2021, the last U.S. aircraft left Afghanistan, unceremoniously ending two decades of investment, partnership, and progress in Afghanistan. Left behind were at least 1,000 Americans, tens of thousands of Afghan allies, and billions of dollars in U.S. military equipment. [844] While President Biden celebrated the withdrawal as an “extraordinary success” the next day, Afghanistan once again became a terrorist safe haven. [845]

STATE DEPARTMENT DELAYS IN PLANNING, INITIATING, AND EXECUTING THE NEO SET THE STAGE FOR CHAOS

NEO Called Too Late

“I think the fundamental mistake, the fundamental flaw, was the timing of the State Department call of the NEO. I think that was too slow and too late. And that, then, caused a series of events that resulted in the very last couple of days.”

— General Mark A. Milley [846]

There is a regimented process by which NEOs are initiated and executed. It is not until a NEO is requested by the State Department and ordered by the president that key military resources can be engaged to ensure its success. That process places initiation authority in the hands of the U.S. ambassador and secretary of state. In the case of Afghanistan, the State Department, driven by fear of political optics, failed to execute its responsibility in a timely manner. That delay led to chaos and insecurity at Embassy Kabul and HKIA right when military resources were most crucial.

The division of responsibilities for a NEO are outlined in a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between the U.S. Department of State and U.S. Department of Defense, signed in 1998. [847] The Defense Department, under the direction of the State Department, is tasked with providing support to “assist in evacuating US citizens and nationals, DOD civilian personnel, and designated persons (host nation [HN] and third country nationals [TCNs]) whose lives are in danger from locations in a foreign nation to an appropriate safe haven.” [848] The MOA assigns responsibility for initiating an evacuation to the “Principal U.S. Diplomatic or Consular Representative” with approval from the Department of State. [849] As the president’s senior representative to the host nation, Ambassador Ross Wilson was entrusted with that responsibility in Afghanistan.

The Defense Department’s Joint Publication 3-68 (JP 3-68) — prepared and kept current under the direction of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs — provides a joint doctrine to plan, conduct, and assess NEOs between the State Department and Defense Department. [850] According to JP 3-68, “During NEOs, the chief of mission (COM), neither the geographic combatant commander (GCC) nor the subordinate joint force commander (JFC), 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. [851] Accordingly, Defense Department processes, consistent with the MOU, and left the responsibility with Ambassador Wilson to initiate and lead the NEO. [852] He would fail on both fronts.

On August 11, 2021, U.S. Embassy Kabul informally requested the Defense Department provide support to help gradually transfer embassy personnel to HKIA. [853] This gradual transfer of personnel was not a NEO. According to testimony from D-MR Brian McKeon, it was not until August 12th — three days before the capital would fall — that the White House and NSA Sullivan determined their plan to keep the embassy open indefinitely following the military withdrawal was not feasible. [854]

On August 15, 2021, the Taliban entered Kabul and took control of Afghanistan. Ambassador Wilson testified it was only then that he sent an official request for a NEO. [855] His NEO request was first sent to the State Department executive secretary, and, from there, to the Defense Department executive secretary. [856] The request memorandum read, “The rapid military gains of the Taliban in Afghanistan has put American citizens and other individuals at grave risk. ... Due to the urgency of this request, DOS requests DoD begin evacuation immediately.” [857] Official evacuation procedures therefore commenced only after the Taliban had taken the capital and the nation.

On August 16, 2021, Ambassador Wilson and Rear Admiral Vasely spoke on the phone with NSA Sullivan and Secretary Blinken. [858] Ambassador Wilson finally agreed with Rear Admiral Vasely that U.S. Embassy Kabul had to be shuttered and all personnel moved to HKIA. [859] That day, President Biden official ordered a NEO in Afghanistan. [860]

The Biden-Harris administration continues to falsely present that President Biden declared the NEO on August 14, 2021. [861] Documents subpoenaed pursuant to this investigation, however, prove otherwise. [862]

Even if the White House's misrepresentation was accurate, that order came too late. According to General McKenzie, he had outlined four Department of Defense recommended trigger points for a NEO, with two or more being sufficient to necessitate it. [863] Those four trigger points included, (1) the fall of half of Afghanistan's provincial capitals to the Taliban, (2) the loss of approaches into Kabul, (3) the large-scale desertions or the demonstration of ineffectiveness within the Afghan military, or (4) the Afghan government losing the ability to exercise command-and-control over the Afghan forces. [864] All four of these conditions were met the week prior to the NEO order.

U.S. military officials and servicemembers described how the State Department disregarded the trigger points. Brigadier General Farrell Sullivan asserted the Defense Department "formed an assessment team" for NEO triggers "early." [865] He explained the assessment team and NEO triggers were a "priority" for Rear Admiral Vasely, who took command of U.S. forces in Afghanistan from General Miller on July 12, 2021. [866] Rear Admiral Vasely purportedly "tried to get the trigger assessment tool before the Ambassador from mid-July to early-August." [867] The challenge, however, was "getting the embassy to even consider NEO planning." [868] In fact, Ambassador Wilson went on vacation in July, with no decisions made by the embassy until he returned. [869]

Rather than use CENTCOM's four trigger points, Ambassador Wilson established 17 indicators which, if set off, would purportedly "initiate action." [870] Ambassador Wilson admitted his trigger matrix was complex, but nevertheless believed it gave Embassy Kabul sufficient opportunity to shutter and evacuate staff to HKIA in a timely matter. [871] Military officials disagreed. [872] One servicemember assessed that once the Taliban took the provincial centers, "the writing was on the wall," and "that is when the NEO should have been called." [873] Indeed, Ambassador Wilson's failure to call a NEO even after the country fell serves as a self-evident failure.

That failure bred chaos. As the Taliban entered Kabul on August 15th, crowds of desperate civilians fled to HKIA, overrunning the airport “before security could be set.” [874] The ensuing chaos forced the airfield to close for 48 hours. [876] Having already completed President Biden’s rapid military retrograde, U.S. forces did not have the troops necessary to maintain order at HKIA. [877] According to Rear Admiral Vasely, “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. [878] He added that had the State Department “declared a NEO sooner, [the military] could have gotten the Washington team into Kabul sooner.” [879]

Testifying before the committee, General Milley explained the delay in requesting and ordering the NEO was the “fundamental mistake,” leading to the events plaguing the Afghanistan evacuation. [880] General McKenzie confirmed “the events of mid and late August 2021 were the direct result of delaying the initiation of a NEO.” [881] Those sentiments were echoed by General Miller, who testified to the committee, **“If you get yourself in an emergency — if the building’s already on fire before you start evacuating it, it’s a much more challenging evacuation.”** [882] Yet with Afghanistan teetering on collapse, a limited military presence, and Embassy Kabul ill-prepared, Secretary Blinken leadership went on vacation, abdicating to Ambassador Wilson, who was fresh off his own vacation and mired in inaction. The crisis in Afghanistan was in part a crisis of leadership.

DATE	U.S. Boots on the Ground (BOG)
1-Aug	925
5-Aug	925
10-Aug	1,074
15-Aug	1,504
20-Aug	5,734
25-Aug	5,107
30-Aug	1,237
31-Aug	0

When asked by the committee whether he should have considered requesting the NEO earlier, Ambassador Ross Wilson testified, “I’m comfortable with the conclusion that I came to when I came to it, on August 15.

That was the point where we could no longer safely stay there, and that was the point — after that point, our ability to get our people out started to look a lot more problematic.” [883]

EVACUATING U.S. EMBASSY KABUL

Foreign Service Personnel and Embassy Documents

When Ambassador Wilson initiated the NEO, few preparations had been made to destroy documents or move personnel at Embassy Kabul. Ultimately, sensitive and confidential documents were left behind for the Taliban to find, while personnel were haphazardly transported to HKIA. Adding insult to injury, Ambassador Wilson fled the embassy shortly after initiating the NEO, leaving embassy personnel behind to risk their lives destroying American secrets and equipment. His was a moral as well as strategic failure; Ambassador Wilson should not be entrusted again with American lives.

On August 12, 2021, Ambassador Wilson planned to evacuate merely 250 of Embassy Kabul’s approximately 2,500 remaining personnel and contractors by August 31, 2021. [884] In other words, he planned to keep the embassy open at near full capacity for the foreseeable future. Therefore, Embassy Kabul had taken few steps to destroy America’s diplomatic footprint in Afghanistan, including two decades’ worth of sensitive equipment and materials. Indeed, Ambassador Wilson informed Secretary Austin he would need 72 hours to even “begin destroying sensitive documents.” [885] Secretary Austin, in response, warned the ambassador he had 72 hours “to be done.” [886] According to Colonel Matthew Hardman — who served as a commander of U.S. forces during the evacuation — “The embassy team was not postured for an evacuation whatsoever, not planned, not resourced, not rehearsed — it was beyond them.” [887]

According to interviews of State Department employees taken pursuant to the State Department’s AAR, which the committee obtained by subpoena, a significant amount of classified information was left to the Taliban. [888] The employees said Ambassador Wilson and Deputy Chief of Mission Scott Weinhold fled to HKIA while embassy personnel attempted to destroy sensitive U.S. government materials. [889] Another employee assessed they needed weeks to destroy the materials left behind but were only given one day’s notice by embassy leadership. [890] Servicemembers on the ground corroborated those accounts, stating, “no one was really serious about evacuation/destruction of documents until 15 August,” [891] and as a result “they still had massive amounts of classified paper documents that they [were] trying to burn.” [892] Both State Department and Defense Department witnesses recalled a large bonfire in the embassy courtyard. [893]

Meanwhile, the Taliban were “drifting into the city, and soon [were] only one kilometer away from the embassy.” [894] According to an embassy employee, droves of classified information were left behind. [895]

The embassy was also ill-prepared for moving personnel to the airport. As staff worked to destroy those sensitive materials, messages blared on embassy loudspeakers to get to the Helicopter Landing Zones (HLZs) for an evacuation to HKIA. [896] **An Embassy Kabul employee explained the embassy did not have a roster of its own personnel. [897] Instead, the employee had to go room to room to clear the compound, finding two embassy staffers not known to even be on the property. [898]** Some embassy personnel “learned about the evacuation from their superiors, while others learned about it from the embassy loudspeakers.” [899] One State Department employee reported that some people at the embassy “didn’t know Taliban surrounded the city, even on day of the evacuation.” [900] In summation, as the enemy of America’s 20-year war took Kabul, Ambassador Wilson fled, and staff scrambled to learn what was going on and destroy documents.

It was not until 1:30 am local time on August 16th that U.S. Forces Afghanistan-Forward headquarters and U.S. Embassy Kabul were shuttered. [901]

Locally Employed Staff

Locally employed staff (LE staff) are essential to the State Department’s global operations; indeed, they comprise the bulk of U.S. embassy personnel. They are citizens of the respective host nation (i.e., Afghans in Afghanistan), assume great responsibility, and, in some cases, great risk by working for the United States. As recognized by the State Department, LE staff are “the continuity staff of our Missions abroad. They provide the institutional knowledge and professional contacts that are so important to the embassy.” [902] That is especially so at a hardship post like Kabul, where foreign service officers usually serve limited assignments of two consecutive years. LE staff provide “institutional knowledge and perform vital mission program and support functions.” [903] When these individuals sign up to advance the U.S. diplomatic mission, the State Department signs up to protect them.

Yet, this investigation has uncovered that not only was there no plan to protect and evacuate LE staff, but Embassy Kabul leadership actively deprioritized them. Indeed, the State Department’s AAR interview notes illustrate Embassy Kabul’s neglect of LE staff.

One State Department employee reflected that the time-crunch in embassy evacuation operations — as a result of Ambassador Wilson’s late NEO request — led to a situation in which “manifesting and shifting flights to get Embassy Kabul people out earlier was not possible to do,” with the evacuation of LE staff being even more difficult, as “they were mixed in with everyone else.” [904] Another State Department employee asserted that embassy leadership “failed LES — they weren’t prioritized.” [905]

Ambassador Wilson admitted to the committee that LE staff who showed up to work on the morning of August 15th “were told to leave.” [906] One embassy employee recounted how, as the embassy was evacuating to HKIA, there was a “group of 40 LE staff ... outside the gates of airport,” and Deputy Chief of Mission Scott Weinhold “sent [an] email saying they should go home.” [907] According to the employee, of those 40 LE staff who worked that day, only 20 made it out of Afghanistan. [908] According to another employee, LE staff were “escorted off Alvarado [inside HKIA] on the 14th/15th and told to come back later.” [909] That same employee also described how “that was a major missed opportunity because it was never going to be easy to get people back to the airport. [911] There were reports of LE staff being escorted off in tears. [910] It was not until August 18th, three days after the fall of Kabul, that U.S. Embassy Kabul reached out to LE staff instructing them to come to HKIA. [912] According to the interview notes, LE staff were happy once Ambassador Bass arrived, “reflect[ing] the lack of trust the community had in the [Embassy Front Office].” [913]

Foreign service officer Sam Aronson explained to the committee that during the NEO, “There were hundreds of local embassy staff, and with their family members, that made it well over a thousand individuals who needed to be evacuated to the U.S.” [914] However, getting the LE staff through the checkpoints and past the gates at HKIA proved difficult as a result of the embassy’s failure to plan. Consul General Howell attested that servicemembers had trouble identifying LE staff because Ambassador Wilson advised them to destroy their embassy badges “early on in the process for fear that it could put them at risk of persecution by the Taliban.” [915] The State Department and Embassy Kabul’s failure to prioritize LE staff contributed to the abandonment of individuals who, for decades, advanced America’s diplomatic mission. Consul General DeHart confirmed that the United States “hardly scratched the surface” of evacuating the LE staff. [916]

The reality is that the Biden-Harris administration's withdrawal from Afghanistan resulted in an appalling failure to follow through on the United States' responsibility to protect these staff members. As one State Department employee put it, the "Department broke its social contract with staff and those who work for it." [917]

FAILURE TO PREPARE AND SECURE HKIA

President Biden, as discussed, had been advised to maintain 2,500 U.S. troops in Afghanistan, and his rejection of that advice cost the United States the use of Bagram Air Base — a U.S.-built and controlled airfield. In their testimony before the committee, General Milley and General McKenzie explained that at 2,500, the United States would have been able to maintain a viable base at Bagram. [918] Without Bagram, the United States was forced to rely on a civilian airport — HKIA — to run the NEO. [919] HKIA was neither prepared for, nor equipped, to host an evacuation of this magnitude.

When the NEO was ordered, the United States had less than 1,000 troops on the ground, and those few resources were split between evacuating the embassy and securing HKIA. [920] In the face of limited resources, the airfield was swarmed with frightened evacuees, making it impossible to establish order and security at HKIA. [921] Further, according to the Defense Department, security improvements to HKIA were not made prior to the NEO "due to the sensitive nature of the mission." [922] Rear Admiral Vasely asserted U.S. forces did not pursue those improvements out of concern that they would alert the Afghan government of a potential evacuation. "[W]e hadn't had a meaningful discussion with [REDACTED] about defense of HKIA for a NEO because we didn't want to let the cat out of the bag, and let them know we were planning for a NEO, so there was no coordinated plan with ANDSF for external defense of the airfield. ... It was a conscious decision with AMB Wilson about not wanting to let ANDSF/GIROA know we were planning for a NEO," he said. [923]

At HKIA, without adequate security in place, the radar systems and the air traffic control tower were badly damaged by those desperate crowds. According to an Air Force colonel responsible for the airfield during the evacuation, "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." [924] That chaos resulted in lasting consequences. A servicemember described the challenge of managing hundreds of flights without working radar systems or an operational control tower. He said, "We had very minimal equipment to do our jobs, so it was very bare-bones controlling, aircraft would call up from random positions in varying distances away from the airport. It was all just real-time decisions, doing the best we could to ensure the safety of all aircraft." [925]



AP



AP

The chaos on the ground manifested in visually harrowing moments that captured the world's attention. After two decades of partnership, the images that arose out of the NEO were symbolic of the Biden-Harris administration's failure in Afghanistan. One image, in particular, stood out. As U.S.-operated C-17 planes accelerated down the runway, Afghan allies ran alongside the aircraft, clinging on even after liftoff. [926] Between August 15 and August 16, 2021, at least four Afghan civilians, including children, fell to their deaths onto the airport tarmac, with others clinging on longer but meeting the same fate. An investigation conducted by the U.S. Air Force concluded the crew had "exercised sound judgment in their decision to get airborne as quickly as possible when faced with an unprecedented and rapidly deteriorating security situation." [927] The circumstances that justified taking off with civilians clinging to the outside of an aircraft are indicative of how seriously political leadership failed.

The circumstances that justified taking off with civilians clinging to the outside of an aircraft are indicative of how seriously political leadership failed.

A servicemember recounted evacuees growing tragically quiet after watching civilians fall to their deaths. [928] To make matters worse, the United States was forced to suspend evacuation flights for 24 critical hours to secure the tarmac. [929] According to General Milley, once the Taliban seized Kabul on August 15th, it took "two to three days" for the 82nd Airborne, the Marine Expeditionary Unit, and U.S. special forces to "wrest control" of HKIA. [930]

Zaki Anwari, a 17-year-old player on the Afghan national youth soccer team, was among the Afghans who fell to their deaths. Aref Peyman, the head of media relations for Afghanistan's Olympic Committee, later said of Anwari, "He was kind and patient, but like so many of our young people he saw the arrival of the Taliban as the end of his dreams and sports opportunities. He had no hope and wanted a better life." [931] Fada Mohammad, another one of the Afghan civilians who fell to their deaths, was a young dentist who fell from the sky and crashed into a home a few miles away. [932]

SHARED CONTROL OF HKIA

Given the lack of U.S. forces on the ground at the start of the NEO and lack of planning, the military was forced to rely on the Taliban for assistance in gaining control of HKIA.

The evacuation began in too chaotic of a state to permit flights. On the morning of August 16, 2021, Rear Admiral Vasely assessed that approximately 5,000 to 6,000 civilians were "all over the southern portion of the airfield, and even on the runway," preventing operations on the runway. [933] He believed that American and Afghan forces were no longer able to regain control of the crowds on their own, and the overflow of people prevented additional the U.S. military from landing at HKIA to help contain the crowds. [934] That day, Rear Admiral Vasely accepted the Taliban's offer of assistance to control HKIA, and by around 10:30 PM local time, the airfield was cleared. [935]

The solution, they decided, was for U.S. forces to stand outside HKIA's gates to process evacuees while the Taliban established checkpoint gates to maintain control of the crowds. [936] Major General Donahue was responsible for tactical coordination with the Taliban, and Rear Admiral Vasely handled strategic decision-making. [937] General McKenzie, in turn, maintained contact with Taliban commander Mawlawi Hamdullah Mukhlis throughout the NEO, who served as the official liaison for coordinating security with the U.S. military. [938] Mukhlis was one of the first senior Taliban commanders to enter the abandoned presidential palace after the capital fell on August 15th. [939] The Taliban authorized the Haqqani network's Badri forces to manage HKIA security — a branch of the Taliban with some of its closest ties to al Qaeda. [940] The United States entrusted terrorists with securing its evacuation.

According to General McKenzie, relying on the Taliban was a terrible bargain; it reduced the risk of attack on U.S. forces at the airport but prevented an unknowable number of eligible evacuees from reaching HKIA due to uncontrolled filtering by the Taliban and fear of passing through their checkpoints. [941] He later recounted the reliance as “the land of bad choices.” [942] According to the U.S. military, reliance on the Taliban during the NEO led to a degree of intelligence sharing, which began on August 18, 2021. [943] Coordination between the military and the Taliban throughout the evacuation “was daily, if not hourly.” [944] CIA Director Burns also reportedly met with Taliban leader Mullah Baradar at an HKIA terminal on August 23rd to discuss Taliban cooperation with the evacuation, sharing U.S. concerns about the threat of attack by ISIS-K. [945] In fact, the security situation at HKIA was at points so tenuous that, Brigadier General Sullivan testified the threat from ISIS-K so exceeded the U.S. security capabilities on the ground, they believed “a bomb made it onto a plane several times, which forced us to offload the planes and search all military aged males.” [946] The United States, under President Biden and Vice President Harris’ leadership, placed the fate of Americans in the hands of terrorists.

According to witness accounts, the process of regaining control of HKIA resulted in violence against U.S. servicemembers by the Taliban. They were forced to return fire at the terrorist group during the course of clearing HKIA. [947] Servicemembers have since recounted armed Taliban fighters using the crowds as cover to attack U.S. forces and Afghan civilians. [948] Those servicemembers in guard towers at HKIA “received small arms fire throughout the day.” [949] Servicemembers on the ground also recounted the Taliban exploiting their security control over the airport. State Department personnel similarly recalled violence ensuing, asserting, “Throughout [HKIA] was sniper fire, incoming rockets, riots at gates, grievous injuries, crushing injuries, unaccompanied minors, minors thrown over gates.” [950]

CONTROLLING THE CHAOS: THE OPERATIONS AND SUPPORTING LOGISTICS OF THE NEO AT HKIA

“I live with memories of women and men walking through razor wire, slicing up their bodies, for a chance that I would allow them into the airport.”

— Sam Aronson, former State Department Diplomat [951]

Leadership: Roles, Responsibilities and Confusion During the NEO

Late improvements to the State's Department's organizational structure during the NEO failed to mitigate the fallout of Ambassador Wilson's delayed NEO request. Days after the Taliban marched into Afghanistan, its leadership changed dramatically.

Leading up to and during the NEO, Ambassador Wilson was responsible for "overseeing all executive branch activities in that country, which includes the protection of American citizens." [952] His deputy, Scott Weinhold, was also responsible for State Department personnel at HKIA. [953] A contingent of roughly two dozen embassy staff and volunteers reported to Ambassador Wilson. On August 19th, Ambassador Bass, however, arrived in Kabul and took over leadership of the mission. [954] Ambassador Bass and his team brought long overdue leadership to the embassy evacuation operation.

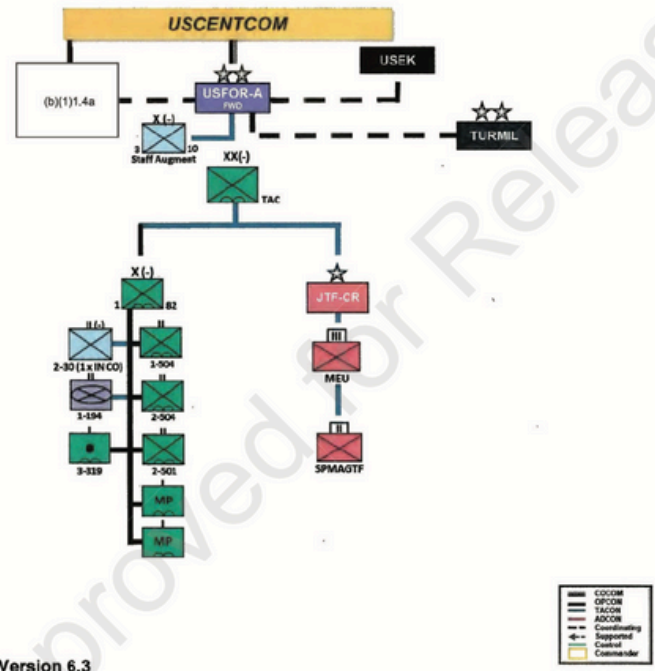
On August 17, 2021, two days after the NEO had been ordered, Ambassador Bass — who previously served as U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan under the Trump administration — received a call from Deputy Secretary Sherman requesting that he depart to Kabul to help run the NEO. [955] Ambassador Bass was sent, reportedly, because Ambassador Wilson "was shattered by the experience of the past week." [956] Ambassador Wilson admitted to the committee that he "wasn't in a frame of mind to complete the job." [957] Ambassador Bass arrived in Afghanistan on or about August 19th, roughly four days after Kabul fell and 36 hours after Deputy Secretary Sherman requested his support. [958]

Ambassador Bass served as U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan from 2017 to 2020 with a lengthy career in the foreign service behind him. He brought with him, amongst others, his former deputy chief of mission, Consul General Jim DeHart, who served with him during his assignment in Afghanistan. According to Mr. Aronson, "it would've been tremendously useful" to have Ambassador Bass and Consul General DeHart on the ground earlier. [959] Another State Department employee asserted Ambassador Wilson did not visit the gates at HKIA until Ambassador Bass did. [960]

Upon arriving on August 19, 2021, Ambassador Bass took over leadership of all consular officers. [961] Consul General DeHart's direct reports included Consul General Howell and her team of consular officers. [962] Consul General Howell volunteered to assist with the NEO while serving as consul general to the U.S. Consulate in Ankara, Turkey. She, too, arrived in Kabul on August 19, 2021, on Temporary Duty Assignment (TDY) and served as team leader for consular operations alongside her deputy, Jean Akers, and Conn Schrader. [963] According to Ms. Howell, 95% of her day during the NEO was spent coordinating with the military. She testified to the committee she was located in the Joint Operations Center (JOC) alongside Brigadier General Sullivan. [964]

Turning to the military, General Miller had transferred command of U.S. Forces-Afghanistan on July 12th to Rear Admiral Vasely, who became the senior commander on the ground. [965] Meanwhile, Major General Donahue was in charge of HKIA operations and security. [966] Brigadier General Farrell Sullivan coordinated with Major General Donahue regarding HKIA security. [967] Finally, Colonel Hardman commanded the security forces, served as the chief of staff for the Army units on the ground, managed the South Gate, and coordinated with NATO and other allies. [968]

ACTS-SCK-DO
 SUBJECT: Enclosure 7 - Executive Summary for Findings and Recommendation - Attack Against U.S. Forces Conducting Non-combatant Evacuation Operations (NEO) at Hamid Karzai International Airport on 26 August 2021



CENTCOM Abbey Gate Report Exhibit 010

While Ambassador Bass’s arrival was overdue, his authority over Ambassador Wilson was not made clear, impeding his ability to effectuate the NEO. [969] An officer in the U.S. military described the apparent pecking order as, “for State Department, Ambassador Bass ran the show. But there wasn’t an authority on who was specifically in charge between him and Ambassador Wilson.” [970] The State Department inspector general later affirmed the presence of both Ambassador Wilson and Ambassador Bass caused confusion regarding who was in charge. According to State Department personnel, “having two people perform the role of the Chief of Mission caused confusion about leadership among DoD officials leading the NEO.” [971] Defense Department personnel recounted, “With [multiple ‘Ambassadors’] both on deck it was not initially clear who was the lead providing us the support we required to execute the NEO,” and “there wasn’t an authority on who was specifically in charge.” [972]

There was also uncertainty regarding the division of responsibilities and authority between the State Department and the Defense Department. Although existing authority identifies the State Department as responsible for the NEO, department witnesses claimed they were unaware of their responsibility. As outlined earlier in this report, the chief of mission is responsible for the success of the NEO while the Defense Department helps effectuate the NEO. [973] But that was not apparent to Ambassador Wilson. **He testified before the committee he was unaware that he bore overall responsibility for the successful completion of the NEO.** [974]

When presented with JP 3-68 memorializing the roles of responsibilities of State Department and Defense Department principals during a NEO, Ambassador Wilson said that he had never seen the document. [975] In his testimony before the committee, Ambassador Bass acknowledged JP 3-68, but testified, “In practice, I don’t believe [Wilson] was [the lead]. I believe it was well understood, certainly by those of us on the ground, that the ultimate responsibility resided within the Department of Defense.” When asked for their basis for believing the Defense Department bore ultimate responsibility, State Department witnesses could not identify any official policy or any reason to dispute the validity of JP 3-68.

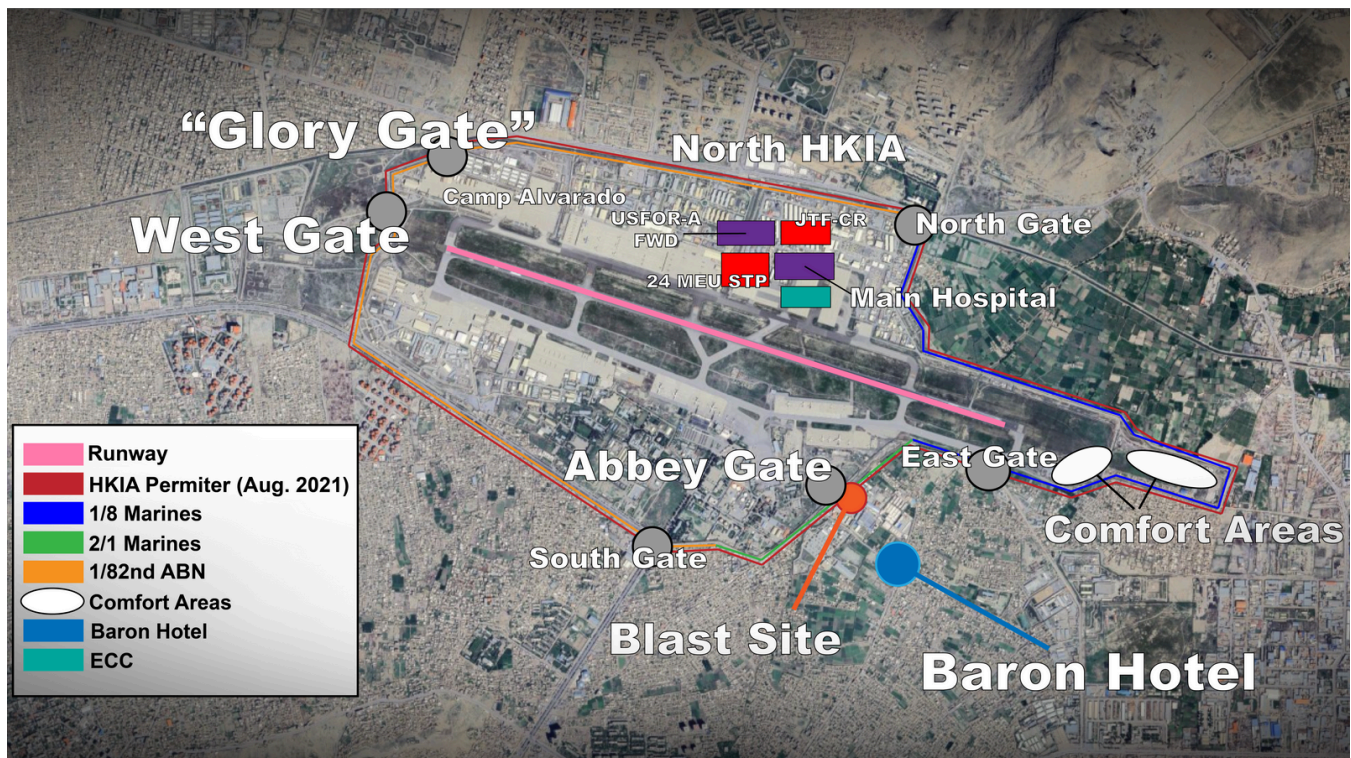
Defense Department witnesses — including General Milley, General McKenzie, and General Miller — testified JP 3-68 authoritatively dictated that the Defense Department supported the State Department in the NEO. According to General Milley, and confirmed by General McKenzie, “the State Department is the lead federal agency for planning and execution, oversight of the execution of the noncombatant operation. And the Department of Defense is in support of and other departments are in support of the State Department.” [976]

The State Department’s lack of awareness of its own leadership responsibilities led to ineffective communications and execution with the Department of Defense during the NEO. This impeded the completion of tasks, including the identification and processing of eligible evacuation populations, communicating with American citizens in Afghanistan, and ensuring a safe environment for U.S. personnel.

OPERATIONS

Staging of Operations

It was not until the State Department ceded to the military’s pleas for a NEO that military reinforcements could arrive to HKIA on August 17, 2021. Upon arrival in Kabul, U.S. forces had to adapt a civilian airport to meet the demands of the largest humanitarian airlift operation in U.S. history. At the height of the NEO, there were 5,784 U.S. troops, over 2,000 coalition and other forces, and eight U.S. battalions at HKIA. [977] Notably, Defense Department leaders previously assessed 2,500 U.S. troops to have been sufficient to keep Afghanistan out of the Taliban’s hands, Bagram operational, and a NEO preempted.



The Joint Task Force-Crisis Response and U.S. Forces Afghanistan-Forward were set up at North HKIA. North HKIA contained the staging area for the Marine Shock Trauma Platoon and the main hospital. [978] Ambassador Bass and his team, including Consul General DeHart and Consul General Howell, were set up near the command centers for the various U.S. military branches at the north end of HKIA, referred to as the JOC. [979] Major General Donahue and Brigadier General Sullivan, as well as Admiral Vasely, were operating out of the same location. [980]

Ambassador Wilson and his embassy team were located in the west end of HKIA at Camp Alvarado, where the 82nd Airborne hospital was also located. [981] According to Mr. Aronson, there was "very little flexibility" for movement between the JOC and Ambassador Wilson's location, due to staffing restrictions on the State Department's security team. [982] He informed the committee that the security team had to hotwire cars to transport personnel between the two locations. [983]

Once Ambassador Bass arrived at HKIA, Ambassador Wilson purportedly shifted his attention to coordinating with leaders in Washington, interfacing with the Afghan government, and supporting consular personnel and locally employed staff. [984] Ambassador Bass testified to the committee he exercised operational authority over TDY personnel supporting the NEO while Ambassador Wilson was responsible for all U.S. State Department personnel in Afghanistan. [985]

State Department personnel on the ground, however, believed that, in practice, Ambassador Bass was leading department operations. [986]

On August 19, 2021, U.S. servicemembers set up at Abbey Gate while British forces operated outside out of the Baron Hotel complex near HKIA. [987] On August 20th, a structure consisting of six large shipping containers, referred to as a “chevron,” was installed outside of Abbey Gate. [988] **Because HKIA was a civilian airport and not a military base, military personnel resorted to repurposing shipping containers as barriers, in an attempt to separate them from the crowds of desperate civilians. The chevron sought to reduce security risk to servicemembers, with two layers of screening: the first, by the Taliban, who sat atop those containers, creating a “checkpoint” for the very civilians fleeing them; [989] and the second, by U.S. and U.K. servicemembers. [990]**

In addition to Abbey Gate, three other gates — the East Gate, North Gate, South Gate — were operational at HKIA. [991] As will be addressed in this report, those other gates were closed by the military starting on or about August 25, 2021, due to ongoing security threats, leaving Abbey Gate as the only operable public entry point by the August 26th ISIS-K terrorist attack. Abbey Gate was the subject of imminent threat warnings as well, however.

The United States also conducted limited operations outside the perimeter of HKIA. This included an effort led by the CIA through its Eagle Base compound, located a few miles away from HKIA. [992] The use of Eagle Base allowed U.S. special forces and CIA operatives to avoid the chaos and crowds surrounding HKIA, and the violence imposed by the Taliban surrounding the airport. [993] As an anecdote, Mr. Aronson recalled befriending an Afghan man upon his arrival at HKIA, who had spent two years working as a translator for U.S. special forces. Frustrated by limitations imposed by the State Department’s “shifting, confusing, infuriating policies about whom he could save,” Mr. Aronson made a deal with the Afghan translator: he would help save the Afghan translator’s family, in exchange for the translator locating and bringing through the gate evacuees identified by Mr. Aronson. Unlike Mr. Aronson, the Afghan translator was not limited by the U.S. government’s travel limitations outside the airport.



ProPublica

Mr. Aronson and the Afghan translator — with help of CIA operatives — rescued 52 people, including American citizens and LPRs. [994]

Overview of Consular Officer Challenges

During the NEO, State Department consular officers were responsible for the critical task of processing eligible evacuation populations. [995] Despite the arduous task and high stakes, the embassy’s consular team remained understaffed until late into the NEO. Further, the consular officers who did arrive later in August had little preparation for what was to come. The result was persistent backlogs, a failure to methodically screen or process evacuees, and significant burdens on U.S. servicemembers who were forced to assist with screening evacuees while maintaining security.

On August 15, 2021, only 15 consular officers were on the ground at HKIA. [996] Ambassador Wilson acknowledged to the committee, “All of us recognized on the 15th that we — or before the 15th — that we would need considerably more consular officers and problem solvers, if you will, than we had at hand.” [997] Three additional State Department consular officers arrived on August 17th bringing the total to 18 consular officers. [998] By August 20th, there were 30 to 40 consular officers on the ground at any given time; testimony, however, is inconsistent on the exact number. [999]

State Department officials have attempted to defend the inadequate NEO consular services. Consul General Howell testified she believed that bottlenecks in processing were not caused by lack of consular officers. [1000] Ambassador Bass testified that by about August 20th, he believed they had a sufficient number of people. [1001] That testimony, to the extent accurate, does not justify why the State Department’s consular operations reached sufficient capacity five days after the Taliban takeover, nor does it address the fact that consular capacity was severely limited by HKIA’s significant security challenges. Multiple servicemembers reported that consular officers arrived too late to Kabul. [1002] Mr. Aronson affirmed that sentiment, testifying he “absolutely” wished he had had the opportunity to arrive at HKIA for the NEO sooner, saying, “without a doubt” more American citizens and Afghan allies would have been rescued if consular officers had gotten to Kabul earlier. [1003] His delay was not for lack of effort, but slow processing of his request to volunteer by the State Department. [1004]

Moreover, many on the ground, particularly military officials, disagreed with assertions that there were sufficient consular officers during the NEO. General McKenzie believed the ability of the State Department to process potential evacuees would “prove to be the Achilles’ heel of the entire mission.” [1005]

The general said, “We were also limited by the number of consular officers that the embassy had on hand.” [1006] A servicemember described how “The pressure to get that many people through forced us to turn into processors because we didn’t have enough State Department folks.” [1007] Another servicemember assessed that consular officers were “nervous and undermanned for sure,” which was a common refrain. [1008] As a result, the military had to serve in as an ad hoc consular function, reducing security capabilities and causing processing inconsistency. U.S. Forces Afghanistan-Forward concluded, “consular staff did not have sufficient manning to supervise all processing at the gates which often led to Department of Defense personnel at the gates making on the spot calls concerning paperwork.” [1009]

Furthermore, with every minute counting, nightly gaps in consular coverage were a notable issue to some servicemembers. They repeatedly expressed frustration that, while they were working around the clock, consular officers would stop working between 2 am and 6 am every day. [1010] Additionally, consular teams ceased working at the same time, creating backlogs for the U.S. servicemembers manning the gates until a new team arrived. [1011]

It was not only the quantity of consular officers, but also the preparedness and training of those officers that posed a challenge. U.S. Forces Afghanistan-Forward reported, “consular affairs personnel rotated during NEO,” and on August 21st, 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.” [1012]

Consul General Howell’s experience is illustrative of issues surrounding consular staffing during the NEO. She testified to the committee she volunteered to assist with the Afghanistan evacuation after receiving a mass request for volunteers from the State Department. [1013] She responded to that request and was sent to Kabul a “day or two” later, on August 17th, to serve as the consular team lead. [1014] Consul General Howell never received any Afghanistan-specific emergency action plans, formal documentation, or guidance, with the exception of some relayed priorities. [1015] In fact, she did not know the timeline for the NEO before departing for Kabul. [1016] During her layover in Doha, Qatar, she received one briefing from the department. [1017] That briefing provided her with background information, but the remainder of her briefings regarding realities on the ground were received only upon her arrival in Kabul. [1018] Despite serving as the consular lead, Consul General Howell was not given an opportunity to assemble her own team for the mission, and she could not speak to how other consular officers were selected for the mission. [1019] She arrived at HKIA in the evening on August 19th and was immediately thrown into action; all just a few days after she was asked to volunteer. [1020]

Marine Sergeant Tyler Vargas-Andrews also described a patrol he and his fellow Marines conducted during which they witnessed the Taliban position “12-15 individuals flex cuffed against the wall” alongside “unconscious or lifeless bodies.” [1021]

As evidenced by Consul General Howell’s experience, one particularly damaging decision was to rely on volunteers rather than deliberately selecting officers to manage the NEO. [1022] Mr. Aronson strongly critiqued the way in which consular officers were picked for HKIA, testifying that some of them did not have the proper skills or emotional preparation for the high-risk, high-stress job at hand. [1023] The State Department’s AAR found it “could have better identified, prepared, and equipped volunteers for the situation they encountered.” [1024] Consular volunteers during the NEO also attested to a lack of guidance on their consular responsibilities. Mr. Aronson told the committee he did not receive any direction or guidance before reaching HKIA. [1025] He testified, **“The only preparation, if you’d even call it that, was, at Al Udeid Air Base in Doha, the assistant regional security officer fitted us for body armor and Kevlar helmets.”** [1026]

Having not been prepared or briefed, other State Department employees reported that consular officer volunteers did not have a clear idea of what they were doing when they arrived at HKIA. [1027] **Mr. Aronson called the lack of preparation atypical in his near decade of experience, explaining that “The norm prior to going into a ‘combat environment’ is to attend at least some mission briefings, preparations, and rehearsals before entering the chaos.”** [1028] He added, “I did not have a firm understanding of what my mission would be,” and it was not until about 45 minutes after landing at HKIA that he learned he would be doing consular work. [1029]

Eligible Evacuation Populations: Identification and Documentation

Throughout the withdrawal and, eventually the implementation of the NEO, the State Department never developed effective ways of identifying eligible evacuees, prioritizing high-risk individuals, or even locating Americans. Interference and inconsistent guidance from the White House made matters worse, and the utter lack of preparation led to a myriad of challenges in processing.

To begin, the State Department’s Consular Affairs Bureau never possessed a full and accurate list of Americans in Afghanistan. [1030]

The State Department Smart Traveler Enrollment Program — which announces a U.S. citizen’s presence in a foreign country to the department and U.S. embassy — is voluntary, even for level four travel advisory countries such as Afghanistan. Accordingly, the State Department had no way of tracking or identifying Americans in Afghanistan before the NEO was ordered. [1031]

Next, as previously prefaced, consular operations were handicapped by ever-changing eligibility criteria for evacuation populations. The State Department’s AAR found that “constantly changing policy guidance and public messaging from Washington regarding which populations were eligible for relocation and how the embassy should manage outreach and flow added to the confusion and often failed to take into account key facts on the ground.” [1032] The changes in eligibility criteria made processing slower and inconsistent, further fueling the chaos at the gates. A servicemember said, “It was difficult to discern who would actually pass the [Department of State] since they changed their policies by the hour on what type of paperwork they would accept.” [1033] An example of an unclear policy was the “immediate family” evacuation criteria, which the State Department did not define. That ambiguity led to Americans being denied entry to HKIA when traveling as a family. [1034] The undefined policy was often strictly interpreted to permit one spouse and children under 21, which stranded Americans, separated families, and increased chaos. [1035]

Another frequently changing evacuation protocol was how to prioritize specific at-risk populations. Mr. Aronson testified prioritization was inconsistent and, at times, nonsensical. “SIVs who were supposedly or allegedly approved but had not yet received the visa foil were at some points taken off that list, and at-risk Afghans were on multiple occasions taken off that list,” he said. [1036] He explained the evacuation priority list changed “almost daily” and “there may have been a day where it changed twice in one day.” Consul General DeHart affirmed Mr. Aronson’s assessment, testifying the guidance “changed more than once” and explained how, in addition to disrupting operations, it was “very difficult” for consular officers who would realize they turned someone away for whom eligibility or priority had changed. [1037]

*Consul General Jim DeHart described the scenes at HKIA as “apocalyptic.” [1038]
A marine added, “it was like controlling a flood at all times.” [1039]*

Another consequential issue arose in verifying eligibility documentation, for which the State Department failed to develop a consistent system. [1040] Ambassador Bass testified before the committee that the specific documentation required for each category of persons changed every couple of days, resulting in consular officers making ad hoc determinations. [1041] That inconsistency arose in part because Embassy Kabul had, amidst the chaos, burned the passports of Americans and Afghans. [1042] One State Department employee described panic when the Taliban arrived at the embassy walls, which devolved into officials filling Tupperware containers with passports and visa foils. [1043] Embassy leadership eventually decided to burn the passports rather than risk them falling into Taliban hands. [1044] In addition to passports, visas and papers belonging to U.S. citizens, third-country nationals, and SIV applicants were also destroyed. [1045] Without documentation, countless evacuees were left with few options.

The State Department made a misguided attempt to address its documentation deficiencies; rather than help, however, that solution proved ripe for abuse and further exacerbated the issue. [1046] The State Department, having burned countless visas and passports, decided to send electronic visa letters to many SIV eligible Afghans — a document that came to be known as the “hall



A “hall pass”

pass.” [1047] Evacuees were instructed by the department that the hall pass would grant them access to HKIA. [1048] Ambassador Bass testified, however, the hall pass became easily replicable and non-SIV eligible populations developed forged copies, making it more difficult for those eligible to be evacuated. [1049] According to department personnel, the hall pass “made the airport crowds worse by incentivizing ineligible Afghans to come to the airport with an unauthorized email.” [1050] Ambassador Bass explained to the committee that the State Department never addressed this issue. “We did not over the course of those 12 days develop a uniquely effective way of identifying SIV applicants from a large and differentiated mass of people,” he testified. [1051] The State Department inspector general agreed, confirming the Department’s identification system failed. [1052]

Evidence obtained in this investigation makes clear the hall pass plan was driven not by on-the-ground judgment, but by intervention from Washington, D.C.

A State Department employee asserted, “I can’t stress enough how ineffective and counterproductive” hall pass was. [1053] He said the “consular team on the ground assured Marines on the ground they were not going to do [the hall pass],” which was “initially turned off, then D.C. turned [it] back on.” [1054] The military offered a sharp critique of the “hall pass.” [1055] Rear Admiral Vasely explained, “State had an idea to issue SIV-like documents via cell phone, which people were texting/air dropping to each other, and thousands of people had them the next day.” [1056]

As with most consular challenges throughout the NEO, the documentation problems impaired the job of the servicemembers manning HKIA’s gates. One servicemember said he did not receive any guidance from the State Department on what paperwork to look for prior to arrival, explaining, “No one came up before we got there to brief us on what we needed to identify. Our company pushed down to look for letters telling them to go to HKIA, and to look for passports and green cards. We didn’t know at that time there were fakes.” [1057] Multiple servicemembers shared that experience, asserting they did not know what the right SIV documents looked like. [1058]

“That was the hardest part, to know what State was looking for. It sucked because we would think they were good, and then State would say ‘no’ and we had to escort them out. That was the hardest part for Marines.”

— U.S. Marine [1059]

The lack of consistent or clearly articulated eligibility, prioritization, and documentation policies, compounded by impractical ideas like a hall pass, made the task of processing evacuees even more difficult. As a result, Americans, our allies, and countless eligible evacuees suffered.

Consular Communication with Americans and Eligible Evacuees

The State Department, for months, refused to warn Americans in Afghanistan of the mounting risk. When the Taliban entered Kabul, its instructions — including how to get to HKIA and other critical evacuation information — caused disarray. According to Secretary Blinken, however, the State Department sent 19 separate warning messages to Americans between March 1, 2021 and August 25, 2021, “urging them to leave the country.” [1060] Those messages did no such thing until it was too late.

A member of the medical team described the desperate circumstances at HKIA. He said, "I know from being there to the moment we left I'd say we treated 200-300 heat injuries of Afghan civilians. Most had limbs locked up. Babies maybe 50-60 babies that had injuries. A couple with c-wire injuries. ... There were two young girls who had 80% of their body burned. The mom and sister only said 'Taliban' repeatedly. The mom said the Taliban came into their house and burned [them]. The STP [Shock Trauma Platoon] kept turning them away. Once I showed the people the extent of the injuries under the two girls' clothes, they were shocked and only just began treating the young girls. I almost delivered two babies. I got a pregnant woman to the plane where soon after the plane took off, she had the two babies." [1061]

On April 7, 2021, U.S. Embassy Kabul notified Americans that Afghanistan carried a level 4 travel advisory and advised, "U.S. citizens wishing to depart Afghanistan should leave as soon as possible on available commercial flights." [1062] No actions to take were identified. About a week later, President Biden would announce his go-to-order while communicating his decision to keep Embassy Kabul open following the military withdrawal.

On May 15, 2021, Embassy Kabul issued another warning, this time, with actions to take, including, "Make plans to depart Afghanistan by commercial airlines" and "Have evacuation plans that do not rely on U.S. government assistance." [1063]

On May 27, 2021, Embassy Kabul again broadcasted, "Make plans to depart Afghanistan by commercial airlines." [1064] About a week later, on June 3, 2021, the embassy issued another notice: "Make contingency plans to leave," "Check with the airlines regarding any flight cancellations and/or restrictions on flying," and "Have evacuation plans that do not rely on U.S. government assistance." [1065]

On July 20, 2021, Embassy Kabul suggested, "U.S. citizens currently visiting or residing in Afghanistan should consider departing." [1066] The first public message actually "urging" Americans to leave Afghanistan did not come until August 7th. [1067] "The U.S. Embassy urges U.S. citizens to leave Afghanistan immediately using available commercial flight options. Given the security conditions and reduced staffing, the Embassy's ability to assist U.S. citizens in Afghanistan is extremely limited even within Kabul," it said. [1068] At this point, Ambassador Wilson was still insistent Embassy Kabul would remain open and a NEO was unnecessary.

Public messages from the embassy prior to August 7th merely suggested U.S. citizens consider making plans to leave at some point in the future. This strategy was consistent with the broader policy of the State Department to downplay the security situation in Afghanistan as the Taliban made rapid territorial gains throughout the spring and summer of 2021.

By the time the Taliban took control of Afghanistan on August 15, 2021, the only advice Embassy Kabul could offer Americans was hide and wait at home. One alert that day stated, “The security situation in Kabul is changing quickly including at the airport. There are reports of the airport taking fire; therefore we are instructing U.S. citizens to shelter in place.” [1069] Another warned Americans, “Do not travel to the airport until you have been informed by email that departure options exist.” [1070] And finally, the embassy communicated Americans should come to HKIA at their own risk: “U.S. government-provided flights are departing. U.S. citizens, LPRs, and their spouses and unmarried children (under age 21) should consider travelling (sic) to Hamid Karzai International Airport. ... THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT CANNOT ENSURE SAFE PASSAGE TO THE HAMID KARZAI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT.” [1071]

In those warnings, Embassy Kabul failed to offer concrete guidance on how U.S. citizens could safely reach and navigate HKIA. And when it did, those directions were often flawed or subject to change. A servicemember recounted, “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.” [1072]

A Marine described the desperation at the gates on August 22nd, recalling, “It looked like a scene from the Children of Men. Displaced families everywhere, sleeping on cardboard, family eating MREs, a young girl being fed by a spoon, families sleeping in vehicles. C-wire everywhere, vehicles were speeding all over the place. It was a miracle there wasn’t an accident.” [1073] One internal State Department memo said “more than 10,000 Afghans” had surrounded HKIA on August 22nd. [1074]

Senior military officials confirmed that State Department’s messaging confused evacuees and caused significant problems for military operations. Rear Admiral Vasely said, “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.” [1075] Major General Donahue said, “my Paratroopers had to deal with the confusion that [State] messaging caused. They would send the wrong messaging, the wrong threat streams.” [1076]

Vetting

Consular challenges at HKIA — including lack of documentation and no data tracking system — resulted in flawed vetting processes that left thousands of evacuees in limbo after the NEO. [1077] A State Department employee told AAR interviewers the U.S. government had “no idea if people being evacuated were threats.” [1078] Another employee recounted a particularly troubling episode, “One plane left and as checks got done a few people on the plane popped red and the plane turned around and went back to Kabul.” [1079] This apparently happened a second time, but the plane was permitted to leave Afghanistan and land in a third-party country. [1080] Consul General Howell’s counterpart, Jean Akers, admitted, “We didn’t have access to systems or databases” that were crucial to determining the eligibility of evacuees. [1081] Indeed, an August 22, 2021 internal State Department memorandum alerted employees biometric screening was not available to vet evacuees at HKIA. [1082] The memo also exposed five cases of Afghans who presented U.S. passports that were not their own. [1083]

Lack of documentation after departure from HKIA further complicated the vetting process. U.S. Embassy Doha’s Ambassador Greta Holtz explained that a high number of Afghan evacuees landed in the country with no real identification. [1084] She said families often showed up where one parent was a U.S. citizen, but the remainder were not documented. [1085] “There were very few whole families where everybody had a passport or a green card or some kind of documentation indicating they will be allowed to legally enter the U.S.,” she said. [1086] According to Ambassador Holtz, the State Department, “created these temporary passports, literally a piece of paper with a photo that was taken right then and there at the flightline. And that work[ed] for a while. Until the Qataris became uncomfortable with that.” [1087]

The ad hoc nature of the Biden-Harris administration’s NEO was also evident in the failure by the State Department to maintain records of Afghan evacuees. The information consular officers did collect, ended up in scattered databases with no central management system. [1088] Instead, they “had to comb through hundreds of excel spreadsheets.” [1089] According to an employee, evacuees were simply thrown onto planes. “We had to sort them all out. We didn’t know where planes were going — Doha, Abu Dhabi, Kuwait — the bilateral agreements for all of this had to be built on the fly.” [1090]

Logistics

Throughout the NEO, the United States struggled to provide essential supplies to State Department and Defense Department personnel at HKIA.

Ambassador Wilson's failure to timely request a NEO prevented logistical preparedness. According to a State Department employee, "logistics were not in place... for food, lavatories, shelter, etc." [1091] In fact, according to a U.S. Marine who had conducted a pre-deployment site survey of HKIA mid-July 2021, Embassy Kabul had yet to implement his submitted preparation plan by the time the NEO arrived. [1092]

In his testimony before the committee, Aidan Gunderson, a senior military medic during the NEO, recalled having to "search for food, water, and necessities; all we brought into Afghanistan were the rucks we had on our backs." [1093] On August 15, 2021 — the same day the Taliban entered Kabul — HKIA's logistical reserve could only support 6,000 U.S. personnel. That reserve, however, was split between the United States, Turkey, and the Afghan National Strike Unit. [1094] Reinforcements did not arrive until August 17th. Even with those reinforcements, the U.S. logistics system on the ground never had more than a one-day supply on hand. [1095]

This lack of supplies persisted throughout the NEO. According to Mr. Aronson, there was a lack of food, water, an inability to properly dispose of trash. [1096] Another military medic asserted, "In my opinion, we never had enough water. We always had people begging for it. During high noon there was no shade to be found, and people would start dropping." [1097] Consul General Howell recalled "a 12- or 24-hour window where they were very concerned about the ability to provide food and water and sanitation to the number of people." [1098] As a consequence, she met with General Sullivan regarding slowing down entry into HKIA. [1099]

Operational resource shortages also impacted military and security operations. A servicemember recalled "stealing vehicles from each other" at HKIA. [1100] Another servicemember explained, "There also weren't enough vehicles to support the various tasks that had to be accomplished ... re-supply, [casualty evacuation], movement to and from gates for rest cycles ... Marines and other personnel were hot-wiring vehicles to ensure they could get the job done, but then other units started stealing them from each other." [1101]

Another element of the logistical failures plaguing the NEO were the third-party country emergency processing centers, or "lily pads." After leaving HKIA, evacuees were flown to these lily pads for processing and housing, before being permitted to enter the United States. Getting the Afghan evacuees lily pads, however, required engagement with foreign embassies and third-party countries. [1102] **In his testimony before the committee, Counselor Chollet conceded the State Department did not secure lily pad agreements with foreign countries prior to the NEO.** [1103]

Rear Admiral Vasely explained that lily pads, as a result, experienced capacity issues at the outset of the NEO and that negotiations by the State Department with Kuwait and Bahrain were a bottleneck. [1104] In fact, prior to August 19, 2021, Camp As Sayliyah in Doha served as the United States' only lily pad.

Even with lily pads eventually in place, the State Department had failed to execute memoranda of understanding with other relevant federal agencies, including the Defense Department and Department of Homeland Security. [1105] Those memoranda were necessary to establish the division of responsibilities regarding vetting, resource management, and personnel. Accordingly, the lack of memoranda “resulted in unclear expectations of individual roles and responsibilities” related to the “accountability of Afghan evacuees, law enforcement jurisdiction, and provision of services beyond basic sustainment.” [1106] A foreign service officer recalled thousands of evacuees being held at Al Udeid Air Base in Doha without running water or air conditioning. [1107]

A Marine testified several Afghans, especially women, once turned away by the State Department asked the Americans to kill them rather than release them back to the Taliban who kept track of the Afghans who sought evacuation and were denied. [1108]

Further, the U.S. Department of Transportation waited until August 20, 2021 to issue an order permitting foreign civil aircraft operations to conduct U.S. sponsored flights to transport Afghan evacuees to the United States. [1109] These delays in authorizing and mobilizing civil aircraft constrained the evacuation of civilians out of Kabul, and overburdened lily pads.

Additionally, given the lack of planning beforehand, the limited number of lily pads were overcrowded. According to Brigadier General Josh Olson at Ramstein Airfield in Germany, his staff planned for 5,000 evacuees.[1110] They ended up with a peak of 20,000. [1111] On August 28, 2021, Ramstein Airfield had to stop receiving evacuees for two days because it reached capacity, delaying the evacuation process. [1112] Brigadier General Lance Curtis added that insufficient lily pads resulted in evacuation pauses at HKIA. [1113] This was echoed by Consul General DeHart, who explained those pauses increased the build up at HKIA. [1114]

Further exemplifying Ambassador Wilson's leadership failures are accounts of him having contracted COVID-19 in the course of NEO, then fake the test in order to leave crowded conditions in Doha after the NEO. According to testimony obtained by the committee, upon arriving in Doha, Ambassador Wilson, had an employee fake his COVID test so he could fly back to the United States immediately. [1115]

Mr. Aronson testified he recalled being “told by someone who took part in the operation — I hate to use the word ‘operation,’ but — someone who took part in Ambassador Wilson's COVID test who tested positive for COVID and was immediately placed into a quarantine tent, and in order to get Ambassador Wilson home to the U.S., they had to ensure there was a COVID test that was showing negative.” [1116] At the time, the CDC required that all persons entering the United States test negative for COVID. [1117]

HKIA’S ABBEY GATE

“At the end of the day, nothing will make up for the lives lost in America's history. I just want to do what I can, to make sure that something like this never happens again. We are going to go to war again, we have shed a lot of blood and paid the price for mistakes that we have made. I am not trying to point out that people are at fault, but at the end of the day the State Department was not prepared. There were some decisions on the ground that could have been made better and information that could have been taken more seriously. I don't want to see American lives wasted. Service members should feel like their service was fulfilled and their time was worth it, and it is up to them to find their why and sense of fulfillment. I'm proud of what I have done and the people that I have helped. I have helped kids and I have helped families. I will proudly show my tears for the brothers that I have lost. I just want answers, and I think that it is important.”

— Sergeant Tyler Vargas-Andrews [1118]

On August 26, 2021, Abdul Rahman al-Logari, an ISIS-K suicide bomber — released 11 days prior from Bagram Air Base by the Taliban — detonated himself at HKIA’s Abbey Gate. This terrorist attack killed at least 185 people. Amongst those individuals, 13 U.S. servicemembers were killed, and at least 170 Afghan civilians alongside them. Another 150 people were critically injured, including 45 U.S. servicemembers. [1119] The names of those 13 brave servicemembers who lost their lives on August 26, 2021 are:

**Marine Lance Corporal Kareem M. Nikoui
Marine Corporal Daegan W. Page
Marine Sergeant Johanny Rosario Pichardo
Marine Corporal Humberto A. Sanchez
Marine Lance Corporal Jared M. Schmitz
Navy Corpsman Maxton W. Soviak
Marine Lance Corporal Dylan R. Merola**

**Marine Lance Corporal David L. Espinoza
Marine Sergeant Nicole L. Gee
Marine Staff Sergeant Darin Taylor Hoover
Army Staff Sergeant Ryan Christian Knauss
Marine Corporal Hunter Lopez
Marine Lance Corporal Rylee J. McCollum**

REMEMBERING OUR FALLEN HEROES



Physical Security at HKIA

On August 22, 2021, President Biden spoke to the rising risk of an ISIS-K attack at HKIA. He claimed the perimeter on the ground would be moved back to mitigate the threat imposed on U.S. servicemembers and civilians at the airport. “ISIS-K is a sworn enemy of the Taliban, and they have a history of fighting one another. But every day we have troops on the ground, these troops and innocent civilians at the airport face the risk of attack from ISIS-K from a distance, even though we’re moving back the perimeter significantly,” he said. [1120] General McKenzie explained, “We pushed hard for the Taliban to establish their perimeter about one kilometer away from the airfield gates ... we wanted them to do the initial screening, particularly the search for suicide bombers” but admitted “the downside of this cordon would be that the Taliban would be in a position to screen or limit those Afghans that we did want to get through our gates.” [1121] **Nevertheless, because the Biden-Harris administration’s NEO necessitated reliance by the United States on the Taliban for security at checkpoints, any steps the U.S. military deemed necessary to protect servicemembers, civilians, and the airport inherently relied on cooperation from the terrorist-affiliated group.**

Two days later, President Biden announced ISIS-K was seeking to “target the airport.” [1122] Despite this awareness, the administration did not take steps to mitigate the risks associated with continuing the NEO. On August 25, 2021, Secretary Blinken conceded, “We’re operating in a hostile environment in a city and country now controlled by the Taliban with the very real possibility of an ISIS attack.” [1123]

What both the president and secretary left out of their statements is that threat multiplied when they allowed the Taliban to capture Bagram Air Base and the prison on its premises — both turned over to the Afghan forces in July following President Biden’s go-to-zero order. Weeks prior to the NEO, the Taliban had released over 1,000 ISIS-K prisoners from Parwan Detention Facility, the prison located at the base, “spik[ing]” threat levels. [1124]

Military officials on the ground began to identify specific plans of attack by ISIS-K against HKIA starting August 23, 2021. Rear Admiral Vasely said, **“We started to see attack planning indicators earlier than the 23rd. But on [the] 23rd started to see specific attack plans against HKIA.”** [1125] Afghan General Alizai informed the committee that, between August 15th and August 25th, his intelligence sources on the ground assessed ISIS-K intended to attack U.S. forces. [1126] He noted that he communicated those warnings to Rear Admiral Vasely. [1127]

NSA Sullivan, in turn, claimed the administration would stop at nothing to keep ISIS-K from attacking HKIA. He said, “The threat is real. It’s acute. It is persistent. And it is something we’re focused on with every tool in our arsenal.” [1128] “It is something that we are placing paramount priority on stopping or disrupting, and we’ll do everything we can as long as we’re on the ground to keep that from happening,” he added. [1129] And yet, the Biden-Harris administration did not afford that risk “paramount priority.” From August 16, 2021 — the day President Biden ordered and formalized the NEO — to the ISIS-K suicide bombing killing 13 U.S. servicemembers, the administration did not order or conduct a single strike against the terrorist group. [1130]

According to CENTCOM, beyond placement of shipping containers outside Abbey Gate, engineering support improving or protecting Abbey Gate was “limited.” [1131] The U.S. military deployed electronic countermeasures at Abbey Gate to stop the remote detonation of any bombs, but those could not stop a bomb command-detonated by a person. [1132] In fact, even the limited countermeasures available were less effective without training and instruction for the servicemembers on the ground on how to employ those systems. [1133]

The ISIS-K Terrorist Attack

“Marines did their job. In the worst situation that you could ever put them in, Marines did their job. They showed up, and they showed out. I couldn’t be prouder of them at all.” [1134]

— U.S. Marine in Afghanistan during the NEO

By August 25, 2021, all gates at HKIA, with the exception of Abbey Gate, were closed to evacuees given increased threat reports. Chaos erupted. According to a servicemember at Abbey Gate’s drainage canal, the crowds began trampling one another, and they were forced to engage in “hand to hand” fighting to push crowds off the barrier. [1135] “In the chaotic crowd, I picked out a 1-2 year old girl in a red dress with blue eyes and her mother desperate to escape being trampled or crushed,” the servicemember recalled. [1136] Despite their significant exposure to the crowds and rising risk, servicemembers continued pulling people into safety, and were often tasked with finding or saving a specific person among the panicked civilians. [1137]

At that point, the crowd at the Abbey Gate had only become larger, more desperate, and more aggressive. [1138] As noted, on August 15th, U.S. Embassy Kabul first warned U.S. citizens to avoid coming to HKIA. “Because of security threats outside the gates of 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,” the security alert stated. [1139] It added, “U.S. citizens who are at the Abbey Gate, East Gate, or North Gate now should leave immediately.” [1140]

Throughout the NEO, U.S. intelligence tracked multiple threat streams, with reporting having “indicated a potential [Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device (VBIED)] or suicide vest [Improvised Explosive Device (IED)] as part of a complex attack.”[1141] On the eve of the terrorist attack, General McKenzie asked Major General Donahue to identify which gate posed the highest risk. [1142] Major General Donahue answered, “Abbey Gate.” [1143]

By the morning of August 26th, given the increase in crowds, Marines were forced to bring troops in, collapsing dispersion and consolidating around the concrete barrier at the base of the sniper tower near the gate. [1144] One of them recounted, “We lost our foothold at the footbridge during the night. When we came back in the morning it was chaos, people were in the water in the canal, people were all the way up to the concrete barrier by the sniper tower. Guys were getting crushed there. It’s just packed.” [1145]

Their assessments were corroborated by CENTCOM, which concluded, “Marines lacked the capacity and resources to maintain dispersion and properly secure the canal pathway and footbridge. This, coupled with both internal and external threats, greatly increased the risk to U.S. forces and the risk to mission.” [1146] At 4:00 pm local time, at least 2,000 people stood in the crowd outside Abbey Gate. [1147]

Mr. Aronson testified to the committee that, on August 26, 2021, Defense Department and State Department officials had identified Abbey Gate as the subject of a likely attack. “The intelligence suggested it was coming to a gate, and based on the configuration of the other gates, they narrowed it down. Basically, Abbey Gate was by far the most likely scenario.” [1148] A servicemember working in the JOC alongside military and State Department leaders recalled, “[On the] day of the attack, I came on shift, and there was a specific time that came from ISIS Twitter. It was specific to Abbey Gate and had a time. We counted down with them to make sure they knew the timeline.” [1149]

At 12:50 pm local time, CENTCOM concluded, “intel indicates ISIS-K picked up media leader and suicide bombers are ready,” and identified an “intent to attack HKIA gate(s) sometime today.” [1150] At approximately 2:30 pm local time, Marines at Abbey Gate were told to prepare for an attack and took cover for about 45 minutes, anticipating an explosion. [1151] After waiting out that time period, Abbey Gate remained open, and servicemembers “moved on trying to get as many people in while [they] still had the gate open.” [1152]

At this point, the State Department’s Diplomatic Security bureau directed consular officers to pull back from Abbey Gate. [1153] Ambassador Bass testified diplomatic security had been delegated responsibility to “conclude that the immediate gate area was too insecure and pull the consular professionals back a couple hundred meters.” [1154] Consul General DeHart recounted, “We had enough indications ... of a terrorist attack in the near future, that we pulled back State Department personnel from the gates ... not too long before the attack took place.” [1155] He added the Marines guarding Abbey Gate “probably did not have the luxury of pulling back.” [1156]

U.S. servicemembers were not afforded the same consideration. **Brigadier General Sullivan was identified by CENTCOM as the decisionmaker behind keeping Abbey Gate open.** [1157] **Although he initially sought to close the gate on the eve of the terrorist attack, he changed course out of concern that British forces at the Baron Hotel would otherwise remain stranded.** “Throughout the evening of the 25 August, into the morning of 26 August, units prepared for the planned closure of Abbey Gate ... The U.K. forces were unable to meet the planned closure time of 1800 on 25 August, and subsequently were unable to meet the new time 0700 on 26 August.” [1158]

Ambassador Bass confirmed to the committee, “The British government representatives on the ground made a very strong appeal that we keep that gate open to allow them to continue their screening efforts as long as possible. And our military commanders agreed to do that.” [1159] Brigadier General Sullivan explained he “was trying to accelerate the Brits,” but “they tried to process too many evacuees as they approached the end of their operations.” [1160] The British, alongside America’s other NATO’s allies, were operating under the same arbitrary timeline imposed by the Biden-Harris administration.

Leaked transcripts from three military secure calls in the hours leading up to the Abbey Gate attack on August 26th indicate the Taliban had become increasingly uncooperative, and there was fear closing Abbey Gate would further limit the number of evacuees rescued. [1161] Reporting represents officials — including Secretary Austin, General Milley, Rear Admiral Vasely, and Brigadier General Donahue — recognized the high risk on the ground, particularly at Abbey Gate. [1162]

At 5:00 PM local time, Brigadier General Sullivan met with the British and the Taliban, with the timeline for Abbey Gate being a “topic of discussion.” [1163] This discussion also included the Taliban’s purported efforts to prevent an attack on Abbey Gate. [1164] According to Rear Admiral Vasely, “Just prior to the attack, the Brits, U.S. commanders, [and Taliban] commanders had just finished a coordination meeting to discuss mitigation of the threat.” [1165] According to CENTOM, “the Taliban were tasked to screen for the specific threat” that day. [1166]

Soon thereafter, at 5:36:52 PM local time, Abdul Rahman al-Logari, also known as Abdul Rahman Hamid Ghulam Sakhi, detonated his suicide bomb at Abbey Gate. [1167] Al-Logari’s bomb was determined by explosive ordnance disposal experts to have been a “command detonated” IED — meaning the suicide vest was triggered by Logari himself. [1168] The bomb contained “20 pounds of military-grade explosives” as well as “five-millimeter ball bearings.” Thirteen brave U.S. servicemembers and more than 170 Afghan civilians were killed at the hands of al-Logari.

Identifying the Terrorist

Preceding the attack, at 7:17 AM local time on August 26th, a sniper team posted a Be-On-The-Lookout (BOLO) to “Chatsurfer” — the U.S. military’s mobile communication platform. [1169] A BOLO is a broadcast which identifies suspicious individuals or activities and alerts servicemembers to remain aware.

The message posted said, “BOLO: Snipers at Abbey Gate identify individual in the crowd acting suspicious, clean shaved, bald head. Individual is action calm, not rushing towards the gate, but instead sitting along the wall. The individual has a backpack and another clear bag that he has kept with him. FF [Field Forces] at Abbey Gate are aware of individual and tracking description.” [1170]

Testifying before the committee, Sergeant Tyler Vargas-Andrews, a sniper who had been operating out of the tower at Abbey Gate, described how his team spotted a man who was “clean-shaven, brown dress wear, black vest, and traveling with a companion.” [1171] Sergeant Vargas-Andrews then asked intelligence officials “why he [the subject of the BOLO] wasn’t apprehended sooner since we had a full description.” Their response was, “the asset could not be compromised.” [1172]

Sergeant Vargas-Andrews recalled disseminating the BOLO for the suicide bomber information to ground forces at Abbey Gate throughout the day on August 26th. One Marine leader confirmed that, on August 26th, “all of the Marines on the ground were aware of the threat and what to look for: a man dressed in black with a shaved head,” who became known as the “Bald Man in Black.” [1173] An intelligence officer with Marines reaffirmed there had been a BOLO for a “clean shaven, clean clothes, possibly a backpack” and that upon receiving the BOLO, the officer recalled going to the sniper towers and asking the snipers about the information. [1174] That individual recalled Marine snipers “started taking pictures of people who look a little off.” [1175] Another servicemember described how the snipers “had pictures of every suspicious person that they were sending back to the JOC.” [1176]

At 8:00 AM local time on August 26th, the snipers requested to engage the man described in the BOLO via radio, but their request was denied. [1177] At 9:30 AM local time, the snipers again requested engagement authority from their chain of command, but by 10:00 AM local time, they had lost the visual of the potential subject of the BOLO. [1178] The snipers were never given authority to engage the BOLO. According to the rules of engagement, the servicemembers at Abbey Gate were not authorized to use lethal force in self-defense based merely on suspicious conduct without additional demonstrations of hostile intent or hostile acts.” [1179]

Sergeant Vargas-Andrews’ testimony before the committee, and the subsequent warranted pressure by Chairman McCaul, led CENTCOM to reopen the investigation into the Abbey Gate attack and conduct a supplemental review. [1180] The review confirmed the BOLO and the presence of the “Bald Man in Black,” but found “the intelligence lacked the specificity necessary to positively identify the suspected bomber in the dynamic crowd at Abbey Gate.” [1181]

According to the assessments, frequent verbal and face-to-face dissemination of threat reporting, by necessity, tended to unintentionally increase the ambiguity of the reporting. [1182] In interviews during the supplemental review, servicemembers asserted the BOLO had seemed too vague for any actions, as the description matched many Afghans in the crowd outside Abbey Gate. [1183]

While many Marines on the ground on August 26th expressed confidence in the prudence of engaging the “Bald Man in Black,” and repeatedly requested authorization to do so, the military’s investigation in the Abbey Gate attack and the supplemental review’s facial recognition analysis concluded that the “Bald Man in Black” was not al-Logari, the identified perpetrator of the attack. [1184] The supplemental review noted, however, that “all intelligence related to the identity of the bomber was produced ... post-blast” [1185]

Within hours of the August 26th terrorist attack, ISIS-K had claimed credit and named Abdul Rahman al-Logari as the suicide bomber. [1186] Abdul Rahman al-Logari was one of the thousands of prisoners the Taliban released from the Parwan Detention Facility at Bagram Air Base on August 15th. [1187] Prior to his capture, Al-Logari underwent terrorist training in Afghanistan, focusing on explosives; al-Logari would often assist fellow suicide-bombers with writing their “wills” and delivering the wills to their families. [1188] He was a known member of ISIS-K, with whom the Taliban have a purported rivalry, and, still, he was released when the Taliban took Bagram. Unsurprisingly, upon his release, al-Logari immediately reintegrated into his ISIS-K terror network and requested the mission to carry out a suicide attack. [1189]

According to Amaq News Agency, ISIS’s propaganda arm, al-Logari “was able to reach a distance of no less than five meters from the American forces, who were supervising the procedures for collecting documents from hundreds of translators and contractors in preparation for their evacuation from the country.” [1190] CENTCOM uncovered evidence that al-Logari used forged documentation to clear the Taliban checkpoint, allowing the terrorist to get near U.S. Marines. “The suspected suicide bomber ... used a forged ID to clear the Taliban [command post], with one side being a Texas driver’s license and the other side being a U.S. permanent resident card,” the Abbey Gate investigation found. [1191] CENTCOM, however, later concluded there was “no evidence” to support the conclusion the terrorist used forged U.S. identification to clear Taliban checkpoints and approach Abbey Gate. [1192]

CENTCOM’s supplemental review found that “intelligence reporting published after the attack” indicated ISIS-K transported al-Logari to an area in the vicinity of Abbey Gate “approximately an hour before the attack,” and “after he arrived at the Abbey Gate corridor, al-Logari had approximately 30 minutes to wade through the crowded mass of potential evacuees to reach his final position.” [1193] According to the review, this tight timeframe “minimized threat of detection” by the United States and “enabled him to conduct the attack” at 5:36:52 pm local time. [1194]

Despite knowing for certain that al-Logari was the bomber as early as September 2021, the Biden-Harris administration did not publicly confirm his identity until April 2024. [1195] U.S. government officials confirmed the identity of al-Logari to other sources multiple times, first disclosing the information to Congressman Ken Calvert in September 2021, then to the *New York Times* in January 2022. [1196] And although CENTCOM appears to have had confirmation of al-Logari’s identity by March 14, 2022, he was not officially declared the bomber in the Abbey Gate attack by the Biden-Harris administration until the release of the supplemental review on April 15, 2024. [1197]

Upon the release of the supplemental review, Chairman McCaul remarked,

“While I’m pleased my investigation forced the Biden administration to reopen their investigation into the Abbey Gate attack that led to the deaths of 13 U.S. servicemembers and the injury of 45, it should not have taken this long to get answers. ... I hope this updated report provides some level of clarity to the families of those who were killed, those who were injured in the attack, and all veterans, especially those who served in Afghanistan. ... With this report revealing the Biden administration has been sitting on critical information about what happened during the emergency evacuation from Afghanistan, it is clear there are many more questions to be answered. I am absolutely determined to see this investigation through to completion and will leave no stone unturned.” [1198]

The Biden-Harris administration’s refusal to publicly confirm the identity of al-Logari, the perpetrator of the horrific attack on Abbey Gate, deprived the 13 Gold Star families of the fallen soldiers, U.S. servicemembers, and veterans the clarity, accountability, and closure they deserved.

The Aftermath of Abbey Gate: Attempts to Understand the Attack

In the aftermath of the Abbey Gate attack, the Department of Defense could not provide details and information regarding events that unfolded when al-Logari detonated the IED.

Approximately three minutes after the blast, “an MQ-9 unmanned aerial vehicle,” commonly known as a Reaper drone, “began observing the scene.”[1199] The Department of Defense explained the drone pilot only came to point his camera on Abbey Gate after the blast once the intelligence cell provided information about “an explosion having occurred.” [1200]

Besides the Reaper drone, the Department of Defense contends that a Marine GoPro video is “the only known footage of the blast itself.” [1201] The video took place 48 meters from the blast, and it shows “a single individual dressed in all black,” who “steps forward from the crowd” and detonates his bomb. [1202]

Despite days of threat reporting and knowledge that Abbey Gate was the most likely target for a terrorist attack, steps were not taken to ensure contiguous video monitoring of the gate. The lack of a close-up video of the blast reflects the absence of a dedicated aerial drone feed or a dedicated video camera system focused on Abbey Gate. While the footage from the Reaper drone thereafter provided some clarity, not having eyes on the gate at the time of the attack contributed to the confusion over the nature of the attack.

On August 26th, the day of the bombing, General McKenzie claimed the attack had been a “complex attack,” which included two ISIS-K suicide bombers as well as a follow-on attack by ISIS-K gunmen. [1203] From the Department of Defense twitter feed, Rear Admiral Kirby reiterated the assessment that the bombing had been a complex attack — this characterization was further echoed by other members of the Biden-Harris administration in the following days. [1204]

A “complex attack,” also known as a Complex Coordinated Attack or Complex Coordinated Terrorist Attack, is a violent assault or series of assaults involving multiple threats and multiple attackers with the intent to harm large numbers of people. [1205] A characterization of the Abbey Gate attack as a “complex attack” would have implied that al-Logari was coordinating his attack with other active terrorists. CENTCOM’s original accounting of the Abbey Gate attack found, “ISIS-K executed a complex attack with [small arms fire] immediately following the explosion. Eyewitness account from an [field grade] officer noted enemy gunmen in dominant overwatch positions from adjacent buildings. This threat is rapidly defeated. The large casualty count is directly attributed to the complex attack.” [1206] Due to the lack of video evidence, the accounts of small fire attacks — which would have classified this attack as complex — could not be verified, thus contributing to the ensuing confusion.

During a press briefing on findings of the Abbey Gate investigation, Colonel C.J. Douglas — one of CENTCOM’s investigators — appeared to walk back the Defense Department’s prior assessment regarding a complex attack. He explained, “Several factors contributed to the initial belief that this attack was complex, including the fog of war and disorientation due to blast effects, the Marines’ heightened alert toward the Taliban, and the presence of gunfire used for warning shots.” [1207] According to Colonel Douglas, “two groupings of UK forces fired warning shots across the frontage of Marines” and over the heads of evacuees and that a Marine element, “fired four warning shots over the head of an individual who displayed concerning behavior.” [1208] These warning shots “resulted in nearly simultaneous gunfire from three separate points” shortly after the explosion. [1209] According to the investigation, the confined space around Abbey Gate would have produced an echo and “created the illusion of a firefight.” [1210]

During that same press briefing, the Department of Defense represented the Abbey Gate attack was conducted by a single ISIS-K bomber and that there had been no gunmen. [1211] General McKenzie accordingly admitted that his comments the day of the Abbey Gate attack, which referred to two bombers and ISIS gunmen, had been wrong. [1212] General McKenzie explained the mistake arose because “the explosively-fired small ball bearings caused wounds that looked like gunshots, and when combined with a small number of warning shots, that led many to assume that a complex attack had occurred.” [1213] His explanation was echoed by Major General Lance Curtis — another CENTCOM investigator. [1214]

Nevertheless, existing evidence challenges the Department of Defense’s contention that the attack was not “complex.” One Marine said he personally witnessed a man firing upon U.S. troops from near the water tower after the bombing. [1215] “I am 100% sure I saw the guy firing from near the tower,” he said. [1216] Another Marine recalled, “I saw the shots hitting around us. I saw the guys on the water tower with guns.” [1217] A further Marine said, “I saw the guy in the window next to the water tower shooting. I know what I saw and I had [positive ID].” [1218] His account was echoed by a Marine who recalled seeing the gunman in the doorway. [1219] Marine Major Ben Sutphen publicly recounted witnessing a Marine corporal “shot through the shoulder, immediately recovers his weapon, and puts the opposing gunman down.” [1220] At least one gunman — who was dubbed as a possible “rogue Taliban member” by CENTCOM investigators — may have fired on a group of Marines. [1221] Two more Marines asserted, “there was definitely some small arms fire aimed at our gate,” [1222] and “it might have been coming from the Taliban position by the chevron.” [1223]

Furthermore, medical staff at HKIA and in hospitals in Kabul recalled treating some gunshot wounds. [1224] Major General Curtis, however, has contended the surgeons and Armed Forces Medical Examiner's Office "are in agreement that they never found any bullets. They acknowledge that they used 'Gunshot Wounds' to identify point of injury as that is the way they were trained." [1225] He acknowledged, "there were gunshots at the time," but asserted these came from coalition forces firing at a suspicious individual. [1226]

Accounts of small arms fires were bolstered by a CNN report in April 2024. CNN obtained and released an exclusive video taken immediately after the bombing, which showed there were more than three "nearly simultaneous" bursts of gunfire. [1227] While CENTCOM claimed the gunfire heard in the aftermath of the attack came from three origins, two U.K. positions and one group of Marines, the CNN footage "shows 11 episodes of shooting after the explosion, over nearly four minutes." [1228] The footage was examined by Robert Majer, an audio forensic expert at Montana State University in Bozeman, who concluded there were "at least 11 episodes of gunfire over a four-minute window, totaling a minimum of 43 shots." [1229] The analysis also suggests that some of the bullets "traveled over or across the camera." [1230] This video challenges CENTCOM's findings.

On April 26, 2024, CENTCOM asserted to the committee it did not have access to the video obtained by CNN when it conducted its investigation. [1231] CENTCOM nevertheless maintained that the video does not dispute their findings. [1232] Major General Lance Curtis, who led the supplemental investigation, contended "our findings found initially that it was not a complex attack. ... in reality it was the intersection of warning shots from three different elements creating the illusion of a complex attack." [1233] The Department of Defense has not yet provided conclusive answers regarding what occurred in the aftermath of the Abbey Gate attack.

Indeed, a vast amount of information that could have provided answers regarding the Abbey Gate attack was deleted or destroyed in the wake of the bombing, including the destruction or deletion of photos, videos, and more. In the aftermath of the attack, the Defense Department demilitarized physical hard drives and servers. [1234] The supplemental report stated the demilitarization of equipment was intended "to decrease the requirements for airlift and deny the use of equipment to the Taliban." [1235] The report, however, acknowledged that digital archives as a result were no longer available. [1236] One Marine recalled Brigadier General Sullivan's decision to destroy those materials and stated he could not recall being told to preserve anything. [1237]

Another Marine recounted taking a sledgehammer to the computers and printers, where information was likely stored. [1238] “We took sledgehammers and destroyed it so no one could put it together. I didn’t burn anything but I heard there were fires. ... Including CIW, digital computer systems, screens. I almost 100% remember an [REDACTED] case begin destroyed,” he said. [1239] And finally, a military official described hard drives being brought to a shredder while other information systems “were punched through or even smashed.”[1240]

Lieutenant Colonel Brad Whited — a commanding officer on the ground during the NEO — confirmed receiving formal guidance on what equipment was to be destroyed but did not recall further specifics. [1241] “A lot was left up to commander judgment on what specifically would need to be destroyed or extracted,” he explained. [1242]

As a result of this destruction, CENTCOM only had access to “25 pictures of the crowds at Abbey Gate” taken between August 20 to August 26, 2021 — denying critical insights as to what happened leading up to, during, and after the attack. [1243] The Department of Defense’s investigation, instead, had to rely on servicemembers on the ground for photographs of Abbey Gate. [1244] The destroyed systems may have contained informative videos and photos capturing scenes at HKIA, and the neglect to preserve that information now denies servicemembers and the Gold Star families a comprehensive understanding of the catastrophic terrorist attack.

FAILURE TO MITIGATE THE ABBEY GATE ATTACK

After the Abbey Gate attack, General McKenzie asserted, “Anytime you build a noncombatant evacuation plan like this, you bring in forces, you expect to be attacked...we expected — we thought this would happen sooner or later.” [1245] The Biden-Harris administration knew such an attack was not only possible but likely, yet they still failed to take the appropriate measure to mitigate the risk. Instead, servicemembers were forced to choose between evacuating civilians or protecting the lives of their fellow soldiers.

While military leaders at the Defense Department contend the bombing was inevitable given the circumstances they were operating under, servicemembers on the ground argue more could have been done to protect the soldiers and minimize casualties.

CENTCOM’s Abbey Gate investigation concluded U.S. military leaders “took proper measures to ensure force protection.”[1246] Experiences on the ground, however, differ. A Marine assessed, “There are things we could have done to mitigate the number of casualties.

The 300-meter buffer on the western side of the line would have prevented casualties ... The bombing could not have been prevented, but casualties could have been prevented.” [1247] Another Marine described how, “No one had to be on the near side canal wall. Period. The reason there were people there is the fault of everyone that was higher there. No one was going from there. Those people dying, we couldn't have stopped that. The stuff in the outer corridor, you can't prevent everything. But you didn't need service members on the near side canal.” [1248]

CENTCOM also concluded “the attack at Abbey Gate was not preventable at a tactical level.” [1249] When asked if the need to reinforce positions at Abbey Gate with additional personnel was ever identified — given the rising violence in the crowd and closure of other public gates — Lieutenant Colonel Whited did not recall discussing extra forces or making an assessment for more resources. [1250] He asserted, “I felt that we had sufficient forces to complete the mission.” [1251]

A U.S. servicemember who was working with Staff Sergeant Knauss said more should have been done to try to stop the suicide bombing. “We talked a lot about how to employ our skills. We could've been given orders. Like, ‘at this time, we need everyone to do something that would reveal if someone was concealing a suicide vest.’ But we were not given any direction on how to handle things. We know how to conduct a loudspeaker operation in the presence of an IED threat. We have done that with dozens and hundreds of people before. ... Guidance for us was to just stop riots. However, I have a loudspeaker. I can talk to everyone. I could give orders to the crowd. It worked at the comfort area and at the other gates.” [1252]

As a result of the Biden-Harris administration's reliance on the Taliban for security during the NEO, measures to mitigate the risk to servicemembers at Abbey Gate and counter the ISIS-K terrorist threat were not taken. Despite purported commitments to help prevent an attack, the Taliban repeatedly refused to help the United States confront the ISIS-K threat during the evacuation. CENTCOM's Abbey Gate investigation confirmed, “The Taliban were tasked to screen for the specific threat” on August 26th. [1253] However, it remains unclear what efforts the Taliban made or what motivations they had to protect American lives.

Leading up to August 26th, the U.S. military was tracking the ISIS-K cell that ultimately conducted the Abbey Gate attack. [1254] A servicemember working on the targeting team recalled “looking at targetable individuals because we had information about an attack, but we had no way to get positive identification (PID) for a FIND and FINISH.” [1255]

The servicemember said the specifics of the threat streams about Abbey Gate were “nothing that would get us to a FIND or a FIX on a target.” [1256] Another servicemember on the ground contended the information on the ISIS-K cell prior to the attack “wasn’t targetable” and “there wasn’t enough pattern or name recognition to drill down the definitive location of the cell prior to the attack.” [1257] Nevertheless, declassified but still heavily redacted CENTCOM records indicate the U.S. military was aware of ISIS-K’s potential staging locations in Kabul. CENTCOM records reveal the same ISIS-K terror cell that conducted the Abbey Gate attack “established a base of operations located six kilometers to the west of HKIA.” [1258] In fact, ISIS-K had previously used the neighborhood as a staging area against HKIA in December 2020. [1259] Still, the U.S. conducted not a single strike against this cell ahead of the Abbey Gate attack.

Part of the reason the United States did not preemptively target ISIS-K prior to the Abbey Gate attack rested with the Taliban’s refusal to do so. A military officer at HKIA recalled, “Intelligence officers at HKIA knew that ISIS-K was staging at a hotel 2-3 kilometers west of HKIA, and [Brigadier General Donahue] asked the [Taliban] to conduct an assault on the hotel, but they never did.” [1260] While contending the U.S. “did not rely on the Taliban for our security,” [1261] General McKenzie admitted before the committee the U.S. “passed the Taliban information on targets that were in close proximity to HKIA, places that we thought ISIS-K was gathering, ISIS-K might be preparing to strike, and there were about eighteen of those targets that we passed.” [1262] He conceded, the Taliban “took action on some of them,” but not all. [1263]

In the aftermath of the attack, Taliban official Habibi Samangani asserted, “Just because we have an agreement not to attack the Americans until they complete their pullout doesn’t mean that we have cooperation with them or provide security for them.” [1264] Instead, the Taliban claimed the United States was at fault for the ISIS-K bombing, arguing that the night before the bombing, it had “warned the foreign forces the repercussions of the large gathering at Kabul airport.” [1265]

Rear Admiral Vasely attested, “clearly the 26th was a lapse in security on the [Taliban’s] part.” [1266] In fact, according to him, it was only after the Abbey Gate bombing that the Taliban undertook a “concerted effort” to secure the area around Kabul airport. [1267] U.S. Forces Afghanistan-Forward concluded, “the 26 August ISIS-K attack reflects the risk of reliance on [Taliban] as they failed to ensure checkpoints were in place to screen personnel approaching the gates.” [1268] The Department of Defense was aware of the risks associated with relying on the Taliban for security; however, the Biden-Harris administration’s decision-making left them no choice but to operate under such risk.

Nevertheless, the Department of Defense continues to refuse to acknowledge a key risk factor: the Taliban's intertwinement with ISIS-K. Despite the Taliban's purported rivalry with ISIS-K, the security failures and refusal to follow through on mitigating the terrorist attack beg the question of collusion. Colonel Douglas, a member of the CENTCOM investigation team, described how following the explosion, "Very quickly Marines determined the Taliban were neither involved nor threatening U.S. personnel." [1269] When asked how the U.S. military ruled out the Taliban were neither familiar with al-Logari nor involved, Colonel Curtis stated, "We don't have any evidence through the course of our investigation that leads us to believe that the Taliban knew about this attack." [1270] The absence of evidence, however, does not necessarily rule it out.

The Taliban and ISIS-K share a documented history of collusion. In 2017, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan "verified allegations that Taliban and local self-proclaimed Islamic State/Daesh fighters killed at least 36 persons, including civilians ... during the attack on Mirza Olang." [1271] Later, in 2020, UN Security Council member states raised concerns that the Haqqani Network — a terrorist faction comprising Taliban leadership — helped facilitate ISIS-K attacks. [1272] Illustratively, ISIS-K's leader, Shahab al-Muhajir joined "Taliban factions affiliated with the Haqqani network" and "had close links to the Haqqani network's senior commanders ... who ran terrorist networks in the capital." [1273] Salman Ahmed, Director of the Secretary of State's Policy Planning Staff, testified the Haqqanis "were part and parcel of the Taliban." [1274] Indeed, even NSA Sullivan has admitted the Haqqanis are integrated with the Taliban. [1275]

The historical connections between the Haqqani Taliban and ISIS-K should have at least raised the possibility of collusion in the Abbey Gate attack. According to an interpreter who worked for Rear Admiral Vasely as an interlocutor with the Taliban throughout the NEO, the "Haqqani [Taliban] definitely brought their elements in and were much more difficult to control and coordinate with." [1276] Further, the Badri 313, one of the brigades tasked with security at HKIA during the NEO, were known to be part of a Haqqani suicide bombing team. The interpreter explained, Badri 313 "was a Haqqani controlled brigade. They were trained the way our special operations are trained." [1277]

Multiple U.S. servicemembers at HKIA and terrorism experts agree there may have been collusion between the Haqqani Taliban and ISIS-K in carrying out the Abbey Gate attack. A Marine at HKIA recounted, "There was some reporting of lower-level Taliban moving over to ISIS-K when the Taliban started working with the Americans. It presented an ideological issue for them." [1278]

Retired military leaders, including U.S. Air Force Major General Albert Elton, have identified “geographic, tribal, familial, business, [and] financial ties” between the Haqqani Network and ISIS-K.” “Although the news cycle of stories suggests ISIS–K is in a full-fledged conflict with the Taliban, there is most likely a working agreement between the two organizations, up to and including the Taliban’s use of ISIS–K as a proxy force,” they contend. [1279]

The day of the Abbey Gate attack, former NSA McMaster assessed the bombing as predictable fallout, given the United States’ reliance upon the Haqqani Taliban for security at HKIA. [1280] He argued it was likely that the suicide attack was the result of collusion between ISIS-K and elements of the Haqqani Network in Kabul. [1281] Mr. McMaster said that “[he] would not be surprised in any way if ISIS-K was used — this Kabul attack network was used — as a cutout for the Taliban, so they can humiliate us on the way out and still continue to play us.” [1282] Mr. McMaster added, **“I’m sure that we will uncover evidence that this happened with the full knowledge of the Haqqanis and certainly elements of the Taliban, if not the most senior leadership. It has all the hallmarks of a complex attack of the kind the Haqqanis are experts at.”** [1283]

Yet, in the aftermath of the Abbey Gate attacks, officials from the Biden-Harris administration continue to claim there was no collusion between the two terrorist groups. President Biden rushed to claim he had seen “no evidence” of “collusion between the Taliban and ISIS in carrying out what happened today.” [1284] General McKenzie reiterated, saying he had not seen anything to indicate the Taliban allowed the bombing to happen. [1285] He said the United States had been sharing “versions” of its intelligence with the Taliban “so that they can actually do some searching out there for us” and that the Taliban had helped stop attacks against U.S. forces. [1286] He did, however, acknowledge al-Logari passed Taliban checkpoints to get near Abbey Gate. [1287] At a minimum, the Taliban failed there. [1288]

Today, given the lack of ground intelligence since their withdrawal, the United States may never know if the Taliban played a direct role in the attack at Abbey Gate. One thing is clear, despite the Taliban’s mixed history of collusion and antagonism toward ISIS-K, their desire to kill Americans has long been evident. The Biden-Harris administration ultimately prioritized the Taliban being “useful,” over the safety and security of Americans, including U.S. servicemembers in the line of fire.

OFFICIAL RESPONSE TO AND RESPONSIBILITY FOR **ABBEY GATE ATTACK**

“If there is culpability in this attack, it lies in policy decisions that created the environment of August 2021 in Kabul.”

— General Kenneth F. McKenzie [1289]

In their testimony before the committee, General Milley and General McKenzie — the two highest ranking military officials throughout the Afghanistan withdrawal — accepted responsibility for the Abbey Gate terrorist attack that claimed the innocent lives of 13 American soldiers. General Milley said the Gold Star families, the 13 fallen soldiers, and the 45 injured servicemembers deserve the full story of what happened that day at Abbey Gate. [1290] He stated, “We owe [the Gold Star families] answers. And I am committed to assist in the effort to get them answers.” [1291] General McKenzie accepted direct accountability, saying, “I was the overall commander. And I alone bear full military responsibility for what happened at Abbey Gate.” He explained, “It remains my opinion that if there's culpability in this attack, it lies in policy decisions that created the environment of August 2021 in Kabul. Culpability and responsibility do not lie with the troops on the ground who performed magnificently.” [1292] The troops on the ground did indeed perform heroically under the unnecessarily dangerous conditions of the NEO wrought by the Biden-Harris administration.

President Biden has yet to accept even a semblance of responsibility for the events that unfolded in Afghanistan. To the contrary, he has consistently boasted to the success of the operation, as recently as during the June 2024 presidential debate mistakenly claiming that no troops died under his watch. [1293] Nor has he held any of his subordinates accountable for the policy decisions that placed U.S. servicemembers, diplomats, and Afghan allies in critical danger. When responding to criticism of the withdrawal, he has placed all blame on the Trump administration and the Doha Agreement, stating, “[T]he former President made a deal with the Taliban.” [1294] That refusal to own mistakes or accept fault extends to every element of the withdrawal and evacuation: President Biden has even refused to concede that relying on the Taliban for security during the NEO was a mistake — a mistake prompted by his administration’s refusal to plan for worst-case scenarios. [1295]

Following the terrorist attack at Abbey Gate, President Biden authorized two reprisal strikes that were either extremely overstated in significance or, in the second case, tragically misdirected at innocent civilians. President Biden, shortly after the attack, announced he would make ISIS-K “pay” for the bombing, but caveating that the retaliation operations would not involve “large military operations.” [1296] Still, President Biden reportedly gave the U.S. military the “green light” to strike targets affiliated with ISIS-K, with one official saying President Biden’s “guidance is to just do it.” [1297] The following day, on August 27th, the United States conducted an airstrike in Nangarhar province, targeting two ISIS-K terrorists, Kabir Aidi and another collaborator. [1298] According to the CENTCOM spokesman, not long after the strike, Aidi “was directly connected to the ISIS-K leaders that coordinated the August 26th attack at HKIA,” and he was “an ISIS-K high-profile attack lethal aid facilitator involved in attack planning and magnetic IED production.” [1299] The second person killed in the strike was identified as an ISIS-K collaborator, but his name was not revealed. [1300]

The United States had eyes on these targets since before the Abbey Gate attack, suggesting that they may not have been high value targets. [1301] That is consistent with CENTCOM’s supplement review of the Abbey Gate investigation, which concluded that striking the ISIS-K cell in Nangarhar earlier would not have disrupted the ISIS-K attack at Abbey Gate. [1302] The supplemental review confirmed the target was an ISIS-K operative based near Jalalabad, over 200 kilometers from Kabul, who was not part of the ISIS-K Kabul cell responsible for the Abbey Gate bombing. [1303]

On August 28th, President Biden claimed he had taken out a person responsible for the attack: “This strike was not the last. We will continue to hunt down any person involved in that heinous attack and make them pay.” [1304] And so, on August 29th, the Biden-Harris administration green-lit a second airstrike against what they believed was an ISIS-K terrorist in Kabul. [1305] They were gravely mistaken. The Defense Department, at the instruction of the administration killed ten innocent Afghan civilians, including Zemari Ahmadi, a longtime aid worker employed by Nutrition and Education International, and nine members of his family, including seven children. [1306]

For several days, the Biden-Harris administration and the Pentagon continued to call the operation a success, refusing to admit to the tragic and deadly error. The administration was, however, almost immediately aware of the horrific miscalculation. On August 29th, shortly after the strike, CENTCOM spokesperson Captain Bill Urban published a press release claiming, “U.S. military forces conducted a self-defense unmanned over-the-horizon airstrike today on a vehicle in Kabul, eliminating an imminent ISIS-K threat to Hamad Karzai International airport. We are confident we successfully hit the target.” [1307]

Similarly, Ms. Psaki conducted a press briefing on August 30th, where she said the Biden-Harris administration conducted “two successful strikes.” [1308] Ms. Psaki added that these strikes confirmed the United States' over-the-horizon capacity works. [1309] She was, of course, wrong on both accounts.

It was only thanks to investigative reporting that news of the innocent civilian deaths was made public, prompting CENTCOM to open an investigation. On August 29th, CENTCOM announced it was “aware of reports of civilian casualties following our strike on a vehicle in Kabul today. We are still assessing the results of this strike, which we know disrupted an imminent ISIS-K threat to the airport...We would be deeply saddened by any potential loss of innocent life.”[1310] **On August 31, 2021, Ms. Psaki was asked by reporters whether there had been any civilian casualties. She responded, “There is an investigation, and I don’t believe the military or CENTCOM [LS1] [DA2] has spoken to or confirmed what has been some reporting out there by news organizations.”** [1311]

On September 17, 2021, three weeks after the strike, General McKenzie led a briefing where he acknowledged that within hours of the strike, there were concerns that the airstrike killed as many as ten civilians, including seven children, and that there was no ISIS-K terrorist present, which was the initial claim. [1312] Secretary Austin and General Milley later confirmed the Defense Department knew within hours that the August 29th strike had likely killed innocent civilians. [1313] **The Biden-Harris administration claimed success and did not retract that claim for almost a month after having erroneously taken ten innocent lives.**

In September 2021, Ms. Psaki affirmed the American public should continue to expect that there would be a further U.S. military response to the Abbey Gate attack, contending “the president’s desire to continue to go after ISIS-K has not changed.” [1314] And yet, the Kabul strike was the last U.S. military airstrike against ISIS-K in Afghanistan. It was a tragic failure and one of many gravestones caused by the Biden-Harris administration’s deadly miscalculations during the Afghanistan withdrawal.

Dignified Transfer at Dover

On August 29, 2021, President Biden visibly and repeatedly checked his watch at the dignified transfer ceremony at Dover Air Base for 11 of the 13 U.S. servicemembers killed at Abbey Gate. [1315] The Gold Star families, grieving their terrible loss, were deeply disrespected and insulted by President Biden’s callous display of boredom and impatience. [1316]

Numerous Gold Star family members who were present at Dover confirmed President Biden checked his watch repeatedly throughout the ceremony. [1317] Mark Schmitz, the father of Marine Lance Corporal Jared Schmitz, recounted for the committee during an August 2023 roundtable that during the dignified transfer ceremony, he watched President Biden check his watch “over and over again.” [1318]



When reports of President Biden’s disrespect surfaced, Ms. Psaki questioned the validity of the families’ perspective, saying, “Of course, they have the right to convey whatever they would like. But I will tell you, from spending a lot of time with him over the past couple of days, that he was deeply impacted by these family members who he met just two days ago; that he talks about them frequently in meetings and the incredible service and sacrifice of their sons and daughters.” [1319] Then, after leaving her role as White House press secretary, Ms. Psaki published a memoir in May 2024, where she claimed the established fact that President Biden had looked at his watch during the dignified transfer ceremony was “misinformation” peddled by the president’s critics. [1320] Ms. Psaki wrote, “The misinformation came in the form of a single photo of the president looking at his watch during the ceremony. People who are quick to criticize the president seized on this image. They splashed it all over social media, making him appear insensitive, concerned only about how much time had passed.” [1321] Ms. Psaki’s memoir continued, “There was such an uproar that the Washington Post reviewed video of the event and concluded, ‘Footage leading up to the moment ... shows Biden with his hand over his heart ... as vans carry the service members’ remains.’” [1322]



U.S. Air Force



AP

Ms. Psaki's memoir was false. She was in fact quoting a "fact check" piece by USA Today, which itself was wrong. [1323] That *USA Today* article now says, "Corrections & Clarifications: This story was updated ... to note that Biden checked his watch multiple times at the dignified transfer event, including during the ceremony itself." [1324] Axios first reported Ms. Psaki's false defense of President Biden, with an article entitled "Psaki's new book falsely recounts Biden's watch check in troop ceremony." [1325] Other news stories followed. In response, Ms. Psaki eventually conceded error, though still sought to minimize it, saying the "detail in a few lines of the book about the exact number of times he looked at his watch will be removed in future reprints and the eBook." [1326] In a transcribed interview, the Republican members asked Ms. Psaki about the incident and insisted that she apologize to the Gold Star families, which she finally agreed to do. [1327]

President Biden's few and fleeting acknowledgments of the 13 U.S. servicemembers are rendered hollow by his refusal to say those servicemembers' names and his persistent refusal to accept accountability for their loss. After the Abbey Gate attack, on August 26th, President Biden stated the 13 U.S. servicemembers who were killed "were part of the bravest, most capable, and the most selfless military on the face of the Earth, and they were part of, simply, what [he] call[ed] the backbone of America." [1328] However, he has disregarded and ignored the Gold Star families. During his State of the Union speech in March 2022 — the first one since the Taliban takeover — President Biden mentioned "Afghanistan" just twice, and never referenced the fallen soldiers or the NEO. [1329]

He made no mention of the Taliban takeover and no reference to the 13 heroic U.S. servicemembers who gave their lives at HKIA. President Biden, General Milley, and Secretary Austin all spoke at Arlington Cemetery for the Memorial Day ceremony in May 2022, but not one of them specifically mentioned the 13 who had been killed at Abbey Gate since the prior Memorial Day. [1330]

In his last presidential debate, on June 27, 2024, President Biden proudly asserted, “Truth is, I’m the only president this century that doesn’t have — this decade — any troops dying anywhere in the world.” [1331] To this day the president has never spoken the names of the 13 in public.

Missing Gear and Personal Effects

After the Abbey Gate attack, when a U.S. servicemember went to verify the identities of the fallen servicemembers, he recalled noticing the “gear and everything they had on was gone. Stripped for the most part.” [1332] The servicemember stated, “The missing gear was the biggest point of miscommunication.” [1333] The following day, as the plane was loaded for Dover, the servicemember discovered that everything belonging to the fallen troops got inventoried rather than being kept for the families. [1334]

The issue of access to personal effects continued for years, and the families of those servicemembers killed at Abbey Gate, as well as servicemembers who survived the blast, brought the issue to Chairman McCaul. On October 25, 2023, Chairman McCaul and Subcommittee Chairman Mast (R-Fla.) sent a letter to Secretary Austin requesting the Department of Defense return all personal effects to the families and survivors by November 2023. [1335] On December 15, 2023, the Department of Defense responded that many of the items requested by the families and survivors were no longer in its possession and could not be returned [1336].

JOURNEY TO THE GATES AND LEFT BEHIND: **EXPERIENCES AT HKIA**

Treatment of Evacuees at HKIA

As previously outlined in this report, the State Department never sought a full accounting of American citizens in Afghanistan. This failure contributed directly to the State Department's inability to effectively communicate with and guide Americans through Taliban checkpoints at HKIA. If evacuees could make it to the airport, they had to get through the Taliban-controlled outer security perimeter before reaching the Marines guarding the gates. [1337] Through a series of checkpoints — where evacuees desperately presented proof of citizenship or legal status — the Taliban inflicted violence and further exacerbated the panic at the airport. These issues were a direct consequence of the Biden-Harris administration's refusal to plan for a NEO.

Americans faced grave risk when attempting to pass Taliban check points. Their U.S. passports and documents proving their citizenship served as both their only means of passage home and an invitation for Taliban persecution. Blue U.S. passports, were at times, the only form of documentation the Taliban accepted checkpoints — and even still they were often not enough. [1338]

In his testimony, Ambassador Bass explained although he assumed “it would be easier for American citizens who were well documented to move,” the reality was that families often contained both American citizens and Afghan nationals, which resulted in significantly over-stringent filtering by the Taliban. [1339] **Ambassador Wilson added the Taliban, in fact, would turn away Americans with a U.S. passport, especially when accompanied by large families.** [1340] **In one example at Abbey Gate, servicemembers recalled, “There were entire days where not a single U.S. document holder entered through the chevron.”** [1341]

The Taliban's “literal” approach in allowing Americans to pass their checkpoints had devastating impacts on LPRs of the United States. When LPRs sought to enter the gates and provided documentation to support their legal status in the United States, the Taliban did not recognize them as American, and violence often ensued. Ambassador Bass confirmed LPRs were often unable to pass the Taliban despite the department's efforts. [1342] He also recalled reports of LPRs being beaten by the Taliban because they did not have a U.S. passport. [1343] The reality of the situation on the ground was such that even if an eligible evacuee presented appropriate documentation, entry was not guaranteed.

In addition to being denied passage at Taliban checkpoints, Americans were beaten and worse by the Taliban. Ambassador Bass described reports of such beatings. [1344] “[W]hat I can recall are reports of Americans being beaten because the Talibs at a particular checkpoint would not recognize their documents, told them to go away,” he testified. [1345] Consul General Howell testified the Taliban would “strike them with sticks” if they attempted to move past a Taliban checkpoint. [1346] She recalled, “I was there the day that we tried to use the passenger terminal for the first time to bring in Americans, and I was outside when they lifted the gate. It was terrible. It was chaotic. It was heartbreaking.” [1347] Mr. Aronson described a chilling scene of processing a “young child, who was about 12 years old...They lived in Charlottesville, Virginia, and he had a bloody gash on him, and he told me that the Taliban whipped him.” [1348]

Taliban violence towards evacuees further discouraged Americans from attempting to evacuate. **According to Ambassador John Bass, Taliban violence was a “contributing factor to why we had some Americans remaining in-country at the end. We had a subset of Americans who were indicating to our consular colleagues that they wanted to leave but they didn’t feel safe enough to get themselves to the airport.”** [1349]

The Taliban’s violence against Afghan allies was even less restrained. The Taliban carried out extensive acts of violence against Afghans attempting to flee Afghanistan, including executing them within view of servicemembers guarding the gates of HKIA. [1350] Consul General Howell confirmed reports that civilians were being shot by the Taliban in the crowds. [1351] “It was very common that one of the Marines would come into the liaison office and say somebody just got shot and killed at Abbey Gate, or somebody threw a baby over a wall at Abbey Gate,” she testified. [1352] She added, “There are consular officers who reported to me people that they saw people that were shot by the Taliban.” [1353] That violence had a devastating impact on those servicemembers and consular officers on the ground. “I did have a number of people who really were traumatized by some of the things that they saw,” Consul General Howell concluded. [1354]

In his testimony before the committee, Ambassador Wilson echoed Consul General Howell’s assessments. “[T]he Talibs were absolutely engaged in using sticks and beating people ... The Talibs used live gunfire to control crowds.” [1355] Publicly released footage from the NEO shows “a man near the airport, bleeding from the head from an apparent beating from the Taliban as he pleaded that he is an Australian citizen.” [1356] Evanna Hu, leader of volunteer group Afghanistan Evacuation Coordination Team, described an instance where a woman trying to get through the checkpoints was whipped. “She didn’t even get close,” Hu said. “About 200 meters from the gates, she got whipped. She sent me pictures of the whip marks on her hand.” [1357]

Fatima Fazi, a reporter for *The New York Times* seeking to escape Afghanistan during the NEO, recounted, “My mom had bruises on her back, and my sister was beat up. And the fighters were just shooting everywhere. In that moment, I could see it so clearly, what it would look like when they shot me, shot my family.” [1358]

Servicemembers and foreign service officers witnessing these atrocities were traumatized. A servicemember at HKIA recalled, “Here would be a whole group of people trying to get through, and the Taliban would beat them and kill them. Bodies would get drug out from that area...I saw humanity at its worst at HKIA.” [1359] A foreign service officer said, “[T]he wounded, dead, killed, the crush of desperate people — it was avoidable.” [1360] **Despite the rampant violence, the military’s rules of engagement at HKIA forbade servicemembers from intervening and stopping the Taliban’s targeting of civilians and allowing the violence to continue outside the gates of HKIA.** [1361] **The Biden-Harris administration partnered with terrorists to secure HKIA, and Americans and Afghan allies paid the price.** [1362]

Volunteer-Led Evacuation Efforts

Upon witnessing the Taliban’s military victories over the spring and summer of 2021, Afghans allies, who worked alongside American forces, grew increasingly worried about their safety in Afghanistan. While State Department officials offered false assurances and watched the SIV backlog grow, Afghan allies turned to U.S. servicemembers and veterans — their partners and allies for the last two decades. Indeed, the State Department’s failure to plan for a NEO forced volunteer groups to intervene to save the Americans, LPRs, and Afghans allies facing a Taliban takeover. These groups filled a vacuum left by the Biden-Harris administration, often at immense personal cost.

Appearing before the committee, Retired Lieutenant Colonel Scott Mann — a Green Beret and founder of Task Force Pineapple — testified to the heartbreaking experience of fulfilling a promise made to thousands of Afghan allies who worked, lived, and bled alongside their American brothers and sisters; a promise broken by the Biden-Harris administration. “As gutting as it was to watch the Taliban return to power, the abandonment of our allies, particularly our Special Operations Forces (SOF) allies, was far worse,” he stated. Lt. Col. Mann (Ret) shared a story about Afghan Special Operator Sergeant First Class Nezamudin Nezami. [1363] “Despite applying for an SIV visa more than a year prior, Nezam received no word from the State Department in these challenging days.” His “dozens of inquiries were met with bizarre voice recordings or instructions that were out of touch and didn’t reflect the reality of the increasing stakes faced by at-risk Afghans like Nezam,” he testified. [1364] When the Taliban marched into Kabul on August 15th, Nezam desperately turned to Lt. Col. Mann (Ret) for help. [1365]

Lt. Col. Mann (Ret) explained the Taliban targeted Nezam after taking Kabul, and family members did not know how to protect him. “The Taliban were closing in on him. He was hiding in his uncle’s house, and the Taliban were on his street. The texts from them continued to pour in. ‘My uncle is about to throw me out of his house,’ Nezam told me. His world was crumbling before his eyes. Nezam was in trouble. No one was coming. And he was out of time,” he recounted before the committee. [1366] Lt. Col. Mann (Ret) worked for 96 hours with little to no sleep, leveraging his contacts in D.C. to guide Nezam through the streets of Kabul and the crowds of desperate civilians at HKIA. [1367] Nezam and his family ultimately made it onto a flight. [1368] Lt. Col. Mann (Ret)’s efforts saved their lives. Despite public promises by the Biden-Harris administration, when help never came, Lt Col. Mann (Ret) opened the encrypted messaging chat room started for Nezam and named it Task Force Pineapple, with a single purpose in mind: “To help at-risk Afghan Partners and their families find safe passage out of Afghanistan.” [1369]

“All the blood, sweat, and tears shed in Afghanistan were for nothing,” Major James Gant told me. He was in pieces from emotional turmoil when Kabul fell on August 15, 2021.

“According to Bonnie Carroll, the president and founder of the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, he was just one of the countless veterans, Gold Star families, and loved ones of the fallen who were thrown into severe mental anguish following the Afghan collapse. This anguish still continues today for many of the 800,000 Americans who served in Afghanistan.

“Another iconic Green Beret NCO who was a Pineapple shepherd—a volunteer who helped Afghan allies escape during the fall—said through tears and a clenched jaw, “If I knew on September 12, 2001, what I know today about how our government would treat Afghanistan, I never would have walked into the recruiter’s office and joined Special Forces in the first place.”

“Our government’s callous disregard for our troops’ sacrifices has caused a palpable spike in veteran mental health incidents. When will someone be held accountable so our veterans can begin to heal?”

Scott Mann,

Founder and President, Rooftop Leadership & The Heroes Journey

Captain Francis Hoang — founder of Allied Airlift 21, another volunteer group that stepped up to the task — described his efforts guiding Afghan allies through HKIA.

He testified, “I am here today because, in August 2021 during our nation’s rushed and chaotic withdrawal, thousands of Americans including me began receiving frantic pleas for help from Afghan allies whose lives were at risk because they worked with us. Unwilling to turn our back on these allies, we did what we could to save their lives. Working from our homes and using every digital tool at our disposal, thousands of us helped guide Afghans on the ground through crowds, with frightened, tired, and hungry kids in tow, desperately trying to find a way out.” [1370]

“I became involved with the NEO for three reasons. I served alongside Afghans during a combat deployment in 2009 with the U.S. Army. They helped me then and I wouldn’t abandon them now. Second, my company trained and supported Afghans who fought for their country and ours. These were my people.

“And finally, I myself am alive and an American citizen today because I was evacuated when I was 18 months old in a NEO — this one from Saigon in 1975.

“One of the darkest and most fearful moments in my life was realizing the gates to HKIA had closed forever when hundreds of Afghan allies, who I was responsible for and had trusted their lives to me and my fellow volunteers, hadn’t made it in.

“We offered them a choice: stay in Afghanistan or undertake a long and dangerous journey with no guarantee of success to Mazar-i-Sharif. It says a lot about Afghans’ courage that almost all picked Mazar-i-Sharif.

“Two weeks later, after a lot of work and close calls, the very first private charter flight after the NEO took off from Mazar-i-Sharif on September 17th. Onboard were 380 Afghan allies, made up of 93 households and 152 children. 100% of them are now in the United States starting new lives.”

France Hoang

Executive Chairman, Allied Airlift 21

Volunteer groups, like Task Force Pineapple and Allied Airlift 21, were responsible for getting thousands of allies into the airport and to safety. [1371] They often relied on front line servicemembers to help ensure people were pulled into the gates of HKIA. One of those servicemembers, U.S. Army Combat Medic Aidan Gunderson, testified before the committee in March 2023 that after his team helped Congressman Mike Waltz’s former Afghan interpreter, his First Sergeant’s phone number got passed around in the volunteer group chats. [1372] Mr. Gunderson said,

“As the sun came up on August 23rd, the texts started rolling in. I never really knew what the texts said or exactly who they were coming from. All [First Sergeant] Kennedy would say was, “C’m on Doc, we got more people to save,” and I would get in the truck. From the morning of the 23rd to the evening of the 25th, we shuttled groups from Abbey Gate. We eventually developed a system as we went on more trips. We started using two trucks and bringing more C Co[mpany] HQ paratroopers that wanted to help. We were getting better at quickly identifying pineapple screens, or spoken passwords previously established by the shepherds. When we identified a person with a pineapple screen we would ask for their name and we would relay their names to CPT Folta. He would check the name and number of the party, and if it all checked out, we pulled them up and through the hole in the fence. We confirmed numbers and made sure the party had no strangers who snuck in with them. Then, we searched them and their bags and shuttled them to the pax terminal to get vetted again and manifested on a flight.” [1373]

Ambassador Bass confirmed the value volunteer-led efforts on the ground, testifying, “efforts by private organizations to validate locations of individuals or to enable them to self-organize and present themselves for entry at a time and place that was predictable, that was helpful.”[1374]

Testifying before the committee, Colonel Krummrich asserted, “The State Department’s inability to stand up a crisis task force and address their broken Special Immigrant Visa program” resulted in the scramble of Afghans who had to turn to servicemembers for help. [1375] According to Joe Saboe, the founder of another such volunteer effort, Team America, “This was born out of desperation... a lot of us knew people who needed to get out, and there was no one in the American government who seemed to be giving any guidance. There has been almost no coordination.” [1376]

Despite holding a high-ranking position as Chief of Staff to Special Operations Command Central, Colonel Krummrich found himself turning to the volunteer groups rather than the State Department. “The State Department gave ineffective instructions to ‘submit your SIV application, go home, and wait for a phone call to proceed to HKIA.’ Those calls were not coming, and the Afghans knew it.” [1377] According to representatives from volunteer groups, staffers and advisors to Vice President Kamala Harris and First Lady Jill Biden turned to several of the volunteer groups, seeking assistance to help get Afghan nationals through the Taliban checkpoints. [1378] Indeed, even officials within the State Department purportedly struggled to find the right points of contact within the agency to help evacuate a group of former interpreters, saying, “I don’t even know if that made a difference,” the official said. “It shouldn’t have taken nearly that long just to get some points of contacts.”[1379]

"When our office started getting calls for help, I did what every other congressional staffer did – contacted State and DOD for assistance.

"No one answered.

"But I couldn't do nothing. So I connected with one of the groups of people who stepped up to do what our government wasn't. We banded together and orchestrated complex operations to get Afghan operators and interpreters, U.S. citizens, and others around Taliban checkpoints and inside the gates of HKIA. For weeks, I barely slept – every waking hour was devoted to posturing terrified families, arranging flights, updating CONOPs, and shepherding them to the airport under the cover of darkness.

"Do you know how frustrating, how CONFOUNDING, it was to have White House staff and active-duty generals ask ME, a 26 year old congressional staffer with no combat experience, to help THEM?"

"This should never have been put on my shoulders. I should never have had to weigh the risk of each new operation, knowing if I made a mistake innocent people could be killed. But I. Had. No. Choice.

"I now carry the burden of everyone I couldn't help. And three years later, I still can't put down my phone when they call.

"There is a difference between responsibility and accountability. I just want those responsible to be held accountable for the consequences of their actions-__. And just once, for the first time since August 2021, I want to put down my phone."

Congressional Aide

The reality that high-level officials within the U.S government turned to the volunteer groups instead of the State Department underscores the failure of the Biden-Harris administration and the critical role these groups played in mitigating the administration's negligence.

THE LAST DAYS: ENDING 20 YEARS OF U.S. PRESENCE IN AFGHANISTAN

In anticipation of departing from HKIA, Marines went into “destruction and sanitation” mode. [1380] Marines were instructed to clean up the airport after thousands of people had moved through it. Testifying before the committee, Aidan Gunderson described the awful conditions at HKIA, saying, “Before I saw any civilians, I could smell the human feces that covered almost every inch of the ground. The stench was overpowering and haunting. On top of the feces was a thick layer of trash. Plastic wrappers from ready-to-eat military rations, empty plastic water bottles, discarded clothes, and cardboard boxes created a blanket across the ground.” [1381] One of the Marines tasked with cleaning up the airport recalled, “There had been over 120,000 Afghans in that area, defecating and leaving trash, bags, clothes, and other unspeakable things,” adding he had to go and find “some cleaning supplies like brooms to push the trash and rubber gloves. It was degrading and ridiculous.” [1382]

The U.S. troops were also instructed to demilitarize the airport. [1383] They broke vehicles, weapons, and ammo, anything the Taliban could use, knowing that once they left, it would be the Taliban that took control of HKIA. [1384] Confusion surrounding the demilitarization instructions led to Marines flipping cars, spraying graffiti, breaking windows, and popping oil pans. [1385] Later, however, U.S. military leadership decided it was important to U.S. interests to leave a functional airport, so that flights could continue to come out after the United States left, and Brigadier General Sullivan instructed the troops clean the place up, re-flip the vehicles, and paint over the graffiti. [1386]

On August 29, 2021, Consul General DeHart flew out of Kabul on the main flight out with most of the evacuation team. A residual evacuation element was left behind to “try to do a little bit more.” Ambassador Bass, Ambassador Wilson, Scott Weinhold, and a few servicemembers remained through August 30th. [1387]

In his last meeting with the Taliban on August 30th, Major General Donahue told them the United States would be leaving the next day on August 31st. [1388] The United States wrapped up evacuation operations around 12 hours before the departure of the last U.S. troops from HKIA, [1389] and at 11:59 PM local time on August 30th 2021, the last American plane took off from HKIA carrying Major General Donahue, the final U.S. servicemember on the ground, and ended 20 years of American presence in Afghanistan. [1390]

“[H]istory will judge us by those final images,” including the decision to leave before getting all American citizens out. [1391]

— Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Kahl

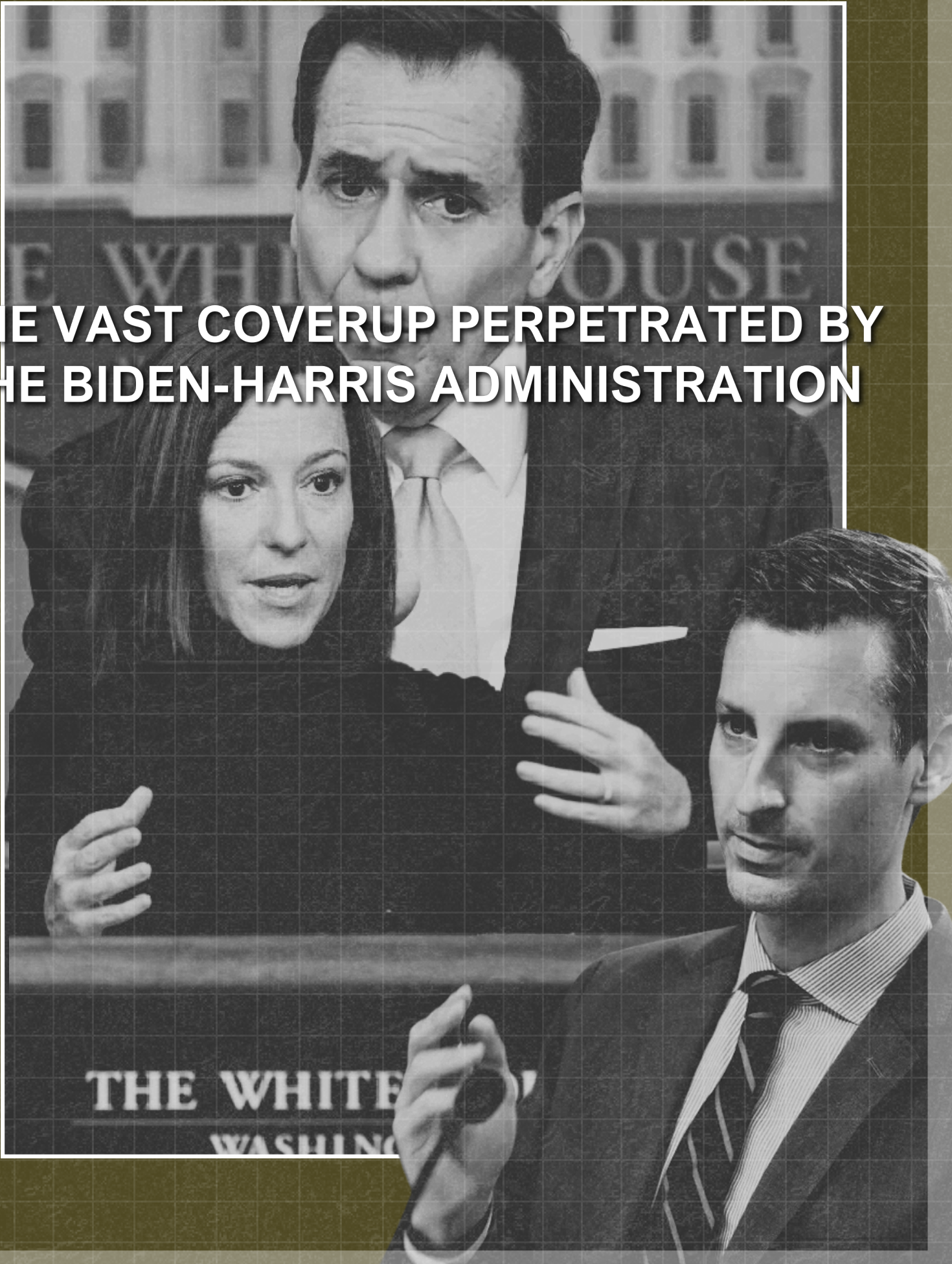
Mazar-i-Sharif

The Biden-Harris administration left Americans, LPRs, and SIVs behind. Yet, the conclusion of the NEO did not portend the conclusion of efforts by volunteer groups to help get stranded Americans out of Afghanistan. Francis Hoang testified to the committee that his organization helped shepherd Americans to Mazar-i-Sharif, a city in northern Afghanistan. Mr. Hoang described how Allied Airlift 21, with the help of other groups, “organized a desperate and treacherous 200-mile journey for 6 buses filled with Afghan Allies and Americans through Taliban-controlled territory to Mazar-e-Sharif. The harrowing journey included an attempted bus-jacking and the birth of a child on board one of the buses.” [1392] Mr. Hoang’s group spent 3 weeks hiding nearly 400 people from the Taliban, trying to organize a charter flight out. It was only on September 17, 2021, however, that the 380 individuals — including 128 Americans — boarded that flight out of Afghanistan. [1393]

The delay in getting that flight out of Afghanistan was not unique to Allied Airlift 21. Other organizations, including some congressional offices, attempting to get flights out of Mazar-i-Sharif faced opposition from the Taliban and delays by the State Department. The State Department claimed that, with no officers on the ground, they were having issues verifying flight manifests and the identity of the individuals on board. A senior State Department official reportedly claimed, “We have not stood in the way of a single charter. And in fact, we have gone to extraordinary lengths...to do all we can to facilitate the departure of these charters.” [1394] Nevertheless, the office of Senator Richard Blumenthal, who had been helping to arrange two flights out of Mazar-i-Sharif, claimed they “provided the State Department with the manifest for our flights as early as August 30 and as late as [September 7, 2021]. ... Although some of our passengers are small children who, admittedly, do not yet have a full suite of documentation that an adult might have, in those cases we provide shot records and offered to help verify their identity any other way that we could. The State Department has had this information for eight days.” [1395]

As a result of the Biden-Harris administration’s failed withdrawal from Afghanistan, with no U.S. officials on the ground, volunteer groups again had to step in to help evacuate Americans, LPRs, and eligible Afghans. Appearing before Congress in October 2021, Under Secretary Kahl testified that approximately 25% of American citizens evacuated from Afghanistan after the conclusion of the NEO were only able to do so thanks to volunteer and private groups. [1396]

**THE VAST COVERUP PERPETRATED BY
THE BIDEN-HARRIS ADMINISTRATION**



A SUMMATION OF THE BIDEN-HARRIS ADMINISTRATION'S MISREPRESENTATIONS OF CRITICAL INFORMATION

“When you conclude 20 years of military action in a civil war in another country with the impacts of 20 years of decisions that have piled up, you have to make a lot of hard calls, none with clean outcomes. What you can do is plan for all contingencies. We did that.” [1397]

— NSA Jake Sullivan, August 17, 2021

As illuminated throughout this report, more than three years after the last U.S. military plane departed Afghanistan, the American people have still never heard a complete account from the Biden-Harris administration on its withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The administration’s public communications, as previously evidenced, came from three podiums and primarily from three individuals: Ned Price, spokesperson for the State Department; Rear Admiral John Kirby, spokesperson for the Department of Defense; and White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki, spokesperson for the president. [1398] Coordinating all three of those entities fell to the NSC, where communications strategy at the time was led by Emily Horne. [1399]

This investigation uncovered that — prior to April 2021 in the lead up to the go-to-zero order — the Biden-Harris administration withheld material information from the American people. Missing from press releases was information related to the Taliban’s failure to adhere to the Doha Agreement, the ongoing presence of terrorism in Afghanistan, the capabilities of the Afghan government and military with and without U.S. support, and dissent from NATO allies on the U.S. plan to withdraw.

With regard to the Doha Agreement, on February 3, 2021, Mr. Price announced the administration would conduct a review of the Taliban’s adherence to the Doha Agreement to evaluate a withdrawal from Afghanistan. This review was to include an “assessment of whether the Taliban are fulfilling their commitments to cut ties with terrorist groups, to reduce violence, and to engage in meaningful negotiations with the Afghan Government and other stakeholders.” [1400]

In his testimony before the committee, contrary to his public statement, Mr. Price asserted the Taliban's adherence to the Doha Agreement was in fact "immaterial" to the Biden-Harris administration's decision to withdraw from Afghanistan. [1401] To summarize: (1) the Taliban were in breach of key elements of the Doha Agreement, (2) the Biden-Harris administration claimed to be assessing the Taliban's compliance therewith, (3) in reality, the conditions were entirely irrelevant to them.

Further, the Biden-Harris administration consistently and misleadingly touted NATO allies' support for its decision to withdraw from Afghanistan. On April 6, 2021, Mr. Price claimed, "We heard this in Brussels the other week, that there is a good deal of agreement with our NATO allies on the path forward when it comes to Afghanistan. The international community is similarly united in the belief that there isn't a military solution to what we have long faced in Afghanistan." [1402] On April 9, 2021, Ms. Psaki insisted President Biden was "taking the advice, the counsel, the consultations of members of his military leadership, members of his diplomatic leadership, and also our partners and friends around the world into — into consideration as he's making his decision." [1403] On June 14, 2021, a senior White House official again claimed NATO allies "said that they ultimately agreed with the decision to come — to draw down this year." [1404] However, as previously introduced in the report, at those same meetings in Brussels, Secretary Blinken was hearing in "quadrophonic sounds" that NATO allies were recommending against an unconditional withdrawal. [1405]

In their testimony before the committee, General Milley and General McKenzie both attested that NATO allies recommended against President Biden's go-to-zero order. [1406] General Miller also testified NATO allies were not pleased with the United States' decision to draw troops to zero, necessitating their withdrawal, saying, "They certainly were unhappy, and they voiced that unhappiness in different publications." [1407] Even Counselor Chollet would only go so far as to testify before the committee that NATO allies did not take a position during the administration's interagency review of the Doha Agreement and decision to withdraw. [1408]

The misrepresentations from the Biden-Harris administration's communication team continued after the president's go-to-zero decision. For example, Ms. Psaki claimed on April 14, 2021, that "al-Qaeda ... is not being harbored in a safe haven in Afghanistan how it was 20 years ago." [1409] Similarly, on May 10, 2021, Mr. Price claimed, "We went into Afghanistan 20 years ago — just about 20 years ago — with a singular mission, and that was to go after the group that was responsible for the 9/11 attacks and to see to it that Afghanistan could not again be leveraged as a staging ground for attacks on the United States. We were able to achieve those goals." [1410]

These claims were again challenged by the testimony of senior military leadership during a congressional hearing. [1411] Secretary Austin affirmed “there are remnants of al-Qaeda still in Afghanistan.”[1412] General Milley said “al-Qaeda is still in Afghanistan” and was “there in mid-August.” [1413] In Ms. Psaki’s testimony before the committee, when asked why she made such claims, she attributed responsibility to the central policy-making apparatus of the administration — the NSC — saying, “Any statement I would have made would have been based on, again, the interagency process and the NSC press guidance that was providing information to me.” [1414]

The Biden-Harris administration also significantly overstated and under-planned its ability to support the Afghan military after the withdrawal. Indeed, it publicly repeated the line that the U.S. would continue to support the Afghan government and military during and after the withdrawal of U.S. troops. On April 13, 2021, in a press call, Ms. Psaki represented, “The United States is going to remain deeply engaged with the government of Afghanistan, committed to the Afghan people who have made ... extraordinary sacrifices during this conflict.” [1415] On July 8, 2021, President Biden claimed, “While we [will] not stay involved in Afghanistan militarily, our diplomatic and humanitarian work will continue. We’ll continue to support the government of Afghanistan. We will keep providing assistance to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces.” [1416] But in April 2021, the administration’s military leaders expressed concern that would eventually become reality. [1417] General McKenzie asserted he was “concern[ed] about leaving with a date certain” because he did not have confidence in the “ability of the Afghan military to hold the ground that they’re on” without U.S. and NATO support in the form of “intelligence, ... fire support, [and] the enabling things that actually give them an edge over the Taliban.” [1418]

The loss of that support had an immediate negative impact on physical capabilities and morale for the Afghan military. [14919] The repeated commitments from the Biden-Harris administration to support the Afghan government and military obscured the fact that the administration did not devise a viable plan to follow through on those commitments, nor had it developed confidence in the Afghan military’s capabilities without U.S. support.

Misrepresentations with regard to Afghan military capabilities and Taliban victories were manifold. The Biden-Harris administration repeatedly told the American public that Afghan forces numbered 300,000, giving them an advantage against the Taliban. [1420] In reality, according to testimony by General Milley, the Afghan forces constituted 175,000 conventional army troops, fighting against a “guerrilla-insurgency” of up to 100,000 fighters. [1421]

This force ratio, he said, “balanced more in favor of the Taliban.” [1422] The Biden-Harris administration also downplayed the onslaught of the Taliban’s summer attacks. On May 3, 2021, Rear Admiral Kirby described Taliban attacks as “small, harassing attacks over the course of the weekend” but said the Pentagon saw nothing “thus far that has affected the drawdown.” [1423] And yet, by July 17, 2021, the Taliban controlled 221 of Afghanistan’s 407 districts, compared to the Afghan government’s 73, with the remaining districts contested. [1424] On July 20, 2021, when asked about increases in Taliban violence and violent attacks touching Kabul, Mr. Price responded by discussing the Biden-Harris administration’s hopes of an agreement in Doha and a diplomatic solution. [1425] Even as the Taliban closed in on Kabul, the Biden-Harris administration kept reiterating a Taliban victory was not inevitable. **On August 11, 2021, Ms. Psaki said, “We are closely watching the deteriorating security conditions in parts of the country, but no particular outcome, in our view, is inevitable.”** [1426] **On August 13, 2021, Rear Admiral Kirby argued “it still is a moment for Afghan National Security and Defense Forces” and “no outcome has to be inevitable.”** [1427] Rear Admiral Kirby also contended “Kabul is not, right now, in an imminent-threat environment.” [1428] Kabul fell to the Taliban two days later.

Perhaps most significantly, after President Biden’s go-to-zero order, the White House and the State Department continued to present the situation in Afghanistan as well-planned when the reality was anything but. On June 3, 2021, when asked about planning for a potential evacuation of SIV applicants to third-party countries, Mr. Price did not directly respond, instead asserting the Biden-Harris administration planned to keep Embassy Kabul open to process applications. [1429] On June 23, 2021, when asked about what steps were being taken to protect SIV applicants, Ms. Psaki claimed, “[W]e’re doing the kind of extensive planning for potential evacuation should that become necessary.” [1430] She also claimed, the “State Department and our team takes very seriously and assesses whether there is a need to take any additional action,” in the event the Taliban advanced quicker than anticipated. [1431] **On July 6, 2021, when a reporter asked Mr. Price about a plan for an evacuation in light of the rapid Taliban advances on the battlefield, he responded, “We’re always planning for any contingency ... we’re planning for any number of contingencies.”** [1432]

But those representations were wrong. When Ambassador John Bass arrived at Embassy Kabul on August 19th, days after the fall of Kabul, the embassy was not operating under any plan that took into account worst-case contingencies. [1433] Indeed, multiple witnesses acknowledged the State Department never had a plan for conducting an evacuation in a Taliban-controlled Kabul. [1434] State Department witnesses further acknowledged the department had not determined SIV eligibility by the time the Taliban took over Kabul. [1435]

Notably, the State Department's on-the-ground evacuation leaders — Ambassador Bass, Consul General DeHart, and Consul General Howell — were stationed at posts around the world and received only 24 to 48 hours notice that the State Department would be sending them into a warzone. [1436] That request from State Department leadership came only after Kabul had already fallen to the Taliban. [1437]

Upon the release of the Biden-Harris administration's review of the withdrawal in 2023, Rear Admiral Kirby, in his new role as NSC coordinator for strategic communications, said, "For all this talk of chaos [at HKIA], I just didn't see it, not from my perch." [1438] His statement flies in the face of reason and the well-documented, globally reported tragedy at the airport. Yet, Rear Admiral Kirby's statements are consistent with the contemporaneous communications of the Biden-Harris administration during and after the NEO. On August 19, 2021, Mr. Price said, "My understanding is that things are moving quite efficiently at this hour at the airport." [1439] On August 20, 2021, Mr. Price again asserted the evacuation operations were "efficient and effective." [1440]

But those public-facing statements were contradicted by internal reports. An internal State Department memorandum from August 19th 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." [1441] A second State Department memorandum conveyed "congestion outside gates worsened, resulting in confrontation and stress" and "a large number of" locally employed U.S. embassy staff "were unable to enter HKIA and returned home, reporting deeply traumatic experiences." [1442] State Department witnesses interviewed by the committee were aware of Taliban violence against Americans and of instances in which the Taliban did not let Americans through to HKIA. [1443] **The information coming from behind the Biden-Harris administration's podiums did not convey the gravity of the emergency, hid the threats facing Americans, and grossly understated the tragedy wrought on those attempting to flee.**

At the same time, the Biden-Harris administration insisted no one saw the fall of Kabul coming. Those assertions are, again, directly contradicted by testimony from top military leadership, in addition to President Ghani warning Secretary Blinken of the imminent dissolution of the ANDSF. [1444]

Ms. Psaki, for example, claimed no one anticipated the fall of the Afghan government and forces with statements like, "I don't think anyone assessed that they would collapse as quickly as they did. Anyone. Anyone in this room. Anyone in the region. Anyone anywhere in the world." [1445]

“I don’t think anyone assessed that they would collapse as quickly as they did. Anyone. Anyone in this room. Anyone in the region. Anyone anywhere in the world.”

— Former White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki

In her testimony before the committee, when presented with military guidance to the contrary and asked what information supported her claim, Ms. Psaki quibbled that “quickly” has a broad range of potential definitions, ignoring the unmistakable impression that statement created for Americans watching. [1446] When pressed on whether she thought she “fairly communicated to the American people based on the warnings issued within the U.S. Government how quickly Afghanistan would fall,” Ms. Psaki merely said she “answered the question based on the information [she] had available at the time.” [1447] Ms. Psaki previously attested to receiving the information she took to the briefing room from the NSC press team.

Such statements came from elsewhere in the administration, as well, with Mr. Price claiming on August 17, 2021, “[I]t is absolutely true that we were surprised at the speed at which the Taliban were able to approach Kabul.” [1448] On August 20, 2021, President Biden contended that “no one — I shouldn’t say ‘no one’ — the consensus was that it was highly unlikely that in 11 days they’d collapse and fall, and the leader of Afghanistan would flee the country.” [1449] Valid explanations are few and far between for the chasm between military testimony on advice to the president on an imminent Taliban takeover and the administration’s claimed surprise when that came to pass.

President Biden also misrepresented the extent to which Americans were left behind. When speaking about the safety of Americans during the NEO with George Stephanopoulos on ABC News, President Biden promised to get all Americans home. [1450] Despite this promise, the committee was informed by Consul General Howell that no matter how many Americans remained in Kabul, the president was set on leaving by August 31. [1451] The White House continued to reiterate these assurances over the course of the evacuation, with Ms. Psaki claiming, “I think it’s irresponsible to say Americans are stranded. They are not. We are committed to bringing Americans, who want to come home, home. ... [W]e have been very clear that we are not leaving Americans who want to return home.” [1452] NSA Sullivan claimed on August 23rd, “[A]s I’ve said before, as the president has said before, we believe that we have time between now and the 31st to get out any American who wants to get out.” [1453] In October 2021, weeks after the conclusion of the NEO, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl testified to the Senate that there were 439 Americans still in Afghanistan at that time. [1454]

Three years later during her transcribed interview, Ms. Psaki agreed that not every American who wanted to get out of Afghanistan got out before August 31, 2021. [1455]

Rather than grapple with the administration's responsibility, NSA Sullivan publicly laid blame on a lack of valor among Afghan soldiers. He said that "when push came to shove, they decided not to step up and fight for their country," [1456] "its own armed forces would not fight to hold it together," [1457] and "they ultimately decided that they would not fight for Kabul and would not fight for the country." [1458] Such statements were a monumental disrespect to the Afghans who fought valiantly for their country alongside the United States for 20 years, experiencing over 69,095 military deaths and 46,319 civilian deaths. [1459] And they were an insult to the 80 to 90 Afghan servicemembers dying daily while fighting against Taliban advances in the final months before the NEO. [1460] Even as the Taliban reached the gates of Kabul, the highest-ranking remaining Afghan commander, General Alizai, asked for U.S. support in a last stand to defend Kabul. [1461] **NSA Sullivan's commentary was as disrespectful to the Afghan soldiers as it was consistent with the Biden-Harris administration's long-running efforts to hide the fact that it privately anticipated this outcome.**

There is one primary party responsible withholding or misrepresenting critical information to the American public: the NSC led by NSA Sullivan. Throughout the course of the majority's investigation, multiple witnesses have pointed to the NSC as leading not only the interagency coordination, but also the decision-making and day-to-day operations of the withdrawal. [1462] In her testimony before the committee, Ms. Psaki conceded she received her talking points on the situation in Afghanistan directly from the NSC press team, who coordinated messaging across agencies. [1463] Further, she testified that she engaged directly with NSA Sullivan when questions arose. For this reason, the committee requested NSA Sullivan appear publicly before this committee, so the public can learn why it was kept in the dark or misled on so many key issues. [1464] The White House and NSA Sullivan instead refused his appearance. The committee rejects their refusal and will not relent in its pursuit of NSA Sullivan's testimony.

The NSC escaped scrutiny as it executed the Biden-Harris administration's withdrawal plan. The State Department, over which this committee possesses jurisdiction, certainly bears significant accountability for parroting NSC talking points, as does the Defense Department. But with regard to the public narrative, the Biden-Harris administration leveraged NSC autonomy to spearhead terrible policy and deceive the public, all while evading oversight. The fact that the Biden-Harris administration's press strategy during the Afghanistan withdrawal was deliberately run out of the NSC — the sole source of Ms. Psaki's briefings — speaks volumes. NSA Sullivan must, for the first time, answer to the public.

LACK OF ACCOUNTABILITY

To this day, the Biden-Harris administration has not only avoided responsibility for its many failures throughout the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, but it has also claimed the operation a success. The day after Kabul fell to the Taliban, President Biden said, “I am deeply saddened by the facts we now face, but I do not regret my decision.” [1465] In the middle of the chaotic NEO, Ms. Psaki stated, “I would say that this is now on track ... to be the largest airlift in U.S. history ... So, no, I would not say that is anything but a success.” [1466] Even after the Abbey Gate attack, where 13 brave servicemembers were killed, along with 170 civilians — and with the knowledge that almost a thousand Americans and tens of thousands of Afghan allies were left behind — President Biden himself touted the “extraordinary success of this mission” on August 31. [1467]

As time has passed, the administration’s narrative has not changed. In December of 2021, NSA Sullivan claimed the United States had “safely and effectively” ended its diplomatic presence in Afghanistan and defended the withdrawal without mentioning the 13 U.S. servicemembers killed at Abbey Gate. [1468] In congressional testimony in 2023, Secretary Austin similarly said he had no regrets. [1469] Counselor Chollet told the committee, “I don’t want to say any hypotheticals, but I think that the fact of the matter is, and I think the president has made this very clear — he believes he made the right decision.” [1470] Under Secretary Kahl called the operation “unparalleled” and said “we, as Americans, should be immensely proud.” [1471]

In January of 2022, President Biden claimed, “I make no apologies for what I did.” [1472] Later that year, Rear Admiral Kirby insisted in November 2022, “We have admitted and acknowledged that not everything about the withdrawal was done perfectly, that there were certainly mistakes made, we’ve investigated those mistakes, we’ve owned up for those mistakes.” [1473] Yet, in May of 2024, President Biden still insisted this “was not a loss in Afghanistan.” [1474] As recently as the June 2024 presidential debate, President Biden brought up the topic of Afghanistan, unprovoked, to brag about his withdrawal and criticize President Trump for not doing so sooner. [1475] And on the three-year anniversary of the Abbey Gate attack, Vice President Harris touted the withdrawal as a success, calling the decision “courageous and right.” [1476]

With an unwillingness to see failure comes an inability to learn or hold those responsible to account. When asked if anyone had been held accountable for the failures of the withdrawal from Afghanistan in a congressional hearing, Secretary Austin admitted, “to my knowledge, no.” [1477] A prime example of the Biden-Harris administration’s accountability failure is found in Counselor Derek Chollet. The self-proclaimed fixer for Secretary Blinken, who was entrusted with significant responsibility over Afghanistan policy, feigned forgetfulness so many times during his transcribed interview that the question became, what did he remember? [1478] Despite his lead role in the Afghanistan failure and alarming lack of candor before the committee, Counselor Chollet was nominated by President Biden to serve as under secretary of defense for policy, a Senate-confirmed position. Chairman McCaul sent a letter to Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Jack Reed (D-R.I.) and Senate Armed Services Committee Ranking Member Roger Wicker (R-Miss.) opposing Counselor Chollet’s confirmation. [1479] Counselor Chollet was never voted out of committee. Discontent with even that degree of accountability, the Biden-Harris administration found a high-powered but non-Senate confirmed position for Counselor Chollet to occupy: chief of staff to Secretary Austin, which he started in June 2024. [1480] To fill the counselor position now vacated, Secretary Blinken tapped Tom Sullivan, brother to NSA Jake Sullivan. **In short, those responsible for the administration’s failure in Afghanistan, and those who have attempted to evade this committee’s oversight, have been rewarded by President Biden and Vice President Harris.**

With that said, the committee majority offers nothing but the highest praise and the deepest gratitude for the brave U.S. servicemembers and foreign service officers who risked their lives to carry out the NEO in August of 2021, despite being set up for failure by political leadership. It is no surprise, then, that those who were actually on the ground do not consider the NEO a success. One State Department employee told AAR interviewers there was “no way you could describe this as a success.” [1481] Foreign Service Officer Sam Aronson shared those sentiments, explaining, “I cannot call this evacuation a success because I had to replace my diplomatic tools with those meant for soldiers in war. Instead of a pen, I carried flashbang grenades as a last resort to divert potential attackers; and instead of a notepad, I wore night-vision goggles to secretly rescue a women’s rights activist under the cover of darkness. I recall, that night, feeling equal parts concerned that I’d either be discovered by the Taliban, taken hostage by ISIS, or reprimanded by a State Department bureaucracy that favors coloring within the lines.” [1482] Mr. Aronson said “after sitting next to Gold Star father Darin Hoover and hearing him describe how much his son, Taylor Hoover, loved being a Marine,” he could not possibly call the evacuation a success. [1483]

In his testimony before the committee, when asked by Congressman Michael Waltz (R-Fla.) whether President Biden's characterization of the withdrawal as a success added to the moral injury of veterans, Retired Lieutenant Colonel Scott Mann, a Green Beret and founder of Task Force Pineapple, stated, "I believe even more hurtful is the non-mentioning of it in two State of the Union addresses." [1484]

SIGAR Stonewalling by the State Department

Understanding how the withdrawal failed is critical to making sure officials and agencies are held accountable and mistakes are not repeated. SIGAR, under congressional mandate to provide "independent and objective" oversight of Afghanistan reconstruction projects and activities, has continued trying to carry out its work. [1485] But it has run headlong into State Department opposition.

In October 2021, after facing State Department obstruction, SIGAR Sopko decried the Biden-Harris administration's "bureaucratic inclination to try to restrict public information." [1486] SIGAR Sopko revealed that, right after the fall of Kabul, the State Department asked him to "temporarily suspend access" to all "audit, inspection, and financial audit reports" on the SIGAR website because the State Department was afraid information included in those reports could put Afghan allies at risk. [1487] SIGAR Sopko said that "despite repeated requests, State was never able to describe any specific threats to individuals that were supposedly contained in our reports, nor did State ever explain how removing our reports now could possibly protect anyone since many were years old and already extensively disseminated worldwide." [1488] SIGAR Sopko was then asked by the State Department to redact a spreadsheet containing roughly 2,400 new items, of which only four were found to have merit. [1489] SIGAR Sopko said the "Pentagon also restricted from public release a range of information going back to 2015 on the performance of the Afghan security forces," at the request of the Afghan government, which he believed consisted of the information needed to determine whether the Afghan military was "a real fighting force or a house of cards waiting to fall." [1490]

James Cunningham, the analyst-in-charge for SIGAR, who spent 17 years analyzing Afghanistan, accused the Biden-Harris administration of stonewalling investigators after the fall of Kabul. In a September 2022 podcast interview, Mr. Cunningham explained, "What we've noticed over the past year or so as we've been doing our work is that the [Biden-Harris] administration, the Department of Defense, the Department of State, and other organizations have just been resistant to this type of independent examination, of learning what happened in Afghanistan ... we asked CENTCOM two years ago if we could look through historical files, and I think they said the files would be ready for us to look [at] in 2030." [1491]

In June of 2022, SIGAR sent a letter to Congress reporting the Biden-Harris administration was blocking its investigations, including inquiries into whether U.S. taxpayer dollars were flowing to the Taliban or the Haqqani Network. [1492] SIGAR asserted, “Two SIGAR audits are also being hindered by a lack of cooperation from State and USAID. The first evaluates your agencies’ compliance with the laws and regulations prohibiting transfers of funds to members of the Taliban and the Haqqani Network. The second concerns ongoing emergency food assistance to Afghanistan.” [1493] Later that year, in October of 2022, SIGAR reported, “for the first time in its history,” it was “unable this quarter to provide Congress and the American people with a full accounting of this U.S. government spending due to the noncooperation of several U.S. government agencies.” [1494] SIGAR added USAID and the Treasury Department “refused to cooperate with SIGAR in any capacity, while the State Department was selective in the information it provided pursuant to SIGAR’s audit and quarterly data requests, sharing high-level funding data but not details of agency-supported programs in Afghanistan.” [1495] SIGAR further asserted a State Department official informed the inspector general that State Department staff received internal instruction to not engage with or speak to SIGAR without prior permission from the State Department’s legal counsel. [1496]

Obstruction of SIGAR continues to this day, with the State Department refusing to share information with SIGAR on its recent report regarding U.S. humanitarian aid implementers paying taxes to the Taliban. [1497]

State Department Obstruction of Congressional Oversight

Pursuant to 22 U.S.C. § 2680, “The Department of State shall keep ... the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives fully and currently informed with respect to all activities and responsibilities within the jurisdiction of these committees. Any Federal department, agency, or independent establishment shall furnish any information requested by ... such committee relating to any such activity or responsibility.” Rule X of the House of Representatives furnishes the committee with oversight authority over, in relevant part, “[r]elations of the United States with foreign nations generally,” the “[d]iplomatic service,” and the [p]rotection of American citizens abroad and expatriation.” [1498]

Throughout the course of this three-year investigation — including the 20 months since Republicans gained a majority in the U.S. House of Representatives — the State Department has actively worked to thwart congressional oversight despite its statutory obligations and the committee’s congressional authorities.

The State Department has resisted, delayed, obfuscated, and outright refused to comply with legitimate oversight inquiries.

Consequently, its modus operandi bred distrust in the department and forced the committee to threaten subpoenas on countless occasions, serving two, and threatening to hold Secretary Blinken in contempt of Congress twice for failure to comply therewith.

The State Department's obstruction is in many cases attributable to White House and NSC interference, with document productions withheld on the basis of purported executive confidentiality concerns. The depth of this investigation comes in spite of the department's lack of cooperation. The Biden-Harris administration's efforts to avoid accountability have undermined the relationship between this committee and the State Department, leading to increasing use of compulsory process. Per Senator Arthur Vandenberg, politics stops at the water's edge, but that is only possible through a shared commitment to transparency and accountability. [1499]

A primary example of State Department obstruction can be found in the department's 90-day internal After Action Review (AAR), which concluded in March of 2022. [1500] The AAR found significant failures in the department's response and identified "an electronic and paper collection of all the materials the review team consulted and cited to prepare its report," titled the "Afghanistan AAR files." [1501] The AAR had been based, in part, on "more than 150 interviews with current and former State Department officials at all levels of the organization," along with other critical documents examining the accuracy of the AAR and withdrawal more broadly. [1502] As described below, the State Department stonewalled requests for the materials underlying the AAR for over a year until this committee instituted contempt proceedings against Secretary Blinken.

To provide an overview of the timeline of obstruction, on January 12, 2023, shortly after Republicans claimed the House majority, the committee requested the production of "all documents resulting from State Department internal reviews related to the Afghanistan withdrawal," to better understand the department's role in the withdrawal. [1503] On January 30th, committee staff provided the department a list of priorities to facilitate production, including the "After-Action Report and all documents and communications referring and relating to it" [1504] The department failed to comply with its February 7th deadline, prompting a warning of compulsory process. Repeated requests and warnings followed on March 3rd, March 22nd, April 25th, June 8th, and June 20th. [1505] Although the State Department did produce the report, it withheld much of the critical supporting material, causing the committee to serve Secretary Blinken with a subpoena on July 18, 2023, to produce the AAR files by July 25, 2023. [1506]

The State Department failed, again, to comply. Accordingly, on August 9, 2023, the committee requested transcribed interviews with the department's Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Legislative Affairs Naz Durakoğlu, and Acting Legal Adviser Richard Visek, both of whom hold responsibility for document production. [1507] Two days later, in lieu of those transcribed interviews, Secretary Blinken communicated to Chairman McCaul his "personal commitment" towards cooperating with the subpoena. [1508] The department, however, proceeded to produce documents that were largely redacted, publicly available, or even blank. Particularly outlandish examples from that document production included a food menu and a 1975 study from Vietnam. [1509]

The committee then learned what the department was withholding. On August 31, 2023, the committee interviewed Ambassador Dan Smith, whom Secretary Blinken tasked to lead the AAR. [1510] Ambassador Smith revealed to committee staff the AAR was based on carefully recorded interviews he and his team conducted of department officials. [1511] He testified that he and his team "took notes on the interviews," which took the form of "memorand[a] of conversation." [1512] Prior to Ambassador Smith's transcribed interview, State Department staff led the committee to believe notes and records compiled in the production of the AAR were not organized in a manner conducive for efficient production. Ambassador Smith, however, confirmed his memoranda would be "in the custody of the State Department," as part of the AAR files, which his team had preserved in accordance with the Records Disposition Schedules approved by the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration. [1513]

It would be months before the department turned over Ambassador Smith's memoranda of conversation, following the institution of contempt proceedings against Secretary Blinken. On October 20, 2023, no longer able to justify its inaction with intimations of disorganization or burden, the department suggested, for the first time, that it might not produce the AAR interview notes at all. [1514] It referenced conversations with the White House and cited purported executive branch confidentiality interests and interagency equities as the basis for its noncompliance with the committee's July subpoena. In response, committee staff reiterated the AAR interview notes provided primary source material essential to the investigation. [1515] On February 26, 2024 — after over a year of good faith requests — Chairman McCaul announced he would begin contempt proceedings against Secretary Blinken. [1516] Notably, no secretary of state had ever before been held in contempt of Congress.

On the eve of contempt, the department agreed to release its objections and produce the materials underlying the AAR report. Those interview notes revealed systemic issues with the State Department's handling of the withdrawal and disclosed that, unlike Biden-Harris political appointees, the department's civil servants generally held a critical view of the withdrawal.

Just as the department improperly withheld the AAR interview notes from the committee for over a year, it also withheld “the Dissent Channel cable sent on or about July 13, 2021, reportedly signed by 23 State Department officials and the official response to it.” [1517] Again, the department only relented after Chairman McCaul subpoenaed Secretary Blinken and threatened contempt. That subpoena was served on March 28th, and on May 5, 2023, Chairman McCaul sent a letter to Secretary Blinken warning of contempt. [1518] The State Department allowed Chairman McCaul and Ranking Member Meeks to view the Dissent Channel cable on May 23, 2023, and later allowed all members of the committee to do the same.” [1519]

The same pattern holds true for witness interviews. Although the department ultimately made 16 current and former officials available for transcribed interviews, it did so after multiple requests, months of delay, and the threat of compulsory process.

On May 14, 2023, the committee submitted to Secretary Blinken requests for five transcribed interviews of key department witnesses: Consul General James DeHart, Mr. Jonathan Mennuti, Consul General Jayne Howell, Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Afghanistan Mark Evans, and Ambassador Dan Smith. [1520] It took the department nearly three months to schedule those witnesses. [1521]

The next slate of requests was similarly delayed. On August 30, 2023, the committee submitted requests for transcribed interviews of nine key department witnesses: Ambassador Ross Wilson, D-MR Brian McKeon, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, Acting Under Secretary Carol Perez, Counselor Derek Chollet, Ms. Suzy George, Mr. Salman Ahmed, Acting Assistant Secretary Dean Thompson, and Ambassador John Bass. [1522] On September 8, 2023, the committee requested another key department witness: State Department Spokesperson Ned Price. The department’s deadline for both requests lapsed without a calendared interview, and it was not until September 29th — after the committee threatened compulsory process — that the department arranged for the first of the ten witnesses to appear. [1523] On October 2 and 3, 2023, the committee — again threatening use of a subpoena — insisted availability for the remaining nine witnesses be provided within the week. [1524] It was only then that the department scheduled interviews for these remaining witnesses. Indeed, the only State Department witness who appeared on request and not threat was former foreign service officer Sam Aronson.

Through patience, repetition, and threat of compulsion, the committee obtained 16 transcribed interviews of State Department leaders and uncovered critical documents underlying the department’s internal investigation. But at nearly every step of the way, the committee’s efforts to engage cooperatively encountered resistance and obstruction.



LIFE AFTER THE NEO

The August 2021 NEO Operations, Failures, and Consequences

AFGHANISTAN TODAY AND THE DAMAGE TO U.S. INTERESTS BY THE BIDEN-HARRIS WITHDRAWAL

Americans Left Behind

At the height of the August 2021 NEO, President Biden sat down with ABC's George Stephanopoulos. In that interview, he committed before the world to extend the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan until all Americans were evacuated. [1525] The Biden-Harris administration, however, did not extend the deadline, nor did it evacuate every American who wanted to get out of Afghanistan. To this day, it remains unclear exactly how many Americans were left behind in Afghanistan after the last aircraft departed on August 30, 2021.

Witnesses interviewed by the committee confirmed Americans were left behind in Afghanistan despite President Biden's promise. Indeed, Consul General Howell attested there was never any impression on the ground that the NEO would be able to evacuate every American who wanted to leave Afghanistan. Upon landing in Kabul, she said, "I understood the goal was to get every American who wanted to be repatriated, if possible, but not that we would not leave until every American who wanted to be evacuated was evacuated." [1526] According to Ambassador Bass, there were extensive ongoing negotiations at senior levels about how long to continue the NEO, but it was President Biden who decided to leave on August 31. [1527] The decision to leave then was understood as unquestionable and no number of abandoned Americans would change President Biden's mind. [1528]

Consul General Howell explained to the committee, "I spent a lot of time trying to figure this number [of people left in Afghanistan] out," but even despite her efforts, she knew, "If someone had told me there's five Americans left or there's 5,000 Americans left, it would not have made a difference in what we did, because there was nothing left on the table, nothing. There was nothing." [1529] In the end, Consul General Howell affirmed an unknown number of Americans who wanted to leave Afghanistan were left behind. [1530] This assessment was shared by Ambassador Bass, who testified, "Whatever the circumstances were, my recollection is it was several hundred." [1531] Their assessments stand in contrast to claims by the Biden-Harris administration that any American who wanted to get out would get out. [1532]

Beyond the realities on the ground during the NEO, General Milley and General McKenzie testified to the committee they never believed the United States could have been able to get all Americans out of Afghanistan. [1533] General Milley stated, “As far as the American citizens, it wasn’t clear then, and it’s still not clear to me, what those numbers are or were, and that was never clarified by anyone in the State Department — exactly how many, where they are, who they are, are they out in Herat, are they down in Kandahar.” [1534] General McKenzie concluded, “I never thought we would get everybody out. ... I knew there would be people left behind.” [1535]

The responsibility for Americans left behind rests squarely with the Biden-Harris administration. Ambassador Bass assessed there were possibly hundreds of Americans who wanted to leave Afghanistan but were left behind due to the ensuing chaos and Taliban violence at HKIA. [1536] He testified, “There were Americans who wanted to leave but didn’t feel safe in getting themselves to the airport before August 30th.” He added, “On the morning of August 30th, we knew precisely at that point in time how many of that group of folks [Americans] who had expressed they wanted to leave had not successfully entered the airport at that point,” and that number was “prospectively in the hundreds.” [1537]

Rather than acknowledging their failure to quantify Americans in Afghanistan, on August 30, 2021, Secretary Blinken represented there were “still a small number of Americans – under 200 and likely closer to 100 – who remain in Afghanistan and want to leave.” [1538] That figure proved to be a fraction of the Americans that were left behind and have since been evacuated.

A few weeks after Secretary Blinken’s misrepresentation, Under Secretary Kahl testified 439 Americans remained in Afghanistan at that time. [1539] Almost two years later, on August 15, 2023, Secretary Blinken conceded the United States had helped facilitate the evacuation of an estimated 900 U.S. citizens from Afghanistan since the conclusion of the NEO. [1540] In addition to the hundreds of Americans evacuated with the support of private and volunteer led-groups, the number of Americans left behind by the Biden-Harris administration’s Afghanistan withdrawal totals at least over 1,000. [1541]

The abandonment of Americans now at the mercy of the Taliban is a betrayal by the Biden-Harris administration of the United States’ responsibility to ensure the safety of Americans overseas. Not only were they subjected to violence by the Taliban during the NEO — discouraging many who rightly feared for their lives from attempting to evacuate — but the administration was informed that would be the case from the outset of the withdrawal, and still failed to prevent it.

Weapons and Money Left to the Taliban

“It’s a new arms race — and it’s threatening global security.” [1542]

— Lynne O’Donnell in *Foreign Policy*

When the last plane left on August 30, 2021, billions of dollars’ worth of American weaponry and money were left behind in a now-Taliban controlled Afghanistan. In March 2022, the Pentagon assessed “\$7.1 billion in U.S.-funded defense articles and equipment remained in Afghanistan when the U.S. military departed.” [1543] U.S. forces attempted to disable or render inoperable certain military equipment at HKIA and at the U.S. Embassy Kabul compound during the evacuation. [1544] Of the remainder of U.S.-owned equipment left behind, the Department of Defense has claimed that, absent specialized U.S. contractor maintenance support, “the operational readiness of that equipment would continue to degrade over time.” [1545]

The Taliban claim to have recovered 40 operational aircraft from the former Afghan government, including two Mi-17 helicopters, two UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters, two MD-530 light helicopters, two Mi-24 helicopter gunships, and one fixed-wing transport aircraft — all of which have since been observed flying according to the UN Sanctions Monitoring Team. [1546] An unclassified DIA report from March 2022 stated the Taliban have represented they repaired seven former Afghan Air Force aircraft, with the DIA reporting “the Taliban may have obtained a degree of operation and maintenance capability.” [1547] On August 14, 2024, a day before the three-year anniversary of the takeover of Kabul, the Taliban held a military parade at Bagram Air Base. [1548] During the parade, the Taliban showcased their ability to operate tanks, helicopters, and Humvees left behind by U.S. and coalition forces. [1549]



AFP



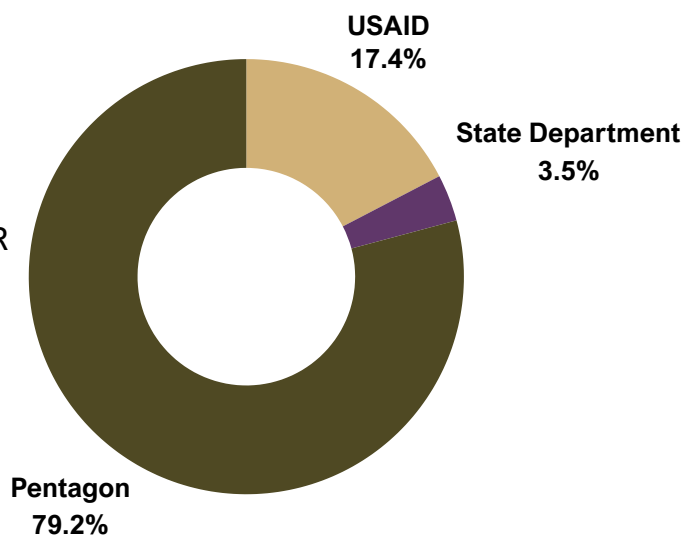
AP

For far too long, the Biden-Harris administration knew that some U.S. weapons would eventually end up with the Taliban. In November 2021, Rear Admiral Kirby admitted the Biden-Harris administration was aware that the defense articles transferred or sold to the Afghan military could end up in the hands of the Taliban, saying it was “equipment that we had turned over to the Afghans. It was Afghan national security force equipment, and vehicles. ... We were completely transparent about the idea that some of those would probably find their way into Taliban hands, and they have.” [1550]

Defense Department witnesses appearing before the committee — including General Miller and General Milley — asserted any weapon left behind had been transferred to the Afghan government, thereby implying Afghans were responsible for the subsequent seizure by the Taliban. [1551] This attempts to divert accountability from the Biden-Harris administration and ignores the reality: **The Biden-Harris administration was advised by its national security experts the Taliban would swiftly topple the Afghan government following a complete military withdrawal and would inevitably seize the equipment left behind thereafter. Regardless of whether the defense articles and equipment are characterized as Afghan-owned or American-owned, the Biden-Harris administration did not develop plans to prevent that from occurring.**

The weapons and defense articles left behind pose a risk to the stability of the region and U.S. national security interests. As has been widely reported, U.S. weapons and military equipment were being sold on the black market as early as October 2021. They have made their way into the hands of terrorist groups operating outside of Afghanistan, such as the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Islamic State - Khorasan Province (ISIS-K). [1552] There are also reports U.S. weapons have been “used in recent attacks by non-state groups in Kashmir, bitterly divided between India and Pakistan.” [1553]

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan also resulted in millions of dollars being left behind. Between the Department of State, USAID, and the Department of Defense, SIGAR concluded the Taliban likely gained access to up to \$57.6 million in former American funds. [1554] SIGAR Sopko stated the final combined direct payments from the Pentagon, State, and USAID to the Afghan government in fiscal year 2021, prior to the Taliban takeover, totaled up to \$57.6 million — \$45.6 million from the Pentagon, \$2 million from State, and \$10 million from USAID. [1555]



SIGAR reported, “It is likely that some portion of the \$57.6 million remained in Afghan government-controlled accounts when the Taliban returned to power and assumed control of Afghan ministries, including the Ministry of Finance.” [1556] Although the Pentagon attempted to recuperate some of the funds left behind, the collapse of the Afghan banking system after the U.S. departure precluded them from doing so. [1557] Neither USAID nor the State Department has attempted to recover funds left behind in Afghanistan. [1558]

The Impact of the U.S. Withdrawal on Servicemembers

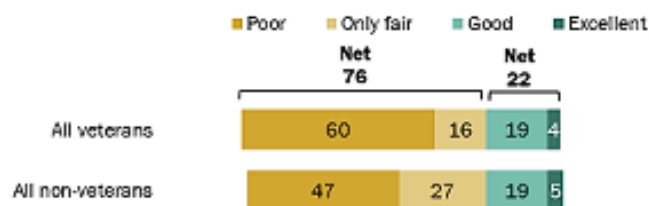
U.S. Military Recruitment and Retention

Although the U.S. military remains an esteemed American institution, it has experienced significant recruitment and retention challenges that are closely associated with the withdrawal from Afghanistan. [1559] The number of U.S. servicemembers who would recommend joining the military has dropped from 75% in 2019 to 63% in 2022, according to the Military Family Advisory Network. [1560] Retired Army Lieutenant General David Barno assessed in March 2023, “the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan is almost certainly one of the reasons” for the military recruitment crisis. [1561]

The Biden-Harris administration’s catastrophic withdrawal from Afghanistan has also impacted public confidence in the military. For example, according to a Gallup poll, the American public’s confidence in the U.S. military dropped by 5% between June of 2021 and June of

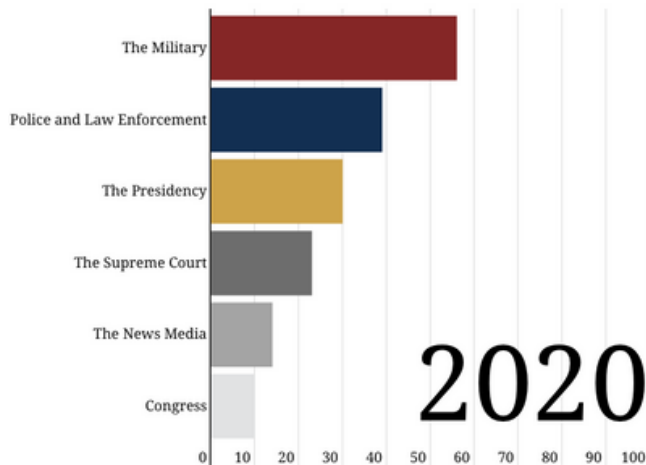
2022, hitting a 20-year low at 60% in 2023. [1563] Similarly, the RAND Corporation concluded based on a 2022-2023 survey that “although the public still holds the military generally in high esteem compared with other major institutions, that esteem is wavering, influenced by such factors as the end of the war in Afghanistan, the increased polarization of the public, and heightened politicization of the military.” [1564] RAND found “key dynamics” shaping public perception of the U.S. military “have been shifting with the end of the war in Afghanistan” and are a cause of the troubling recruitment trends. [1565]

% saying the Biden administration has done a ____ job handling the situation in Afghanistan



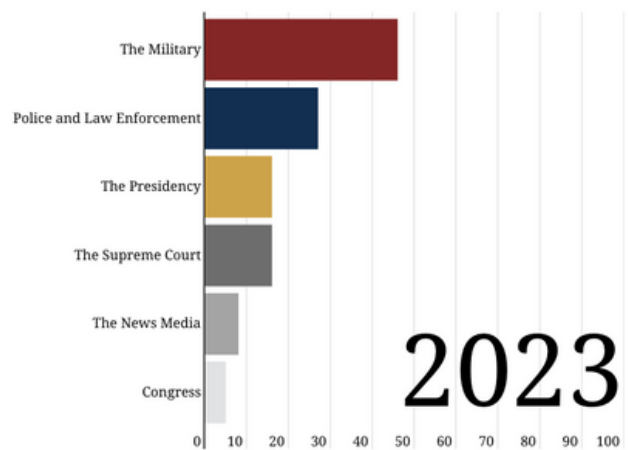
PEW Research Center Veterans Views on Afghanistan [1562]

Trend in Trust and Confidence in Public Institutions



2020

Trend in Trust and Confidence in Public Institutions



2023

Reagan Institute

The Biden-Harris administration's failed withdrawal would reverberate across the community of veterans who, for decades, had fought and given their lives countering global terrorism. Lt. Col. Mann (Ret) testified to the committee, "Relinquishing Afghanistan back into the hands of 20 other violent extremist groups undoes the intelligence and partner capacity we fought for, and it takes us back to pre-9/11 vulnerability. Every veteran knows it, even if no one in our government understands it. It has become a moral injury on our veterans and military families. A moral injury is an injury to the soul. A violation of what we know to be right by leaders whom we trusted." [1566]

"All the blood, sweat, and tears shed in Afghanistan were for nothing," Major James Gant told me. He was in pieces from emotional turmoil when Kabul fell on August 15, 2021.

"According to Bonnie Carroll, the president and founder of the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, he was just one of the countless veterans, Gold Star families, and loved ones of the fallen who were thrown into severe mental anguish following the Afghan collapse. This anguish still continues today for many of the 800,000 Americans who served in Afghanistan.

"Another iconic Green Beret NCO who was a Pineapple shepherd—a volunteer who helped Afghan allies escape during the fall—said through tears and a clenched jaw, "If I knew on September 12, 2001, what I know today about how our government would treat Afghanistan, I never would have walked into the recruiter's office and joined Special Forces in the first place."

"Our government's callous disregard for our troops' sacrifices has caused a palpable spike in veteran mental health incidents. When will someone be held accountable so our veterans can begin to heal?"

Scott Mann,

Founder and President, Rooftop Leadership & The Heroes Journey

When speaking to the impact of the Afghanistan withdrawal on American servicemembers and veterans, General Miller compared Kabul to Saigon, testifying to the committee that for many servicemembers “the way we came out of there felt traumatic ... probably not unlike what Saigon looked like for Vietnam veterans after spending so much time in Vietnam and seeing an evacuation off the roof.” [1567]

“The Kabul evacuation in August 2021 was a stark and complex demonstration of human nature, showcasing acts of profound courage alongside instances of chaos and failure. As the Moral Compass Federation community worked tirelessly to assist our most trusted allies in Afghanistan, we witnessed our partners abandoning hope, navigating treacherous chokepoints, and experiencing the abandonment of twenty years of promises. The uncertainty surrounding the fate of many we tried to help still weighs heavily on our hearts.

“In the three years since, Moral Compass Federation has dedicated itself to raising awareness of moral injury among our veterans. Many who served multiple deployments in Afghanistan, giving years of their lives and losing countless brothers and sisters in arms, are left questioning the purpose of their sacrifices and the trust in institutions and leadership to which we dedicated our adult lives.

“We believe this committee's work marks the beginning of a crucial journey toward truth – a truth that has long been denied to our service members. By acknowledging their experiences and the complex emotions surrounding the evacuation, we hope to start the healing process for those who have borne the weight of this conflict.

“Thank you to the committee for initiating this vital work. It is our sincere hope that this will lead to more honest accounts and a deeper understanding of the impact on those who served.”

Timothy “Tito” Torres

*Vice President and Chief Executive Officer
Moral Compass Federation*

Their sentiments are echoed by veterans’ groups continuing to aid Afghan allies in escaping the Taliban’s wrath in Afghanistan. In his testimony before the committee, Executive Director of the 1208 Foundation and Green Beret Thomas Kasza spoke to his disappointment in the treatment of Afghan allies following the withdrawal. “Rather than debating the normalization of the Taliban, I will illuminate the fallout of continued apathy and half-measures, because it is apathy that allows us to violate our principles and ignore promises. It is apathy which betrays allies,” he stated. [1568]

Amy Marden, a representative of the Moral Compass Federation, who testified to the committee on behalf of the 20 veterans-member organizations represented by Moral Compass Federation, spoke about the toll abandoning America's allies has taken on U.S. servicemembers. "Suicide is now the second leading cause of death in veterans under age 45. Our armed services are failing to meet recruitment goals necessary to maintain a healthy fighting force. And Americans' confidence in the military is at its lowest point in 35 years. Recognizing and addressing the moral toll of the Afghanistan withdrawal is crucial not only for the well-being of our armed forces but also for the overall strength and resilience of our nation. Helping Afghans helps veterans," she shared.

"As the founder of the Special Operations Association of America, our organization speaks as a voice for the Special Operations Forces (SOF) community who served in Afghanistan. Our members were significantly impacted by the catastrophic U.S. military withdrawal in August 2021. Our organization was among the few nonprofits on the ground in the region during this tragic event. We worked tirelessly to assist Afghan allies—interpreters and commandos—who had fought alongside us for over 20 years.

"Forged by the bond of shared sacrifice, more of our community would be in Arlington National Cemetery today if it were not for those who stood shoulder to shoulder with us.

"The moral injury from this withdrawal has been profound, leading to increased veteran suicides and a surge in VA crisis hotline calls. The trust built with our Afghan partners was shattered, and the consequences have rippled across the globe, undermining our alliances and national security.

"The withdrawal was avoidable and highlights failures at every level. We must ensure that the sacrifices of our veterans and the lives of our Afghan allies were not in vain. We owe it to them to honor our promises and prevent such a tragedy from ever happening again."

Daniel Elkins,

Founder of the Special Operations Association of America

President Biden and Vice President Harris have yet to publicly acknowledge the toll the withdrawal has taken on U.S. servicemembers. Former Army Ranger and law student Sam Ayres, who served three tours in Afghanistan as an enlisted infantryman, sent a letter to the administration to explain why the issue mattered personally to veterans. [1569] He wrote, "I was thrust back into the ongoing debate in my mind about whether our service—and the loss of teammates, American and Afghan—was all a waste ... Many of us veterans will spend the rest of our lives grappling with this question. At the very least, I hope we'll be able to feel we did something honorable over there in our small corner of the war.

That would provide some solace. But coming to that conclusion will be even harder if the Afghans who went out on missions with us are left to die at the hands of our onetime enemies.” [1570] According to reporting, he “received a pro forma response.” [1571]

Afghanistan in the Hands of the Taliban

The Taliban Regime following the U.S. Withdrawal

What came next for Afghanistan, following the U.S. withdrawal, is nothing short of a tragedy. After August 30, 2021, Afghanistan was taken over by the Taliban. On September 7, 2021, the Taliban announced a 33-person “caretaker” regime that contained only Taliban members — no past government officials, no women, and no leaders from minority ethnic or religious groups. [1572] In addition to ensuring exclusive Taliban control, the interim regime included several leaders from their prior regime that spanned from 1996 to 2001, as well several individuals sanctioned by the United States. [1573] Haibatullah Akhundzada, hard-line Sunni cleric and father of a suicide bomber, took up de facto leadership after the United States left; he now serves as the Taliban’s supreme leader. [1574]

That interim government has become the Taliban’s de facto permanent regime. Since seizing Afghanistan, the Taliban have taken few steps to establish a permanent governing structure. [1575] While the Taliban claim to be preparing a constitution, they continue to operate without one, affording their supreme leaders unlimited political authority. [1576] The country, instead, is ruled by authoritarian decree in the absence of a constitution. Taliban security forces instead determine what is criminal on the spot, rubber stamped by Taliban courts. [1577]

KEY FIGURES IN THE TALIBAN’S INTERIM GOVERNMENT

Leader/"Commander of the Faithful"
Sheikh Haibatullah Akhundzada
 Took command of the Taliban in 2016, following the death of Akhtar Mohammad Mansour. The Taliban released the only known photo of Sheikh Akhundzada at this time. He is estimated to be in his 60s and is generally characterized as a religious authority, rather than a military commander.

KEY
 □ Involved in Doha Talks
 ■ Sanctioned*
 Ⓢ Guantanamo Five**
 ◻ Previously Incarcerated

Prime Minister
Mohammad Hassan Akhund
 A minister in the previous Taliban regime and close to Taliban founder Mullah Omar. Rarely seen in public. Thought to be a religious authority rather than a military commander.

Deputy Prime Minister
Abdul Ghani Baradar
 A founding member of the Taliban, Baradar was close to Mullah Omar and held several positions in the previous regime. Led the negotiating team in Doha. Generally considered a moderate within the movement.

Deputy Prime Minister
Abdul Salam Hanafi
 An Uzbek, Hanafi is one of very few non-Pashtuns in leadership. Also a deputy minister under the previous regime, he was allegedly involved in drug trafficking.

Political Deputy for Prime Minister
Abdul Kabir
 A member of the previous regime, allegedly involved in both terror operations and drug trafficking.

Defense Minister
Muhammad Yaqoob Mujahid
 The oldest son of Mullah Omar, Mujahid is believed to be in his early 30s.

Deputy Minister of Defense
Abdul Qayyum Zakir
 A high-ranking military commander with possible connections to Iran. Zakir appears popular with field commanders and was strongly opposed to peace negotiations.

Deputy Minister of Defense
Mohammad Fazil Mazloom
 A front-line military commander through the 1990s, Mazloom is accused of human rights abuses and war crimes.

Interior Minister
Sirajuddin Haqqani
 Wanted for multiple terror attacks by the FBI, Haqqani is a U.S. Specially Designated Global Terrorist.

Director of Prisons
Nooruddin Turabi
 Infamous for his brutal Justice Ministry under the previous regime, Turabi continues to support amputations as punishment.

Deputy Minister of Interior Affairs for Security
Mohammad Ibrahim Sadr

Acting Director of Intelligence
Abdul Haq Wasiq

Foreign Affairs Minister
Amir Khan Muttaqi

Minister of Justice
Abdul Hakim Ishaqzai

UN Ambassador (unrecognized)
Suhail Shaheen

Spokesman
Zabihullah Mujahid

* Individuals marked as "Sanctioned" are named in UN, U.S. and/or Interpol lists.
 ** "Guantanamo Five" refers to the five Taliban officials released from Guantanamo Bay Prison in 2014 in exchange for Bowe Bergdahl.
 Note: It remains unclear how much power individual officials hold. The Taliban continue to shuffle various cabinet positions and have named multiple people to the same roles. Nearly all officials listed here are sanctioned for alleged connections to criminal acts ranging from drug trafficking to civilian massacres.
 Note 2: This graphic is not intended to communicate any official recognition of the Taliban as the rightful or legitimate government of Afghanistan.
 Source: Please see endnote 11. The photos of Sheikh Haibatullah Akhundzada, Mohammad Hassan Akhund and Abdul Hakim Ishaqzai originated with various Taliban media and may not be accurate. The photos of Abdul Ghani Baradar and Suhail Shaheen are State Department photos. The photo of Sirajuddin Haqqani is from the FBI. The photo of Zabihullah Mujahid is a still image captured from a video of a Taliban press conference. SIGAR has not used photographs to which others hold copyright.

SIGAR Quarterly Report to Congress, October 30, 2021

The Haqqani Network — a Sunni Islamist and U.S. Designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) with strong ties to al Qaeda — is embedded in Taliban leadership, holding key ministerial positions. [1578] One of those positions includes Sirajuddin Haqqani, the leader of the Haqqani Network and the government’s interior minister. [1579] Under Sirajuddin Haqqani’s leadership, the Haqqani Network “planned and conducted numerous significant kidnappings and attacks against U.S. and Coalition Forces in Afghanistan, the Afghan government, and civilian targets.” [1580] He was designated as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT), and the U.S. government continues to offer up to a \$10 million bounty for information on him. [1581] There are several other members of the Taliban government who are also sanctioned by the United States, including acting governor of Afghanistan’s Central Bank, Alhaj Hedayatullah Badri, and his deputy, Noor Ahmad Agha. [1582]

Taliban abuses, however, are increasingly challenging to track, as the Taliban have violently dismantled Afghanistan’s free press — once the norm in a country that fostered independent domestic and global journalists. [1583] **The Afghan independent media sector has largely collapsed, with well-known journalists forced to flee the country and others going into hiding or giving up their work.** [1584] Media outlets that remain in official operation must do so under heavy Taliban control and censorship. [1585] The lack of a free and independent press means the global community has insight into only a fraction of the Taliban’s human rights abuses.

Those abuses include extrajudicial killings, torture, extensive gender-based violence and sexual violence, restrictions on the religious freedom of Shia Muslims, and discrimination against Hazara ethnic minorities, among countless other forms of violence and abuse. [1586] The Taliban’s religious persecution extends beyond the Shia Hazara community to Christians, Sikhs, and Hindus, who face criminal prosecution and worse, like summary beheading, for engaging in religious studies. [1587]

Despite the Taliban’s history of brutality when they previously ruled the country from the 1990s to October 2021 and the decades of ruthless violence against the U.S.-backed Afghan government, the Biden-Harris administration pushed the idea it could leverage the Taliban’s desire for humanitarian aid and international recognition to moderate their repressive impulses from the moment they took over the country.

Even before the last U.S. military plane left the country, Secretary Blinken claimed on August 29, 2021, “We have very significant leverage to work with over the weeks and months ahead, to incentivize the Taliban to make good on its commitments” — a hope he and other high ranking State Department officials would repeatedly vocalize. [1588]

Two days later, Ms. Psaki made a similar statement, saying, “We have enormous leverage over the Taliban, including access to the global marketplace — that’s not a small piece of leverage.” [1589]

This idea mirrors the arguments made by Ambassador Khalilzad throughout 2021 when serving as special representative of Afghanistan reconciliation. Ambassador Khalilzad baselessly asserted the Taliban would honor their commitments and respect basic human rights as a result of their desire for international recognition and the continuation of humanitarian assistance. The Biden-Harris administration embraced Ambassador Khalilzad’s delusion to justify its withdrawal.

Even as the international community attempted to signal that countries will not engage with the Taliban absent improvements in human rights, the Taliban have been less than unresponsive to international pressure. [1590] Instead, for example, Taliban Supreme Leader Akhundzada doubled down on extremist rule in April 2024, insisting “public stoning and hand-cutting” are legitimate. [1591] And the Taliban’s interior minister, Sirajuddin Haqqani, proclaimed in February 2024 that formal relations with the rest of the world, especially the United States, are irrelevant to the Taliban’s policymaking. [1592]

Taliban Reprisals

The decades of animosity, conflict, and violence between Afghans who supported the U.S. mission and the Taliban did not disappear with the departure of U.S. forces. Upon overtaking Kabul in August 2021, the Taliban immediately and falsely proclaimed amnesty for former members of the Afghan military and government. [1593] Despite that paper-thin promise, Afghans who were associated with or fought alongside the United States have been systematically and brutally targeted by the Taliban. [1594]

During a January 2024 roundtable held by the committee, attendees, including activists and Afghan journalists, described countless atrocities, including the targeted kidnapping, torture, and murder of former Afghan security forces, government officials, prosecutors, contractors, interpreters, and their family members. [1595]

- Afghan journalist Sanjar Sohail, the founder of Hasht-e-Subh, described the “systematic killing and torturing of former soldiers and officers of former Afghanistan republic ... including their families.” [1596]

- Andrew Sullivan, the director of advocacy for No One Left Behind, testified that surveys sent to thousands of Afghans still trapped in Afghanistan demonstrated “incredibly moving pleas for help” as well as “242 responses of extrajudicial killings committed by the Taliban.” [1597]
- Joe Maida of the Justice Sector Group discussed the Taliban’s targeting of former Afghan government prosecutors who had helped convict and imprison Taliban, al Qaeda, and ISIS-K terrorists, adding the retribution extends to family members, with daughters of justice officials “at increased risk of forced marriage to Taliban members.” [1598]
- Amy Marden, a representative of the Moral Compass Federation, said there have been “thousands of documented horrors exacted upon our Afghan forces,” detailing threats, kidnappings, torture, and murders targeting Afghan forces, interpreters, justice sector officials, and contractors. [1599]

A *New York Times* investigation by Mr. Sohail and his colleagues revealed the Taliban had been carrying out revenge killings against Afghan allies. They found in 2022, “nearly 500 former government officials and members of the Afghan security forces were killed or forcibly disappeared during the Taliban’s first six months in power.” [1600] Similarly, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan recorded reports of “hundreds of human rights violations,” including the murder of over 200 former government officials and ANDSF members. [1601] These reprisals have been characterized by experts as a “settled, systematic, organized and strategic cleansing of the former forces and anything demonstrating the American legacy.” [1602]

Additionally, American technology has empowered the Taliban to systematically target Afghan allies. A 2022 report by the Defence Education Enhancement Programme (DEEP) of NATO discovered the Taliban gained access to U.S. military-maintained biometric devices and databases after the withdrawal. [1603] The biometric devices in question are enabled to recognize fingerprint, eye scan, and facial information, and the DEEP report warned that the Taliban had access to biometric data allowing them to identify civilians that worked with the United States or NATO. [1604]

General Milley confirmed the reports of “brutal” reprisals in his testimony before the committee. [1605] “I think some were killed, Afghans. I don’t know about the Americans. I don’t think the Americans were. But I think some of the Afghans were tracked down that worked with us, and I think some of them were killed. And I’m pretty certain some of them in pretty brutal ways,” he explained. [1606]

“Afghanistan is a land of enduring hope and resilience. Despite the fall of many governments and the oppression our people face today by terrorists, the spirit of freedom has always prevailed. Each generation has forged opportunities and a future for themselves, and the last 20 years of democracy offered a unique chance for a new generation to lead. We, the youth, prepared for two decades to take the reins of our country. Yet, just as we were poised to strengthen Afghanistan’s young democracy, the U.S. withdrew, handing our country to a terrorist group.

“Though we were denied the opportunity to build on our progress pre-2021, I am confident in the will and strength of our youth. We will liberate and rebuild Afghanistan into a democratic and pluralistic country, where every citizen enjoys equal rights, regardless of ethnicity, religion, or gender. The determination and perseverance of Afghanistan’s people will secure our freedom, independence, and dignity, no matter the cost. Our righteous struggle today ensures a better, peaceful future for us and our children.”

Ahmad Massoud

Leader of the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan

General McKenzie similarly attested to Taliban brutality, adding the Taliban were “absolutely” and “systematically” carrying out a vengeance campaign. [1607] SIGAR also confirmed reprisal killings were occurring, reporting in April 2024 the Taliban are still “targeting former members of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces and government officials.” [1608]

Despite the transparent falsehood of Taliban promises, Under Secretary for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland denied the existence of systemic reprisals by the Taliban in her testimony before the committee in September 2023. [1609] In response to the question from Rep. Mike Waltz (R-Fla.), “Is the Taliban murdering our Afghan allies today in Afghanistan,” she responded before the committee, “I do not believe we have seen a consistent pattern of those Afghans who worked and supported our efforts in Afghanistan being murdered by the Taliban.” [1610]

In April 2024, almost six months after Under Secretary Nuland’s testimony, the State Department finally acknowledged “members of the Taliban reportedly killed persons in retaliation for their association with the pre-August 2021 [Afghan] government.” [1611]

Women in Afghanistan

“I am not sending my boy back there to risk his life on behalf of women’s rights.”

— Then-Vice President Biden, According to Then-Special Representative Richard Holbrooke [1612]



Reuters

Few have suffered so systematically under Taliban oppression as Afghan women and girls. The Taliban almost immediately turned the Afghan Ministry of Women’s Affairs into the “Ministry for the Prevention of Vice and Promotion of Virtue,” and Taliban decrees have since progressively restricted the ability of women to teach, work, study, travel, or leave the house without a male escort. [1613] Women were immediately banned in September 2021 from receiving any education beyond sixth grade, with that order made permanent in March of 2022. [1614] In December 2022, female aid implementers were banned from working for international NGOs, which effectively prevented many NGOs from operating in a country where only female aid workers are permitted to service Afghan women. [1615] In November 2022, the Taliban resumed the enforcement of their fundamentalist interpretation of Sharia law, including public lashings, amputations, and stoning. [1616] And then, in July 2023, beauty salons — one of the few remaining vestiges of female economic freedom — were outlawed. [1617] In some parts of the country, women are not permitted a SIM card in their phone or internet access without male supervision. [1618]

“Under the Taliban regime, Afghan women face an increasingly dire situation marked by severe gender apartheid. Since the Taliban’s takeover in August 2021, the regime has systematically imposed restrictions that undermine women’s rights and freedoms. The Taliban’s policies have codified gender discrimination into law, resulting in widespread societal and economic exclusion for women. The regime has mandated that women wear full-body coverings in public, further erasing their presence in society.

“More recently, the Taliban have banned women’s voice being heard in public spaces, aiming to completely silence them. The draconian regime of Taliban has imposed a ban on women’s employment and on secondary and higher education for girls, affecting approximately 3.5 million girls, according to estimates by the World Bank. This has deprived them of essential educational opportunities, further entrenching gender apartheid. The Taliban’s policies have formalized gender discrimination through legal means, leading to increased violence against women. Legal protections for survivors of such violence are minimal, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis faced by Afghan women. The gender apartheid enforced by the Taliban regime has led to significant human rights violations and heightened vulnerability for Afghan women.

“The international community must take a firm stand to protect Afghan women, codify gender apartheid as a crime, and ensure perpetrators face justice for their actions.”

Hadeia Amiry

Former Afghan Diplomat

Most recently, on August 21, 2024, the Ministry for the Prevention of Vice and Promotion of Virtue issued new laws that banned women from showing their bare faces in public, and from using their voices in public, including singing, reciting, or reading aloud. [1619] Finally, one of the most heinous outcomes of Taliban rule is the ever-increasing frequency of young girls being forced into child marriage. [1620] Dire economic conditions, the United Nations has said, drives families to sell their children for this purpose as young as six months old. [1621]

In January 2024, Too Young to Wed, an organization that combats child-marriage globally, reported that child marriages had “skyrocketed” in Afghanistan. [1622] “In Shahrak-e-Sabz, a settlement of makeshift mud-brick homes and tents for the displaced in Herat province that we visited last month, our researchers counted 118 girls who had been sold as child brides, and 116 families with girls waiting for buyers,” which “amount[ed] to 40 percent of families surveyed.” [1623] The report found girls in their new homes often “are saddled with housework and often subject to verbal, physical and sexual abuse — slavery under the guise of matrimony. It’s no wonder suicide and depression are rising among Afghan teenage girls.” [1624]

During the NEO's implementation in August 2021, Vice President Harris was on a trip to Singapore and Vietnam. At the time, she promised the administration would prioritize helping Afghan women and girls. [1625] Her promise has clearly not been fulfilled.

"The Taliban have brought down a veil of darkness over Afghanistan. International bodies, organizations, and governments have expressed "condemnation," yet the 'Taliban 2.0' continues to impose its draconian dominion over the people of Afghanistan — especially women and girls — with impunity. Money continues to flow while Taliban officials continue to be feted in capitals around the world. Terrorist organizations, through the Taliban's growing network of madrassas, are once again finding sanctuary in Afghanistan.

"The House Foreign Affairs Committee's relentless pursuit of the truth about, and accountability for, the U.S.'s disastrous evacuation, as well as the ramifications of that decision is one of the few rays of light in these dark days. Their work goes beyond condemnation and rightfully lays bare the costs and consequences of America's abandonment of our allies and indifference to our conscience in Afghanistan. The Committee's unwavering focus remains the one remaining avenue for Gold Star families, veterans, members of the resistance, and the women of Afghanistan to give voice to the voiceless."

Kelley E. Currie and Amy K. Mitchell,

Former Ambassador-at-Large and Chief of Staff, respectively, for the Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues, U.S. Department of State

American Hostages

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan has created significant peril for any American who travels to the country. The Taliban have wrongfully detained or taken hostage multiple Americans since seizing power in Afghanistan in 2021. Currently, seven Americans are held in the country, even though Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid falsely claimed in February 2024 the Taliban "don't have American prisoners in the country." [1626]

One wrongful detainee, Ryan Corbett, has been held by the Taliban since August 2022. The Taliban seized him as a prisoner for leverage against the United States when he traveled to Afghanistan to check on business he left behind. [1627]

In addition, George Glezmann has been wrongfully detained by the Taliban since December 2022. [1628] A State Department spokesperson said in June 2024, “The United States is concerned about the well-being of George Glezmann and other Americans wrongfully detained in Afghanistan and is actively working for their release.” [1629]

Some Americans have, however, been released from detainment. Safi Rauf, an Afghan American Navy reservist, and his brother Anees Khalil, a U.S. green card holder, were conducting humanitarian work in Kabul when they were taken hostage in December 2021. [1630] They were released by the Taliban in April 2022 following negotiations with the United States. [1631] Following his captivity, Mr. Rauf wrote “From Kabul, with Love,” a screenplay detailing his experiences. [1632] He explained, “The worst part of captivity is the everyday survival. Everything is very uncertain. You don’t know if you’re going to be there for the next week or the next decade. ... On the inside of your mind, you’re fighting because you can’t shake off the thought that I could spend a large part of my life in this basement, not knowing what goes on in the world. Time stopped the day I got into captivity, and it started the day I got out.” [1633]

Mark Frerichs, a Navy veteran, had been held hostage by the Haqqani Network since January 2020 — before President Biden announced his go-to-zero order. [1634] He was released in September 2022 in exchange for Bashir Noorzai, a Taliban-affiliated drug lord. [1635] Noorzai, described by the Justice Department as “a Mujahideen warlord and strong ally of the Taliban,” was found guilty in 2008 of a heroin trafficking scheme and sentenced in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York 2009 to life in prison. [1636] In the 1990s, Noorzai used his influence in southern Afghanistan to help Taliban founder Mullah Omar rise to power and used his drug money to provide the group with arms including AK-47s, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, and anti-tank weapons. [1637] Four hundred of Noorzai’s own fighters, working on behalf of the Taliban, battled the U.S.-allied Northern Alliance in Mazar-i-Sharif. The DOJ said that “in return for his financial and other support, the Taliban permitted Noorzai to continue his drug trafficking activities with impunity.” One article in February 2024 accused Noorzai of now serving as “the key conduit for growing ties between China and the Taliban,” saying Noorzai “has now gone into business with China.” [1638]

American journalist Ivor Shearer and his Afghan producer, Faizullah Faizbakhsh, were arrested without cause in August 2022 while filming in Kabul. [1639] The Taliban did not release Shearer until December 2022. [1640] Faizbakhsh was not released until January 2023. [1641] Mr. Price characterized the Taliban’s release of these two Americans as a “goodwill gesture.” [1642] He added the administration advocated “for the immediate release of any U.S. nationals detained in Afghanistan.” [1643]

U.S. Humanitarian Assistance for Afghanistan

“The Taliban have not met any of the commitments they said they were going to meet when they took over and not just the way they’re treating women and girls, the way they’re managing their own economy, the way they’re taking care of their own people. We are in no position, nor will we be, to recognize the Taliban as the official governance of Afghanistan.”

— White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby, May 28, 2024 [1644]

Since the Biden-Harris administration’s withdrawal, the United States has struggled with the impossible balance of holding the Taliban accountable for their human rights transgressions, ensuring the international community maintains a policy of nonrecognition, and supporting the humanitarian needs of a starving and beleaguered Afghan population now under Taliban rule.

The Taliban have caused a monumental humanitarian crisis. By the end of 2023, 69% of the population lacked access to basic items, utilities, and essential services. [1645] Since August 2021, the U.S. has appropriated at least \$3 billion in humanitarian aid and development assistance to meet these needs. Although the United States remains the largest donor to Afghanistan, hundreds of millions of dollars have also flowed into Afghanistan since the withdrawal from the UN and elsewhere. [1646]

Pursuant to its mission priorities in Afghanistan, the State Department is engaged in a variety of programming centered around improving conditions for women and girls, counter-narcotic drug interdictions and rehabilitation, supporting civil society, and removing explosives left over from decades of war in Afghanistan. [1647] While these programs are meant to help support vulnerable Afghan people, the Biden-Harris administration’s withdrawal handicapped the United States’ ability to do so effectively and transparently.

U.S. APPROPRIATIONS FOR AFGHANISTAN ASSISTANCE				
OCTOBER 1, 2021, TO JUNE 30, 2024 (\$ MILLIONS)				
Funding Category	FY 2022	FY 2023	FY 2024	Total
Humanitarian	\$1,077.69	\$656.20	\$358.46	\$2,092.35
Development	217.76	185.85	54.99	458.59
Agency Operations	229.19	57.44	29.77	316.40
Security	100.00	0.00	0.00	100.00
Total	\$1,624.65	\$899.49	\$443.21	\$2,967.34

Source: SIGAR, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, 6/30/2024, Appendix A.

As a result of the withdrawal, the U.S. no longer has a presence on the ground in Afghanistan and therefore, all humanitarian aid must be implemented via third-party actors such as international organizations and non-governmental organizations. [1648] Given the State Department has no presence in country, this process has contributed to difficulties overseeing U.S. programming and the utilization of U.S. funds in Afghanistan. U.S. policymakers have been placed in an impossible position: support vulnerable Afghan people without supporting the Taliban.

As a condition for operating and providing aid in Afghanistan, the Taliban often require partner NGOs to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). [1649] These MOUs allow the Taliban to exert a degree of control over implementing partners and their humanitarian activities. [1650] In addition, the Taliban charge taxes, fees, duties, and utilities on NGOs operating in the country, meaning U.S. taxpayer dollars end up in the hands of terrorists. [1651] According to a May 2024 SIGAR report, \$10.9 million in U.S. taxpayer dollars has been paid to the Taliban in the form of taxes, fees, duties, and utilities since 2021. [1652]

Unsurprisingly, Taliban officials routinely interfere with aid delivery in Afghanistan. The May 2024 SIGAR report found that U.S. partners are pressured to hire Taliban allies, contract with Taliban-affiliated companies, pay off Taliban officials, and divert aid to Taliban soldiers. [1653] The State Department and USAID maintain that their implementing partners are advised to halt operations if they face Taliban interference, though not all cases of Taliban interference are reported to the U.S. government. [1654]

The Doha Dialogue

The international consensus against engaging with the Taliban has weakened in recent months, with several countries including China and the United Arab Emirates extending diplomatic recognition to Taliban officials.

In 2023, UN Secretary-General António Guterres established a forum in Doha for international dialogue regarding Afghanistan. [1655] Three such dialogues have been held thus far. [1656] The Taliban were not invited to the first Doha meeting, as that meeting was meant to identify global common ground for engaging the Taliban. [1657] The Taliban were invited to a second meeting, along with the UN special envoy for Afghanistan and representatives from Afghan civil society. [1658] The Taliban declined the invitation because of those invitees, insisting it be treated as the governing authority in Afghanistan. [1659] Nonetheless, the Taliban attended the most recent meeting, entitled Doha III. [1660] The meeting was held from June 30 through July 1, 2024, under the chairmanship of United Nations Undersecretary-General for Political Affairs Rosemary DiCarlo. [1661] The agenda of this last meeting included discussion of economic development and counter-narcotics. [1662]

The United States, under the Biden-Harris administration, has not formally recognized the Taliban. But it has placed no public or reported pressure on the United Nations to distance itself from the Taliban or to focus dialogue on the Taliban’s wide-ranging human rights violations. To that point, at the demand of the Taliban, Afghan civil society, including Afghan women, were excluded from Doha III. [1663] The Biden-Harris administration again placed no genuine pressure on the United Nations to do otherwise. To the contrary, U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Tom West and U.S. Special Envoy for Afghan Women, Girls, and Human Rights Rina Amiri both attended Doha III. [1664] A State Department representative told SIGAR “the Taliban heard directly from nearly every envoy in Doha about the centrality of human rights and inclusivity to the international community.” [1665] That rationalization, however, falls short. **The Taliban’s presence — at the official exclusion of Afghan civil society, women, and other human rights defenders — at Doha III represents a willingness by the Biden-Harris administration to formally engage with the Taliban regardless of its growing oppression and human rights abuses.**

In the absence of leadership from the Biden-Harris administration, the United Nations has moved inexorably toward diplomatic recognition of the Taliban. At a UN Security Council meeting ahead of Doha III, Roza Otunbayeva, UN special representative of the secretary-general and head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), remarked that willingness to engage with the Taliban was necessary to promote policies that would “allow for their reintegration into the international community.” [1666]

Afghanistan SIV Policy and Developments

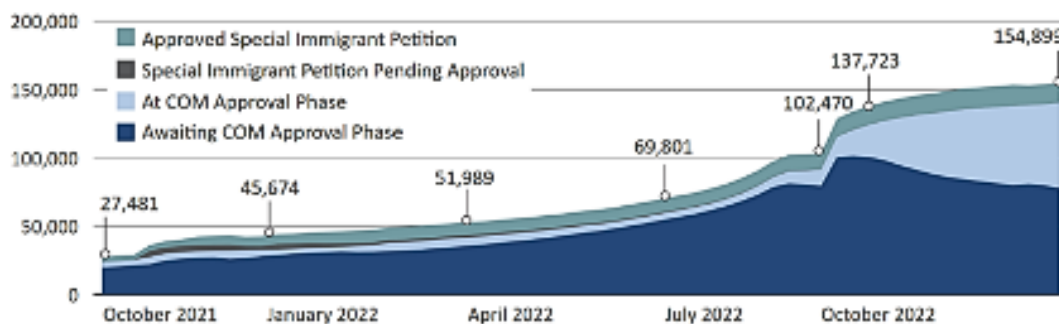
As previously discussed, the State Department experienced significant delays in processing Afghan SIV applications in the critical period following President Biden’s go-to-zero order. That delay has continued in the years following the withdrawal. SIVs are intended to be available to those who worked for the U.S. military or its contractors to support its mission. And, according to congressional mandate, SIV applications must be adjudicated in nine months. [1667] But the reality was many multiples of that, at a time when speed meant life or death.

The issue was predictable and avoidable. On May 18, 2021, a bipartisan group of senators wrote to President Biden “to express [their] support and commitment to the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program for Afghans” and to express their deep concern “about the fate of these individuals after the departure of U.S. troops.” [1668] Those senators called on President Biden to take a series of concrete measures to ensure sufficient and expedited capability to safely process Afghan SIV applications. [1669]

They “echo[ed] the sentiments of the late Senator John McCain,” sentiments this committee also holds, that “it would be unconscionable to abandon these brave individuals who are now in danger for their service to the United States’ mission in Afghanistan.” [1670] **House Foreign Affairs Oversight Subcommittee Chairman Brian Mast (R-Fla.)** said at the time, “To put it very bluntly none of us want to see one of those individuals that have worked with us have their head cut off on the internet. That’s a real threat. That’s not hyperbolic.” [1671]

Despite the urging of this committee, a bipartisan coalition of senators, and the media, the Biden-Harris administration did very little to further expedite SIV processing even as the number of applications skyrocketed in August 2021. As reported by the State Department inspector general, the backlog of Afghan SIV applications significantly swelled between October 2021 and October 2022. [1672]

Figure 8: Backlog of Afghan SIV Principal Applications



Source: Generated by OIG from the Department’s Office of Management Strategy and Solutions’ Afghan SIV applicant data provided from October 2021 through December 2022.

That was due to the Afghan SIV Unit “maintain[ing] essentially the same staffing level for more than 15 months between August 2021 and November 2022, despite the significant increase in applications awaiting COM approval.” [1673] The State Department inspector general found “the number of Afghan SIV principal applicants awaiting COM approval increased by 1,416% from October 2021 through December 2022, from 4,029 to 61,114, respectively.” [1674] There were 154,899 principal SIV applications in process and an estimated 650,576 additional eligible family members of those principal SIV applicants by the end of December 2022, according to the State Department, for a total of roughly 805,475 estimated Afghan SIV applicants. [1675]

The State Department inspector general found **“the number of Afghan SIV principal applicants awaiting COM approval increased by 1,416% from October 2021 through December 2022, from 4,029 to 61,114, respectively.”**

This report previously introduced the Defense Department’s Project Rabbit, which was started in 2021 as the department’s initial effort to assist the State Department with verifying the employment of Afghan SIV applicants who worked for a Defense Department contractor or sub-contractor. In 2023, the State Department inspector general assessed the viability of the program and concluded that, although Project Rabbit “has increased the number of employment verifications used to process SIV applications, the management of the portal moving forward ... remains unclear.” [1676] This was because Defense Department officials “stated that they intended to transition management” of Project Rabbit to the State Department, but the Pentagon and the State Department “had not established an official agreement regarding the path forward for Project Rabbit.” [1677] The inspector general concluded the State Department’s Afghan SIV program “faces challenges” and leveled criticism at the State Department, warning it had “not developed and implemented a strategic performance management approach to resolving the Afghan SIV applicant backlog or to developing methods to further improve the Afghan SIV program.” [1678]

SIV applicants are generally not able to enter the United States until they have received their visas or have been granted other alternative and temporary pathways, such as humanitarian parole. For that reason, the Biden-Harris administration’s SIV processing delays have been a matter of life or death.

In an attempt to address this problem, the State Department established the office of the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts (CARE), within the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs (SCA). [1679] The State Department inspector general found that, from October 2021 to February 2023, CARE “facilitated the relocation of 8,950 SIV applicants from Afghanistan for continued Afghan SIV processing.” [1680] State Department officials told their inspector general “one of the biggest challenges to SIV applicants departing Afghanistan is the lack of freedom of movement out of Afghanistan, which is dependent on Taliban cooperation.” [1681] In 2023, the Association of Wartime Allies concluded, **“The most current data released by Department of State shows a dire situation, with the most current U.S. government data suggesting an SIV relocation pace that is at an alarming and unacceptable rate needing more than 31 years to process.”** [1682]

Despite time running out for America's Afghan allies, in May 2022 Secretary Blinken sought court relief from his congressional and court-ordered processing timelines of Afghan SIVs. The case, *Afghan & Iraqi Allies v. Blinken*, stemmed from an earlier suit under the prior administration, regarding SIV processing timelines. [1683] In that case, the plaintiffs reached a settlement with the government in May 2020, approved in June, with the State Department agreeing to meet certain processing timelines, along with other requirements. [1684]

The Biden-Harris administration did not hold to the promise made by the prior administration and, following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, Secretary Blinken moved to vacate that court-ordered settlement before the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia in May 2022. [1685] In light of the Biden-Harris Administration's hasty withdrawal, he argued the State Department's SIV processing delays were now. [1686] With thousands of allies abandoned in Afghanistan, he further argued the State Department's resources were better allocated to issues in Iraq, the crisis in Ukraine, civil war in Ethiopia, COVID-19 visa backlogs, and a lack of consular services in Moscow. [1687] The D.C. District Court permitted certain modifications to the existing timeline but denied Secretary Blinken's request to have free reign to decide what the appropriate processing schedule should be. It held that changed circumstances do not permit the government "to abandon its reporting or explanation obligations." [1688] Further, it found that, in certain ways, the Department's SIV processing delays had only become more unreasonable, explaining, "The conditions for [Afghan SIV applicants] and their families have become increasingly desperate and dangerous." [1689]

Secretary Blinken, rather than accepting this mandate to promptly process Afghan SIV applications, appealed the decision to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit — using resources to litigate his case that he argued were too strained to aid Afghan allies. On June 7, 2024, the D.C. Circuit affirmed the District Court's decision, again denying Secretary Blinken's request. [1690] In so doing, the Circuit Court emphasized that some Afghan SIV applicants, whose applications were pending for over nine months as of May 2020, still had not been fully adjudicated. It concluded the District Court did not err and the State Department's prior delays are not excused by change in circumstance. [1691] In short, the D.C. Circuit thoroughly rebuked Secretary Blinken's two-year legal battle to escape his responsibilities to process Afghan SIV applications in a timely manner.

The Biden-Harris administration's secretary of state did not prepare for the U.S. withdrawal following President Biden's go-to-zero order, instead allowing delays in the SIV program to persist and grow. Then, following the catastrophic withdrawal and subsequent evacuation, while Afghan allies suffered under Taliban persecution, Secretary Blinken went to court for relief from his legal obligations.

His argument was that the very same crisis he helped the administration create now hindered him from doing his job and that his resources were better spent on other crises. The U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia and the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit rejected those arguments, as does the committee majority.

Counterterrorism Capabilities

From the inception of the United States' presence in Afghanistan, a primary goal has been to incapacitate terrorist groups seeking haven in the region, particularly with the Taliban's assent. President Biden, however, consistently disregarded military advice that America's counterterrorism mission could be advanced through a small remaining force. Rather than mitigate the loss of U.S. forces in the region, his administration failed to plan for alternative methods of countering terrorism following the withdrawal. Terrorism, as a result, has flourished under the Biden-Harris administration.

President George W. Bush first authorized "strikes against al Qaeda terrorist training camps and military installations of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan" on October 7, 2001, following the September 11th terrorist attacks that killed nearly 3,000 Americans. As described by President Bush, the aim of U.S. presence in the region was "to disrupt the use of Afghanistan as a terrorist base of operations, and to attack the military capability of the Taliban regime," which was widely assessed to be providing sanctuary for al Qaeda. [1692]

Nearly eight years later, President Obama similarly spoke of the terrorist threat in Afghanistan. In an August 2009 speech, President Obama characterized it as a "war of necessity ... fundamental to the defense of our people." [1693] According to President Obama, "If left unchecked, the Taliban insurgency will mean an even larger safe haven from which al Qaeda would plot to kill more Americans." [1694] President Trump, later, as a precondition for withdrawing U.S. troops, mandated the Taliban abide by an "ongoing commitment to prevent any international terrorist groups or individuals, including al-Qa'ida." [1695]

For two decades, U.S. forces and operations in Afghanistan fought to counter and defeat terrorist groups that sought and found refuge under the Taliban. [1696] The Biden-Harris administration pushed that mission aside with its decision to unconditionally withdraw from Afghanistan — to the detriment of the American people and the sacrifices of U.S. servicemembers.

In July 2021, President Biden falsely claimed al Qaeda had been defeated in Afghanistan. [1697] Yet numerous experts in his administration — including General Milley, General McKenzie, and General Miller — counseled him that the threat posed by al Qaeda in Afghanistan remained, as did core elements of its leadership structure. [1698] Al Qaeda's existence is thanks, in part, to support from the Taliban — the very regime President Biden asked the Afghan government to cede power to throughout 2021. [1699] In April 2021 — the same month as President Biden's go-to-zero order — the UN issued a report noting evidence that the Taliban continued to associate with al Qaeda, and terrorist groups continued to operate freely in Afghanistan, particularly in Taliban-controlled areas. [1700]

President Biden was also advised that a small-scale counterterrorism advisory force would mitigate known gaps in the ANDSF, presenting a path to longer-term counterterrorism success.[1701] President Biden neither communicated that fact to the public, nor heeded its wisdom. According to his national security experts, there were other options post-withdrawal, such as counterterrorism basing arrangements with nearby allies, which would facilitate ISR operations and thereby protect against a resurgent al Qaeda and ISIS-K. Unfortunately, due to the administration's failure to plan for all contingencies, counterterrorism basing arrangements were not prepared. At the State Department, Counselor Chollet was responsible for securing such basing arrangements and ensuring the U.S. had the requisite resources and agreements to continue effectuating counterterrorism operations.[1702] When asked by the committee if concrete plans for a counterterrorism capacity post-withdrawal were completed by August 2021, Counselor Chollet conceded they had yet to be finalized, stating instead they were "underway." [1703]

Today, the entrenchment of the Haqqani Network in the Taliban regime and the presence of ISIS-K in Afghanistan point to the continued terrorist threat emanating from Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. [1704] Even without accounting for al Qaeda, the terrorist threat flowing from Afghanistan has grown, with increased threat levels throughout Europe, as evidenced by ISIS-K's significant terrorist attacks — including the attack on Crocus City Hall in Moscow on March 22, 2024. [1705]

Meanwhile, without a presence in Afghanistan, the United States is ill-positioned to counter the rise in terrorism in Afghanistan. DIA Director Lieutenant General Scott Berrier acknowledged in September 2021 the Biden-Harris withdrawal made it harder to conduct counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan. [1706] FBI Director Christopher Wray similarly testified in September 2021 he was worried the withdrawal from Afghanistan could lead to an attack on the United States, given the increased potential for a terrorist attack in the U.S. inspired by the Taliban victory. [1707]

According to General McKenzie, intelligence-gathering capacity has dramatically declined since the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan. [1708] Furthermore, CENTCOM Commander General Michael Kurilla testified in 2023 the degradation in intelligence gathering capacity in Afghanistan has meant “the DoD currently lacks the granularity to see the full picture.” [1709] Most recently, in March 2024, General Kurilla agreed Afghanistan is a hotbed for terrorism and the U.S. has limited insights into Afghanistan due to the withdrawal. [1710] In an April 2024 interview, Dave Pitts, a former CIA operational leader in Afghanistan in 2021, stressed the current limits on the United States’ ability to monitor ISIS-K. He contrasted the current limits with the effective monitoring and campaign against ISIS-K by the United States, NATO, and the ANDSF prior to President Biden’s withdrawal. [1711] While the United States’ available intelligence and counterterrorism capabilities have significantly diminished, terrorist groups have proliferated in Afghanistan under a permissive Taliban regime.

Taliban Enablement of Al Qaeda

Al Qaeda presents one of, if not the largest threat from Afghanistan following the Biden-Harris administration’s withdrawal. In September 2021, DIA Director Berrier said “the current assessment — probably conservatively — is one to two years for al Qaeda to build some capability to at least threaten the homeland.” [1712] This sobering assessment was echoed by Deputy CIA Director David Cohen, who said that “the one- to two-year timeline sounds about right.” [1713]

In September 2022, the National Intelligence Council released an assessment on the “Prospects for al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Globally Through 2024.” [1714] That assessment asserted, “[A]l-Qaeda probably will prioritize preserving its sanctuary over conducting operational activity in Afghanistan during the next two years.” [1715] The assessment added that al Qaeda’s “trajectory in Afghanistan will continue to depend on Taliban will and ability to enforce restrictions; the conditions in Afghanistan relative to other geographic areas, including perceived CT pressure; and al-Qaeda’s leadership focus.” [1716]

Following General McKenzie’s retirement from CENTCOM, General Michael Kurilla took command in April 2022. Testifying before Congress in 2024, General Kurilla stated, “Al-Qaeda, while weakened, still enjoys safe havens in Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent operates training camps, safehouses, and religious schools in Afghanistan.” [1717] General Kurilla added al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) continues “to call for lone wolf attacks on U.S. and Western interests via their global digital reach.” [1718]

Later that month, General Kurilla reiterated, “We do see the Taliban as harboring al Qaeda.” [1719] General Kurilla, when specifically asked about President Biden’s statement claiming al Qaeda was eradicated, refuted it, again saying, “I do see al Qaeda and ISIS-K inside of Afghanistan.” [1720] Public reporting has further suggested al Qaeda is “raking in tens of millions of dollars a week from gold mines in Afghanistan’s northern Badakhshan and Takhar province,” while the Taliban “are once again providing al Qaeda commanders and operatives with everything they need, from weapons to wives, housing, passports, and access to the vast smuggling network.” [1721]

By July 2022, al Qaeda had grown under Taliban sanctuary into a threat that required American intervention. That month, the United States carried out a successful strike against Ayman al-Zawahiri — Osama bin Laden’s longtime number two and ultimate successor — in Kabul. [1722] The UN Sanctions Monitoring Team noted that al-Zawahiri’s “apparent increased comfort and ability to communicate has coincided with the Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan and the consolidation of power of key Al-Qaida allies within their de facto administration.” [1723] Following the strike, Rear Admiral Kirby admitted the Taliban’s protection of al-Zawahiri “was a violation of the Doha Agreement.” [1724] Rear Admiral Kirby further acknowledged that “Mr. Zawahiri ... was actively encouraging his followers to plot and plan attacks against American interest in the American homeland.” [1725] **In response to the strike, General McKenzie warned in August 2022, “The fact that al Qaeda leader Al-Zawahiri was in downtown Kabul should give us pause. It tells you first of all, that the Taliban obviously negotiated the Doha accord in complete bad faith. They said they wouldn’t provide a safe haven for al Qaeda. What’s the definition of a safe haven if it’s not the leader in your capital city?”** [1726]

Confirmation of continued Taliban linkage with al Qaeda has come from several sources. The DIA confirmed in March 2023 “the Taliban maintained its decades-long ties to al-Qaeda and had not expelled legacy al-Qaeda members from Afghanistan.” [1727] The UN assessed in June 2023 that between 30 to 60 “core members” and hundreds of al Qaeda fighters remained active in Taliban-run Afghanistan. [1728] Many of these al Qaeda members have received official appointments, or otherwise advised, the Taliban regime. There is also evidence al Qaeda fighters have been benefiting financially from the Taliban’s monthly “welfare payments” system. [1729]

By January 2024, al Qaeda significantly expanded operations in Afghanistan, thanks to the support and permissive operating environment provided by the Taliban. Al Qaeda had “up to eight new training camps in Afghanistan” as well as at least five madrasas along with “a new base to stockpile weaponry.” [1730]

The UN noted the terrorist group “maintains safe houses to facilitate the movement between Afghanistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran.” [1731]

A May 2024 report from the U.S. Institute for Peace (USIP) Senior Study Group on Counterterrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan concluded, “The Taliban’s policies in Afghanistan are the main generator of opportunities for terrorist groups in the region.” [1732] The USIP Senior Study Group found “the Taliban are providing sanctuary to groups designated as terrorists” by the U.S. and the UN despite their pledge to the contrary, and added these terrorist groups “seek to work with the Taliban in Afghanistan and have pledged allegiance to the Taliban’s supreme leader.” [1733] Further, the USIP Senior Study Group concluded the Taliban’s victory over the United States “has motivated Taliban allies to engage in long-term campaigns against their respective adversaries” and serves as “an inspiration for terrorist groups not just in Afghanistan but also beyond.” [1734] Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas similarly testified in November 2022 that both al Qaeda and ISIS-K “have continued to celebrate perceived victories over the United States pointing to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on their anniversaries and the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan to encourage the use of violence by their supporters.” [1735]

The Taliban has established 6,836 madrassas for men and 380 madrassas for women as of April 2024. [1736] These madrassas, especially those explicitly designated as “jihadi madrassas,” enable the Taliban to promote their own extremist religious ideology. [1737] The USIP Senior Study Group warned in 2024 that the expansion of these Taliban-led madrassas might spark increased global terrorism. [1738] Retired Lieutenant General and former National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster testified before the committee, “**When terrorists gain control of havens and support bases they become orders of magnitude more dangerous. We know this from September 11, the most devastating terrorist attack in history, and we know it from the rise of ISIS.**” [1739]

While America’s campaign in Afghanistan began against al Qaeda and the Taliban, a new threat eventually emerged: the Islamic State’s Khorasan Province affiliate, also referred to as ISIS-K. Created shortly after the rise of ISIS around 2014, ISIS-K was formed by former Pakistani Taliban fighters who both contested the Taliban’s power and also sought to dispel U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan. [1740] ISIS-K certainly does not live up to the adage that says “the enemy of my enemy is friend.” Moreover, the Taliban’s rivalry with ISIS-K has proven to be insufficient to contain the group’s growth. The chaotic withdrawal — punctuated both by the breakout from the prison at Bagram Air Base and the ISIS-K suicide attack on August 26th — created a power vacuum allowing ISIS-K to build strength. In so doing, ISIS-K has proven to be one of the more capable ISIS affiliates with regard to external operations.

The Haqqani faction of the Taliban reportedly maintains a close relationship with ISIS-K. According to the UN Sanctions Monitoring Report, “The Taliban remained divided to some extent over approaches in dealing with both [ISIS-K] and communities sympathetic to it.” [1741] The terrorist landscape in Afghanistan is such that divisions between groups are seldom “black and white,” and the Haqqani faction and ISIS-K have become “intertwined and interconnected” through a variety of points, including “marriage ties[, which] ensure ideological separations do not cause permanent fault lines.” [1742] Indeed, the leader of ISIS-K, Shahab al-Muhajir, reportedly previously served as a midlevel Haqqani commander.[1743]

Despite ISIS-K’s rapid growth, the United States has not seemed to find an effective deterrent. The Biden-Harris administration has not conducted a single strike against ISIS-K since 2021, which stands in stark contrast to the 313 operations carried out by CENTCOM against ISIS in Iraq and Syria in 2022. [1744] In March 2022, General McKenzie issued a warning, saying, “Absent sustained [counterterrorism] pressure, ISIS-K may gain strength and be emboldened to expand its operations and target neighboring countries.” [1745] He added, “ISIS-K could establish an external attack capability against the United States and our allies in twelve to eighteen months, but possibly sooner if the group experiences unanticipated gains in Afghanistan.” [1746]

ISIS-K has carried out several attacks since the fall of Kabul. These have included a suicide bombing at a Kabul military hospital, [1747] a suicide bombing outside the Russian embassy in Kabul, [1748] an attack on the Pakistani embassy in Kabul, [1749] and an attack on the China Town Kabul hotel. [1750] In April 2023, a leaked Department of Defense assessment reported in the press found Afghanistan had “become a significant coordination site” for ISIS-K planning attacks in Europe and Asia and for conducting “aspirational plotting” against the United States. [1751] The assessment revealed ISIS-K attack planning centered on “specific efforts to target embassies, churches, business centers and the FIFA World Cup soccer tournament” and that there were at least 15 such plots by February 2023. [1752]

ISIS-K’s growth and threat have continued into 2024. In February 2024, the Treasury Department assessed, “ISIS-K in Afghanistan remains an important and powerful affiliate due to its role as a regional hub, transferring hundreds of thousands of dollars to financial facilitators as well as providing personnel and weapons to support external operations.” [1753] The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) reported in March 2024 that ISIS-K continues to carry out deadly attacks inside Afghanistan as well as outside the country. [1754] Similarly, the Washington Institute assessed in March 2024, “In the past year, [ISIS-K] has planned twenty-one external plots or attacks in nine countries, compared to eight plots or attacks in the previous year and just three between 2018 and March 2022.” [1755] The assessment concluded, “This trend undermines the Taliban’s repeated claims that it would prevent transnational terrorist threats emanating from its territory.” [1756]

In his March 2024 testimony before Congress, General Kurilla also made clear the Taliban “has shown neither the capability nor the intent to sustain adequate counterterrorism pressure” against ISIS-K, saying, **“In fact, this lack of sustained pressure allowed ISIS-K to regenerate and harden their networks, creating multiple redundant nodes that direct, enable, and inspire attack.”** [1757] General Kurilla made clear he did not expect that dynamic to change. [1758] He explained ISIS-K has “leveraged poor economic conditions, lax governance in Afghanistan, and a sophisticated network to recruit, train, and sustain an expanding cadre of fighters.” [1759] General Kurilla noted the ISIS-K 2024 attack in Iran — which killed 91 Iranians and injured 284 others — along with multiple bombings in Pakistan in 2023 as demonstrating the group’s increased capabilities. [1760]

In early April 2024, FBI Director Wray warned, “The foreign terrorist threat and the potential for a coordinated attack here in the homeland, like the ISIS-K attack we saw at the Russia Concert Hall a couple weeks ago, is now increasingly concerning.” [1761] His warning echoed the sentiments of Ambassador Ian McCary, the U.S. deputy special envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, who stated in March 2024 that ISIS-K “poses a clear external threat.” [1762] Ambassador McCary assessed, “The Taliban have made progress combatting ISIS-K, but they have struggled to dismantle ISIS-K’s clandestine urban cells and prevent attacks on soft targets.” [1763] He noted combating ISIS-K is “a lot more complicated with the Taliban in power. They are not a counterterrorism partner of ours. It makes everything a bit more challenging.” [1764] The Taliban, meanwhile, falsely claim they have eliminated the threat of ISIS-K in Afghanistan. [1765]

ISIS at the Southern Border

The Biden-Harris administration’s withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, when coupled with its longstanding lax border security, has increased the security risk and threat levels inside United States. Indeed, it is known that hundreds of ISIS-affiliates have crossed the border, with only a fraction of them detained.

As an initial matter, the Biden-Harris administration has not implemented sufficient tools to prevent terrorists crossing the southern border. A Department of Homeland Security inspector general report released on June 7, 2024, found, “The Department of Homeland Security’s technology, procedures, and coordination were not fully effective to screen and vet non-citizens applying for admission into the United States or asylum seekers whose asylum applications were pending for an extended period.” [1766] The report warned that if the proper measures were not taken, “DHS will remain at risk of admitting dangerous persons into the country or enabling asylum seekers who may pose significant threats to public safety and national security to continue to reside in the United States.” [1767]

In June 2024, the Department of Homeland Security identified over 400 persons of interest from Central Asia who had illegally crossed the U.S. southern border with the help of an ISIS-related smuggling network. [1768] Reportedly, the U.S. arrested over 150 of these individuals, while many remain at large. [1769] Earlier that month, on June 11, 2024, the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force arrested eight individuals across Los Angeles, New York, and Philadelphia with ties to ISIS-K who had similarly entered the U.S. illegally through the southern border. [1770] These arrests, according to analysis by FDD's Long War Journal, underscore the possibility that ISIS-K members "who have infiltrated the Taliban's security apparatus have now tapped into a vast network of Tajik Islamists to expand the group's operational capacity beyond Central Asia and the Middle East." [1771]

Although terrorists have long sought to exploit weaknesses at the United States' southern border, the Afghanistan withdrawal prompted a wave of new threats over which the U.S. lacks adequate intelligence. On June 4, 2024, just a week before the arrests, FBI Director Wray testified before Congress, saying, "Certainly, we have seen over the last five to six years an increase in the number of known or suspected terrorists, in other words, watch-listed subjects attempting to cross the border." [1772] **The issue, Director Wray explained, was that as of late, the intelligence community does not have access to enough derogatory information about these individuals of concern, and he pointed specifically to the withdrawal from Afghanistan as impeding the intelligence community's ability to vet and watch-list potential threats.** [1773] The United States is currently under a "heightened threat environment," following the arrests of the eight ISIS-K affiliated individuals. [1774] The withdrawal from Afghanistan poured fuel on the fire of the Biden-Harris administration's failed border policies, creating this heightened domestic risk.

The TTP, Pakistan, and Afghanistan

Pakistan has suffered from a significant increase in terrorist attacks since the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. [1775] Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP), known as the Pakistani Taliban, have expanded considerably since 2021. According to USIP's Senior Study Group on Counterterrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan, TTP is the largest single terrorist organization inside Afghanistan, [1776] where most of its capabilities and leadership reside. [1777] Indeed, the TTP continue to receive significant support from the Afghan Taliban, as well as al Qaeda and their affiliates, as they conduct an increasing number of attacks against Pakistan. [1778] This includes permissive sanctuary space to conduct and recruit for external operations, as well as access to leftover weapons and equipment from the former Afghan government's security forces. [1779] According to the Global Terrorism Index, 2023 was the most active year for TTP attacks in a decade. [1780]

In December 2022, General Kurilla stated, “We are concerned by the threats posed by Tehreek-e-Taliban-Pakistan to Pakistani security and stability.”[1781]

The TTP and the Afghan Taliban have long maintained a mutually beneficial relationship. [1782] In addition to both receiving support from al Qaeda and its affiliates, the two are underpinned by similar ideologies and long-term objectives. Much like the Afghan Taliban, the TTP also seek to take control over Pakistan and subject the country to a strict interpretation of Sharia law. [1783] Despite public claims to the contrary, the Afghan Taliban are unlikely to restrain TTP activities within Afghanistan given the extent of TTP support they received during the insurgency, particularly from 2007 to 2013. [1784]

General Kurilla has raised the alarm about the risk posed by the TTP, calling out the Taliban for harboring the TTP and warning “the Taliban’s inability, or unwillingness, to rein in violent extremist organizations could destabilize Central and South Asia.” [1785] This assessment has been backed up by a January 2024 UN report in which the monitoring team notes the TTP pose “a regional threat in South and Central Asia,” and several of their attacks were “being supported from within Afghanistan.” [1786] The UN report detailed the extent to which the Pakistani Taliban were being supported by the Taliban and its al Qaeda allies, saying, “Besides supplying weapons and equipment, Taliban rank and file, Al-Qaeda core, and AQIS fighters assisted TTP forces in cross-border attacks. ... Some Taliban members also joined TTP, perceiving a religious obligation to provide support. Interlocutors reported that TTP members and their families receive regular aid packages from the Taliban. ... Al-Qaeda core and AQIS continue to provide training, ideological guidance, and support to TTP. ... With the consent of senior al Qaeda leaders, AQIS selected approximately 15 commanders to assist TTP with attacks in Pakistan.” [1787]

Emboldening the Axis of Evil

The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal not only increased the terrorist threat emanating from Afghanistan, but also emboldened America’s adversaries, including Russia, China, Iran, and their proxies. The manner in which the Biden-Harris administration abandoned Afghanistan projected weakness, signaling to America’s allies and adversaries that the United States would cower in the face of threats.

The Biden-Harris administration has repeatedly justified its withdrawal by referencing a zero-sum argument, claiming that to prepare for the United States’ rivals and challenges around the world, it purportedly needed to repurpose resources dedicated to Afghanistan. For example, President Biden stated that “there’s nothing China or Russia would rather have” than for the United States to remain involved in Afghanistan. [1788] But that belief is little more than ex post justification and is not grounded in evidence, nor does it relate to the manner with which the withdrawal was executed.

Testifying before the committee, former National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster asserted that he did not share President Biden's view and said that Russia and China "are both very happy that we got out." [1789] Indeed, this narrative is based on the flawed assumption that Americas' adversaries only assess American strength in terms of percentage of committed resources, and not in terms of more nebulous concepts such as resolve, principle, and willingness to engage. By relying on this dangerous zero-sum narrative, the Biden-Harris administration signaled to our adversaries the United States military did not have either the ability or the will to compete on multiple fronts at the same time, a revelation that may have fueled Russian willingness to invade Ukraine, Iranian willingness to support its proxies in their war with Israel, and an increasingly aggressive China toward Taiwan.

Unsurprisingly, the Biden-Harris administration's justification only fed into perceptions of the United States as a weak and unreliable ally. Ivo Daalder, a former U.S. Ambassador to NATO, said a few days after President Biden's April 2021 announcement that "Moscow and Beijing will look closely at how we react in one situation to set the stage for the other" and argued that "we need greater strategic clarity on what we would do if Russia moved militarily against Ukraine, or China on Taiwan." [1790] In September 2021, General Milley testified before Congress, saying, "I think that our credibility with allies and partners around the world, and with adversaries, is being intensely reviewed by them to see which way this is going to go, and I think that 'damage' is one word that could be used, yes." [1791]

As a result of faltering U.S. standing, America's partners and allies in the Middle East and Central Asia are increasingly turning to Russia and China as alternative security suppliers. Since 2021, the region has also moved toward normalizing relations with U.S. adversaries like the Ayatollah in Iran and Bashar al-Assad in Syria, both of whom are working alongside Russia with an overt goal of diminishing American presence in the region and beyond. The United States withdrawal from Afghanistan strengthened the ambitions of America's adversaries of claiming newfound geopolitical clout in contested regions around the globe.

Russia

On his first day as secretary of state, Secretary Blinken asserted, "The world is watching us intently right now. ... They want to see whether we will lead with the power of our example and if we will put a premium on diplomacy with our allies and partners to meet the great challenges of our time — like the ... danger to our security and global stability posed by our rivals and adversaries." [1792] A few months later, the world, particularly America's adversaries, watched the United States willingly turn over Afghanistan to the Taliban, subjecting its allies after two decades of partnership to the mercy of the terrorist group.

During the August 2021 NEO, Russian commentators and pundits took to the media to connect the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan to Ukraine. [1793] Andrey Kortunov, the director general of the Kremlin-backed Russian International Affairs Council, went on CNN on August 22, 2021, to warn Ukraine that it could not trust U.S. commitments following the Taliban takeover. [1794] An adviser to Ukrainian President Zelensky, Andrew Mac, echoed these concerns at the conclusion of August 2021, saying, “The situation in Afghanistan seems to indicate a realignment of U.S. global commitments, and President Zelensky wants to hear from President Biden where Ukraine fits in.” [1795] General Milley addressed these concerns in the months following the NEO, acknowledging that enemies of the United States may have perceived the withdrawal from Afghanistan as a sign of weakness. [1796]

Ahead of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, former U.S. government officials from multiple administrations further confirmed the Biden-Harris administration’s withdrawal from Afghanistan emboldened President Putin. Kurt Volker, the U.S. special representative for Ukraine negotiations under President Trump, asserted, “A decision that was made here in the U.S. to withdraw abruptly, where everyone was advising that the Afghan government would collapse if we did that, yet we did it anyway.” He claimed the unconditional withdrawal created “a damaging image for the United States in the world — that we lack resolve and that we lack the stomach to follow through, and that we will not stand with allies. And that in turn has given encouragement to ... Putin concerning Ukraine.” [1797] Michael Vickers, the undersecretary of defense for intelligence under President Obama, also suggested “our defeat in Afghanistan in August 2021 no doubt convinced Putin that our resolve to counter his aggression had weakened.” [1798]

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, General Tod Wolters, commander of U.S. European Command, testified that President Putin “was attempting to take advantage of fissures that could have appeared in NATO as a result of the post-Afghanistan environment.” [1799] Former leaders of NATO countries and other European nations made similar connections between the Biden-Harris administration’s abandonment of Afghanistan and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Former French President Francois Hollande claimed that President Biden’s disaster in Afghanistan encouraged Putin to invade Ukraine, and former Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt asserted the “Kremlin certainly took note” of the withdrawal from Afghanistan, which “demonstrated that the U.S. might not have the staying power or the strategic patience that is necessary.” [1800]

The CCP and the Taliban

Predictably, China and its Chinese Community Party (CCP) — sharing a 57-mile border with Afghanistan — exploited the fall of Kabul for personal gain. [1801] The United States witnessed widespread Chinese propaganda questioning America’s commitment to upholding Taiwan’s security in the wake of the withdrawal. [1802] Further, the CCP has since secured economic ties to the Taliban, aiming to exploit the resource-rich nation.

The Defense Department’s annual China Military Power Report in November 2022 concluded the CCP used the U.S. debacle in Afghanistan to undermine U.S. alliances as it turned its sights on Taiwan. [1803] According to the report, “PRC officials and state media outlets also repeatedly condemned the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and cited the withdrawal as evidence that the U.S. is an unreliable partner and declining power.” [1804] On the second anniversary of the withdrawal, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin stated, “On this date two years ago, the whole world witnessed the ‘Kabul moment’ when the US hastily withdrew its troops from Afghanistan. ... What happened in Afghanistan marked a military, political and counter-terrorism failure of the US in Afghanistan.” [1805]

“On this date two years ago, the whole world witnessed the ‘Kabul moment’ when the US hastily withdrew its troops from Afghanistan. ... What happened in Afghanistan marked a military, political and counter-terrorism failure of the US in Afghanistan.”

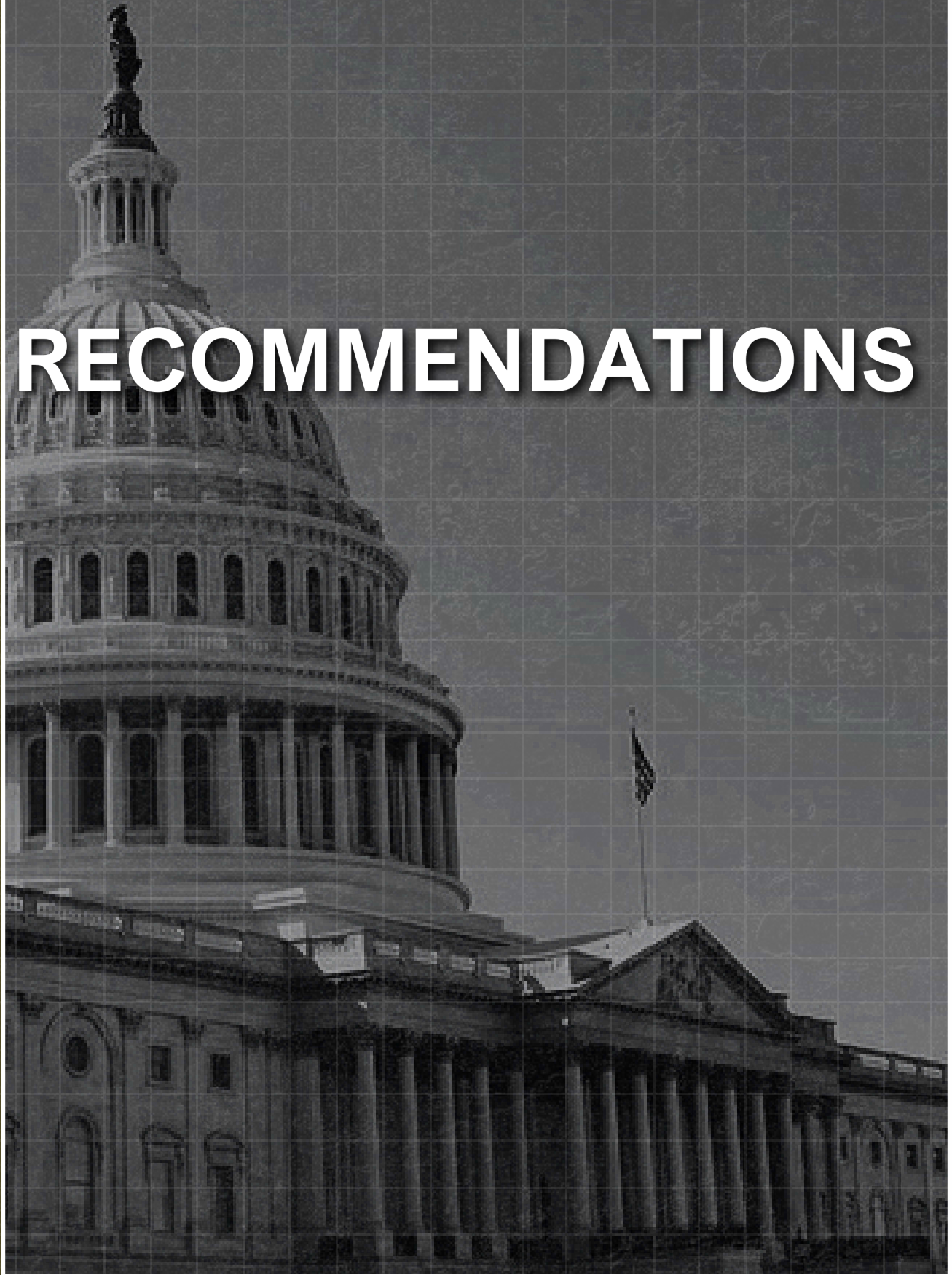
— Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin



Not only has China leveraged the withdrawal to pursue its ambitions over Taiwan, but it has also gained an economic foothold in Afghanistan. In October 2023, the Taliban publicly stated it wanted to join the CCP’s Belt and Road initiative — a manipulative tool of economic coercion that employs debt-trap diplomacy to ensnare nations under China’s influence. [1806] The State Department told SIGAR in early 2024 that the president of China Metallurgical Group Corporation, Wang Jicheng, met with the Taliban’s new ambassador to China to discuss exploiting Afghanistan’s massive Mes Aynak copper deposit. [1807] The U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission’s annual report for 2023 assessed China has “sought to expand its trade relations with existing oil and gas suppliers in Central Asia as well as establish new relations with resource-rich actors across South Asia and the Middle East, including Qatar and the Taliban in Afghanistan.” [1808] The report noted, “China’s preference for partnering with high-risk and autocratic countries helps to sustain and stabilize these governments while offering a viable path to circumvent U.S. leadership and U.S. economic statecraft.” [1809]

These efforts have brought about a January 2023 agreement between China's state-owned Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Company and the Taliban to drill for oil in Afghanistan. [1810] Today, the CCP views the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban takeover as ushering a new era for diplomacy between the terrorist group and China. The chief of mission to the Chinese embassy in Afghanistan stated, "**[A]s foreign invaders withdrew, Afghanistan ushered in a new era of independent development and the transition from chaos to order.**" [1811]

RECOMMENDATIONS



RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Congress should ensure accountability for key individuals responsible for decision making and execution failures throughout the withdrawal:

- Throughout Biden-Harris administration, key White House, National Security Council (NSC), State Department, and Department of Defense officials failed to execute their responsibilities on behalf of the American people and were not held accountable for the death and destruction their failures caused. Therefore, Congress should pass resolutions condemning:
 - **Joseph R. Biden**, President of the United States
 - **Kamala D. Harris**, Vice President of the United States
 - **Lloyd Austin**, Secretary, Department of Defense
 - **Antony Blinken**, Secretary, Department of State
 - **Jake Sullivan**, National Security Adviser of the United States
 - **Derek Chollet**, Former Counselor, Department of State; Current Chief of Staff, Department of Defense
 - **Ross Wilson**, Former Ambassador to Afghanistan, Department of State
 - **Brian McKeon**, Former Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources, Department of State
 - **Zalmay Khalilzad**, Former U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Department of State
 - **Colin Kahl**, Former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Department of Defense
 - **Jonathan Finer**, Deputy National Security Advisor of the United States
 - **Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall**, Homeland Security Advisor to the President of the United States
 - **Jen Psaki**, Former White House Press Secretary
 - **Ned Price**, Former State Department Spokesperson
 - **John Kirby**, Former Defense Department Spokesperson; Current White House National Security Communications Advisor

2. Congress should codify Noncombatant Evacuation Order (NEO) authorities and responsibilities:

- President Biden, Vice President Harris, the NSC, the State Department, and the Department of Defense political leadership prioritized politics and optics over operational needs leading directly to the failures of the disastrous Afghanistan withdrawal.

- Congress should take legislative action to establish specific authorities, and place responsibilities and requirements upon the Executive Branch to ensure future non-combatant evacuation operations (NEOs) are successful. The legislation should require the State Department, Department of Defense, other relevant departments and agencies to begin conducting all necessary exercises and preparations for a potential NEO when a country with a U.S. diplomatic mission is or has been designated a Level 4 Travel Advisory country, when an embassy is designated a High Threat Post pursuant to 22 U.S.C. § Section 4803, or when an embassy goes on Authorized Departure or Ordered Departure status. Congress should be briefed on such NEO coordination and planning when a country with a U.S. diplomatic mission is designated a Level 4 Travel Advisory country, when an embassy has been designated a High Threat Post, or when an embassy goes on Authorized Departure or Ordered Departure status.

3. Reestablish a crisis response bureau in the State Department to respond to situations similar to Afghanistan:

- The Trump administration's State Department had the foresight to create the Contingency and Crisis Response (CCR) Bureau. Among other responsibilities, CCR was tasked with developing and implementing policies and programs to safely evacuate U.S. government personnel, family members, and U.S. citizens. However, Secretary Blinken, upon recommendation from D-MR McKeon, closed this office in July 2021, just weeks before the fall of Kabul.
- Congress should take legislative action to authorize the creation of a crisis response bureau to ensure the safety and security of American personnel during emergency evacuations. The bureau leader should have extensive crisis management experience, with consideration given to experience as a Chief of Mission at a High Threat Post, former military flag officers, or other experience in crisis situations. The bureau, in coordination with the Bureau of Consular Affairs and other offices, should maintain and regularly update a roster of experienced personnel to deploy as part of crisis response, including but not limited to select members of the State Department Reserve Corps. Priority should be given to those and other individuals with experience at High Threat Posts, including certain retired foreign service officers, those who have served in the U.S. military, undergone medical training, or possess other crisis management experience.

4. DoD should declassify the U.S. Central Command Abbey Gate Investigation and the Army Central Supplemental Review:

- The Department of Defense should declassify the U.S. Central Command Abbey Gate Investigation and the Army Central Supplemental Review, in accordance with all statutory and regulatory procedures protecting sources, methods, and national security interests.

5. The Department of Defense's policies regarding personal effects must be stringently adhered to:

- The Department of Defense failed to maintain and return all the personal effects of the brave 13 servicemembers killed and 45 wounded at Abbey Gate. While personal effects may be important for Department of Defense investigators after an attack or incident, they must also eventually be returned to the servicemembers or their next of kin.
- Congress should ensure adherence to current law, to include 10 U.S.C. § 7712, 8392, and 9712, which states that Department of Defense maintain all personal effects for servicemembers injured, missing, or killed in action or while training. Department of Defense leadership should ensure that, if for any reason they believe the personal effects are dangerous, they must get the servicemember or the next of kin's written approval to destroy the items.

6. Eyewitness testimony portals should be established to capture testimony from witnesses who are not interviewed:

- While investigators across the State Department and the Department of Defense were able to speak with many witnesses of the Abbey Gate terrorist attack, important witnesses were not included in their investigations and did not have their testimony heard.
- The State Department and the Department of Defense should, respectively, create portals or other means of communication for eyewitnesses to submit their information relevant to after-action reviews. This information would allow for investigators to maximize their scope and for important inputs to reach those investigators.

7. Congress should require the State Department and the Department of Defense to maintain standard operating procedures for NEOs:

- The State Department did not adhere to or maintain standard operating procedures that align with the Department of Defense's standard operating procedures, which created confusion and left both departments unprepared for the Afghanistan NEO.
- Congress should take legislative action to require the State Department, and the Department of Defense to maintain a joint-NEO plan, which should delineate clear lines of command, roles, and responsibilities in requesting and executing a NEO.

8. The State Department should designate a single official as lead during a NEO or other crisis situations:

- The State Department's leadership failed in both mission and clarity during the Afghanistan withdrawal. The majority's investigation uncovered confusion at every level, across multiple bureaus and offices, regarding who at the State Department was in charge of the NEO, which delayed or prevented decisive action.
- The State Department should designate a single official, who is responsible for organizing and executing the State Department's crisis response efforts, and should be responsible for coordinating with the NSC, Department of Defense, other departments and agencies, non-governmental organizations, and others during a crisis.

9. Congress should consider making the Bureau of Diplomatic Security a direct report to the Secretary of State:

- Diplomatic Security was one of the few entities within the State Department that appropriately assessed the security risks in Afghanistan, including regarding the maintenance of a diplomatic mission. However, the majority's investigation uncovered that Diplomatic Security's memoranda were often watered down or ignored.
- Congress should consider making Diplomatic Security a direct report to the Secretary of State to ensure security and safety assessments are unfiltered and are afforded appropriate consideration.

10. Congress should consider reforming the NSC to ensure Congress's ability to conduct its constitutional oversight over national security decision making:

- Overwhelming witness testimony and documentary evidence has pointed to the NSC as the nerve center for critical decision making regarding the withdrawal from Afghanistan, going well beyond the NSC's statutory role of advising the President on national security policy integration (50 U.S.C. 3021) into operational control, including decision making regarding roles and responsibilities delegated in statute to the State Department in Title 22 of the U.S. Code.
- Congress should review the operation of the NSC to assess whether it comports with its statutory mission and limitations, to ensure that operational decisions that would otherwise be made by agencies subject to committee jurisdiction are not obscured from congressional view and oversight.

11. Certain Dissent Channel cables should be shared with the interagency and committees of jurisdiction:

- The Dissent Channel cable sent by Embassy Kabul personnel in July 2021 raised all the concerns that came to fruition in the withdrawal. When cables regarding the safety and security of U.S. personnel in country are transmitted, access cannot be limited to the State Department's senior leadership. In Afghanistan, on-the-ground information and assessments found in the cable would have been beneficial for situational awareness and contingency planning by the Department of Defense, NSC, intelligence community, and other relevant federal entities.
- Congress should take legislative action to require that the Secretary of State, while protecting the privacy and identity of those individuals transmitting the Dissent Channel cable, share all Dissent Channel cables pertaining to the safety and security of U.S. Embassy personnel and American citizens with the Secretary of Defense, heads of appropriate elements of the intelligence community, and heads of any other relevant federal entities. The Secretary, while protecting the privacy and identity of those individuals transmitting the Dissent Channel cable, shall further share any such cables with the Chairs and Ranking Members of the committees of jurisdiction in an appropriate setting.

12. High Threat Post leadership selection should be more rigorous:

- The majority's investigation revealed that Ambassador Wilson's poor decision making and performance leading up to and during the NEO led to or exacerbated the failures on the ground.
- The State Department should ensure it selects Chiefs of Mission and Deputy Chiefs of Mission to serve at High Threat Posts who have significant experience, capabilities, and training to perform their duties in high risk, high threat environments and crisis situations.

13. Reports tracking the weapons left behind in Afghanistan should be mandated:

- The Biden-Harris administration left \$7.1 billion of U.S.-funded weapons and equipment in Afghanistan when the U.S. military withdrew. These weapons and equipment are now in the hands of the Taliban and other adversaries.
- Congress should ensure the Department of Defense, Department of State, and other relevant agencies' inspectors general and the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconciliation produce a joint report on the weapons and equipment left behind, our efforts to track such weapons and equipment, how the Taliban and other terrorists are employing or attempting to deploy such weapons and equipment, and what efforts the U.S. government is making to ensure these weapons and equipment are compromised, destroyed, or otherwise prevented from being used against American citizens, Afghan civilians, or by other adversaries of the United States. While this report is being drafted, the leaders of the relevant departments and agencies should brief Congress on their initial findings, to include detailing what weapons left behind are in the hands of terrorists.

14. The U.S. government should uphold our commitment to those brave Afghans who risked their lives fighting for freedom from the Taliban:

- Congress should ensure there are sufficient Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) to relocate all Afghans who risked their lives to fight alongside the U.S. military and who the Biden-Harris administration left behind in Afghanistan. Additionally, the processes for vetting and relocating vulnerable Afghan allies should be modernized, including by employing existing technology systems to increase efficiency.
- Congress needs to work in a bipartisan, bicameral manner to find a humane solution for all Afghans, including those already in the United States, who have a legitimate fear of persecution from the Taliban. It is imperative that the solution includes robust vetting to protect U.S. national security.

15. Congress should take legislative action to designate the Taliban as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO):

- Congress should take legislative action to designate the Taliban as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, including for purposes of 8 U.S.C. 1189(a).

16. Congress should continue to strongly and publicly condemn the Taliban:

- Congress should pass a resolution:
 - Condemning the Taliban for its brutal treatment of women and girls
 - Stating the United States shall not normalize relations with the Taliban.
 - Stating the United States shall halt funding to the United Nations Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan, should the UN recognize the Taliban as the government of Afghanistan.

17. U.S. veterans should be recruited to staff the Office of the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts (CARE):

- The State Department's CARE office should, in partnership with veteran service organizations, work to recruit veterans, particularly those who served in Afghanistan, to assist efforts to support in Afghan allies who were left behind by the Biden-Harris administration.

18. The State Department should improve efforts to account for all U.S. citizens traveling to Level 4 Travel Advisory countries:

- The State Department has struggled to accurately account for U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents (LPRs) overseas. In the event of an emergency evacuation, the Department is often guessing how many U.S. citizens and LPRs must be evacuated, leaving it without key information.

The State Department identifies Level 4 Travel Advisory countries are dangerous and recommends U.S. citizens and LPRs not travel to those countries. However, that is not a prohibition of travel, and many U.S. citizens and LPRs do travel to those countries for various reasons.

- To ensure the State Department has a more accurate accounting of U.S. citizens and LPRs in those countries, it should review and expand its ability to communicate and share information on the security situation in the country and encourage registration in Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP). In doing so, the State Department should work with private air, land, and maritime transportation carriers and other entities to devise ways in which to better gauge the numbers of U.S. citizens and LPRs traveling to and residing in Level 4 Travel Advisory countries at a given time.

19. Congress should enact H.R. 4517 Ensuring Voluntary Actions are Compensated (EVAC) Act:

- When Afghanistan fell, private citizens jumped into action to save American citizens, lawful permanent residents, and Afghan allies, often at great expense and risk to themselves.
- This bill would require the Secretary of State to submit a plan for the reimbursement of personal funds expended to evacuate American citizens, lawful permanent residents, and Afghan allies from Afghanistan.

20. Congress should enact H.R. 8371, the Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act:

- Veterans who served in Afghanistan have expressed their frustration and sense of betrayal at the manner in which the Biden-Harris administration left Afghanistan. They, like all our nations' veterans, deserve better care, benefits and support.
- This bill would improve the delivery of healthcare, benefits, and services at the Department of Veterans Affairs for veterans, their families, and their survivors.

Despite significant obstruction and stonewalling by Secretary Blinken and the State Department, the findings of this report reflect a wide-ranging and thorough investigative effort into multiple facets of the Biden-Harris administration's withdrawal. The findings also illuminate areas where further oversight and investigation are needed. Congress has a responsibility to ensure those at fault during the Afghanistan withdraw are finally held accountable.

21. Congress should request testimony from Department of Defense officials:

- This investigation uncovered inexcusable errors made by the Department of Defense that warrant further investigation, including, but not limited to, their failure to have video footage of Abbey Gate leading up to and at the time of the attack after heightened and consistent threat streams of imminent attack; the demilitarization – i.e., destruction – of physical hard drives and servers at HKIA that may have contained evidence; and the failure to close Abbey Gate in spite of heightened and consistent threat streams of imminent attack. There is also unresolved debate over several issues, including, but not limited to, whether Abbey Gate was a complex attack or a lone suicide bomber. For both reasons, Congress should request testimony from Department of Defense officials, including, but not limited to:
 - **Lloyd Austin**, Secretary of Defense
 - **Colin Kahl**, Former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy
 - **Chris Donahue**, Lieutenant General, U.S. Army*
 - **Peter Vasely**, Rear Admiral (Retired), U.S. Navy*
 - **Farrell Sullivan**, Brigadier General, U.S. Marine Corps*
 - **John Kirby**, Former Defense Department Spokesperson

22. Congress should request testimony from NSC officials:

- As this investigation lays out, the National Security Council usurped the congressionally mandated roles and responsibilities of the State Department, including by controlling the planning and execution of the NEO. For that reason, Congress should request testimony from National Security Council officials, including, but not limited to:
 - **Jake Sullivan**, National Security Advisor of the United States
 - **Jonathan Finer**, Deputy National Security Advisor of the United States
 - **Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall**, Homeland Security Advisor to the President of the United States

23. Congress should request testimony from White House officials:

- The White House has led a campaign of obstruction against this investigation, delaying and hindering witness testimony and document discovery. Because the White House has claimed to wield control over the appearances of witnesses and production of documents by the U.S. Department of State and U.S. Department of Defense, Congress should request testimony from White House officials, including, but not limited to:
 - **Ron Klain**, Former White House Chief of Staff
 - **Steve Ricchetti**, Counselor to the President
 - **Ed Siskel**, White House Counsel
 - **Rachel F. Cotton**, Deputy Counsel to the President
 - **Dana Remus**, Former White House Counsel
 - **Richard Sauber**, Former Special Counsel to the President
 - **Anita Dunn**, Former Senior Advisor to the President of the United States

**House Armed Services Committee majority requested written responses to questions from these witnesses on behalf of the House Foreign Affairs Committee majority. On September 6, 2024, these individuals provided their answers in writing which, while informative, raised critical new questions Congress should continue to pursue.*

ENDNOTES

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- [11] Senator Joseph Biden, Speech at the Council on Foreign Relations, U.S. Response to Terrorist Attacks, 21:10–21:15 (Oct. 22, 2001).
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[1103] Transcribed Interview with Derek Chollet, Couns., H. Comm. on Foreign Affs., in Washington, D.C., at 159 (Dec. 19, 2023) (“Why was it not until after the Taliban took over that the Department was able to secure these lily pads? ...But there had been discussions, to my understanding, is that had been sort of started, but nothing had been solidified until the evacuation was underway, and the decision taken to really go beyond the NEO and conduct this massive evacuation of non Americans from Afghanistan that would, therefore, require a system of these lily pads to help vet individuals, ensure they had the proper paperwork to be eligible to come to the United States. “)

[1104] CENTCOM Abbey Gate Investigation Report, Ex. 21, at 15 (2021), <https://www3.centcom.mil/FOIALibrary/cases/21-0545/04%20AR%2015-6%20ROI%20Abbey%20Gate%20Exhibits%2021-40.pdf>

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[1114] Transcribed Interview with James DeHart, Consul General, Comm. on Foreign Affs., in Washington D.C., at 42 (June 16, 2023). (“And, as the as more and more people came into the airport, the population in the airport grew, and and this was the result of some different factors, including including the lack of lily pads, different countries for aircraft to travel to. And, as the situation within the airport got more difficult, the guidance raised the bar on who we could allow into the airport.”)

[1115] Transcribed Interview with Samuel Aronson, U.S. State Dep’t Foreign Serv. Officer, H. Comm. on Foreign Affs., in Washington, D.C., at 84 (Sept. 15, 2023).

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[1147] CENTCOM Abbey Gate Investigation Report, Ex. 70 (2021), <https://www3.centcom.mil/FOIALibrary/cases/21-0545/06%20AR%2015-6%20ROI%20Abbey%20Gate%20Exhibits%2061-80%20part%201%20of%202.pdf>

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[1149] ARCENT Supplemental Review — Witness Interview, Ex. S060, (Nov. 7, 2023).

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