

‘Then, We Lost Everything:’ Afghan Evacuee Experiences of Operation Allies Refuge and Operation Allies Welcome



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Executive Summary

On 30 August 2021, the last US military plane departed Kabul ahead of President Biden's 31 August deadline to withdraw all American troops from Afghanistan. The humanitarian evacuation of Afghan citizens that took place during the weeks leading up to this event - dubbed Operation Allies Refuge (OAR) - marked the end of the US's 20-year military presence in the country and represents the largest non-combat airlift in US history.¹ It also opens a new, complicated, and uncertain chapter for the Afghan evacuees as well as for their receiving nations.

As the number and scale of complex humanitarian emergencies worldwide continues to grow, so too does the need for increased coordination between civilian and military actors. It is critical to understand the perceptions and experiences of this type of coordination from the crisis-affected communities themselves to gain novel insights.² This report examines OAR and Operation Allies Welcome (OAW) from the perspectives of those most affected - the Afghan evacuees themselves. This research is structured around two overarching questions:

1) What are the experiences and perceptions held by Afghan evacuees during Operation Allies Refuge and Operation Allies Welcome?

2) What are the immediate and long term needs within the Afghan evacuee population resettling in Rhode Island?

This report draws on 32 interviews with Afghan evacuees who experienced both OAR and OAW and have resettled in Providence, Rhode Island. This sample is representative of the three broad categories of evacuees: 1) Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders, 2) SIV eligible parolees, and 3) non-SIV eligible parolees. In addition to the interviews, the data collection for this report included the use of clinically validated mental health screeners with a subset of participants.

The report presents its findings in chronological order according to the two operations, covering topics from the interviews such as the risks and rewards of working with the US in Afghanistan, the chaos at the Kabul airport during the airlift, the uncertainty of living in international and US bases for processing, familial separation, and hopes for the future.

The report offers eight recommendations relevant to the federal, state, and local levels of the US government, the UN system, and international and domestic NGOs based on the findings of this research project. They address topics ranging from humanitarian evacuation, processing

¹ Charles Pope, "One Year Later, Historic Afghan Airlift Inspires Pride and Reflection across the Air Force," Air Force, August 30, 2022, <https://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/3144426/one-year-later-historic-afghan-airlift-inspires-pride-and-reflection-across-the/>

² Maria Carinnes Alejandria et al., "Humanitarian-Military Relations in Complex Emergencies: Evidence, Insights, and Recommendations a Report of the Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Studies at The," 2022, https://watson.brown.edu/chrhs/files/chrhs/imce/partnerships/Civ-Mil/PRM%20Report%205_26.pdf.

displaced populations, civil-military interactions during domestic operations, refugee resettlement, and post-resettlement:

1) Address the disparities in which populations are eligible for evacuation

The US SIV policy needs sustainable and effective definitions that cover all categories of potentially eligible individuals and their families. The framework should include considerations of non-Euro-American family structures to guide future actions and educate foreigners working for the US government. The US should also continue diplomatic actions to address SIV-eligible individuals who still reside in Afghanistan.

2) Involve displaced populations awaiting resettlement in decision-making processes

A framework for a communication process that gives agency to displaced populations awaiting resettlement would help identify and address issues faced by evacuees. Any repeatable template for dialog should include stakeholder selection considerations to engender trust and build understanding. Furthermore, a combined review board methodology to bring applicable stakeholders together to address requirements and spending strategy creates an opportunity to combine resources, accountability, and decrease wasteful overlap.

3) Provide better education and expectation management for civil-military coordination through interaction, exercise, and preparation

Exercising coordination frameworks between military, civilian government, and non-governmental organizations will lead to better education of all involved and should improve the speed and effectiveness of response to actual emergencies. The use of non-conflict scenarios in response to environmental or technological disasters would improve civil-military communication while protecting the principles established in humanitarian law.

4) Further develop Interagency and NGO coordination frameworks

The Unified Coordination Group (UCG) framework should be expanded to include optional incorporation of Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) and other non-state actors such as specialized volunteers using best practices from UN frameworks such as the Inter Agency Standing Committee. Templates for coordination may include memorandums of understanding for areas such as information sharing, licenses, law enforcement, funding, and reimbursement.

5) Redouble efforts to integrate gender into refugee resettlement considerations

Resettlement and post-resettlement organizations should continue integrating socialization initiatives for women to address culturally sensitive gender role differences in the US. A staged, consensus-building, and community-based program should focus on communication pathways, reduce isolation, and use relationships to educate resettled women.

6) Create a centralized and easily accessible information portal to address the key resettlement concerns and needs of all Afghan refugees, including education and immigration

A singular, centralized resettlement informational hub, accessible to individuals who may lack general literacy, education, and English language skills should be created. It should include videos, podcasts, and alternative communication material in a variety of languages to alleviate

confusion and access concerns. This can be paired with a more coordinated approach among refugee service agencies and also between resettlement agencies and post-resettlement agencies.

7) Host a refugee-centered job fairs with local businesses

Hosting refugee and new immigrant centered job fairs within local communities would address refugee concerns about finding meaningful work as short-term benefits end, while allowing local businesses a communication platform on their openings to a diverse workforce. Mutually supportive efforts between local resettlement organizations, chambers of commerce, and government could aid education of all parties on benefits, requirements, and future opportunities. This should be ongoing an ongoing, coordinated process to create a more sustainable path for job placements for refugees.

8) Integrate culturally sensitive mental health care into refugee health care

Culturally and linguistically tailored mental health resources, often with a more informal approach that is deeply enmeshed in the community, are needed. There are examples of scalable and cost-effective interventions used in some communities. It is also essential that safeguards are put in place to ensure that these separate mental health services do not jeopardize participant's immigration petitions.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the Afghan evacuee population in Rhode Island for participating in this research project at a time of great tumult in their lives. A special thanks to Heidi Peltier and Stephanie Savell at The Costs of War Project, as well as Meghan Geary, David Vine, and Noah Coburn for their expert guidance. Finally, we would like to thank Noah Ruttenberg and Perri Peltz for providing funding to support this project.

This report is dedicated to those left behind.

Acronyms

ANA - Afghan National Army
CARB - Contracting Acquisitions Review Board
CBP - US Customs and Border Protection
CIA - US Central Intelligence Agency
CRAF - Civil Air Reserve Fleet
DHS - US Department of Homeland Security
DoD - US Department of Defense
DoS - US Department of State
FEMA - Federal Emergency Management Agency
IASC - UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ISIS-K - Islamic State Khorasan
MHL - Mental Health Literacy
NGO - Non-Governmental Organization
NORTHCOM - US Northern Command
OAR - Operation Allies Refuge
OAW - Operation Allies Welcome
PTSD - Post-traumatic Stress Disorder
RDC - Refugee Dream Center
SIV - Special Immigrant Visa
STEM - Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
TSA - Transportation Security Administration
UAE - United Arab Emirates
UCG - Unified Coordination Group
UN - United Nations
UNHCR - United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USAID - US Agency for International Development
USCIS - US Citizenship and Immigration Service
WPS - Women, Peace, and Security

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I. Introduction

On 30 August 2021, the last US military plane departed Kabul ahead of President Biden's 31 August deadline to withdraw all American troops from Afghanistan. The humanitarian evacuation of Afghan citizens that took place during the weeks leading up to this event - dubbed Operation Allies Refuge (OAR) - marked the end of the US's 20-year military presence in the country and represents the largest non-combat airlift in US history.³ It also opens a new, complicated, and uncertain chapter for the Afghan evacuees as well as for their receiving nations.⁴

While actual numbers of individuals evacuated from Afghanistan to the US have proven difficult to pin down, official statements from multiple US government agencies state a total of 76,000 Afghans were evacuated during the Kabul 2021 airlift, and 9,000 additional individuals left the country later via chartered and commercial flights. As of writing, this means a total of 85,000 Afghan evacuees are in the US.⁵ 310 evacuees on parole status arrived in Rhode Island, with 2-3 more families and a few secondary migrants arriving later. The total Afghan evacuee arrival number was around 330 for RI.⁶

Under Operation Allies Welcome (OAW), the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) led and coordinated the resettlement of Afghan evacuees in the US. This support included overseas

³ Pope, Charles. "One Year Later, Historic Afghan Airlift Inspires Pride and Reflection across the Air Force," Air Force, August 30, 2022, <https://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/3144426/one-year-later-historic-afghan-airlift-inspires-pride-and-reflection-across-the/>.

⁴ Initial estimates suggest that most Afghans who collaborated with the US military were left behind (Donati, Jessica. "Majority of Interpreters, Other U.S. Visa Applicants Were Left Behind in Afghanistan." The Wall Street Journal, September 1, 2021, sec. World. https://www.wsj.com/articles/majority-of-interpreters-other-u-s-visa-applicants-were-left-behind-in-afghanistan-official-says-11630513321?mod=article_inline). These factors become more worrisome when combined with reports that the Taliban may not be allowing all evacuees to board outbound flights for unknown reasons (Gannon, Kathy. "Taliban Stop Planes of Evacuees from Leaving but Unclear Why." AP, September 5, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-religion-taliban-dbe38a9a3c0b33f3532aac5ff1b50078>) and that neighboring countries have closed their borders to refugees, effectively trapping tens of thousands eligible for US resettlement inside Afghanistan (Shah, Saeed. "Tens of Thousands in Afghanistan Are Trapped as Neighbors Close Borders." The Wall Street Journal, September 2, 2021. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/tens-of-thousands-trapped-as-afghanistans-neighbors-close-borders-11630588397?mod=djem10point>).

⁵ Kessler, Glenn. "Numbers behind Afghanistan Evacuation Come into Focus," Washington Post (The Washington Post, May 25, 2022), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/05/25/numbers-behind-afghan-evacuation-come-into-focus/>.

⁶ "Governor McKee Announces Afghan Relief RI Effort to Support Afghan Evacuees, Launches Fundraising Initiative with Rhode Island Foundation | Governor's Office, State of Rhode Island," governor.ri.gov, November 8, 2021, [https://governor.ri.gov/press-releases/governor-mckee-announces-afghan-relief-ri-effort-support-afghan-evacuees-launches](https://governor.ri.gov/press-releases/governor-mckee-announces-afghan-relief-ri-effort-support-afghan-evacuees-launches;); the team verified numbers with DORCAS International, the federal resettlement agency in RI.

security screening, initial immigration processing, and COVID-19 testing/quarantine. Upon their arrival, these individuals were sheltered in eight military bases across the country before being sent onward to resettlement organizations in almost every US state.⁷

While resettlement is never straightforward, these Afghan evacuees face unique obstacles. Rather than receiving documentation in staging countries before departing to the US for resettlement, 80% of these individuals arrived without the proper immigration processes and paperwork due to the rushed nature of the evacuation's final days.

OAR and OAW were unique in their scope, reach, and complexity and represent a significant exercise in civil-military coordination. For example, in the Dulles International Airport staging site alone, hundreds of employees from the US Department of State (DoS), the US Department of Defense (DoD), US Agency for International Development (USAID), and Transportation Security Administration (TSA) employees worked three shifts a day, 24/7 to process and screen the incoming evacuees.⁸

Similar intensive inter-agency coordination occurred on the eight "safe haven" bases within the US. The teamwork between nearly two dozen interagency groups, non-governmental organizations, and the DoD enabled the unprecedented resettlement to be completed within months. The civil-military coordination showcased the possibilities when bringing these disparate entities into one facility with equal agency and a common goal. Yet policy, resource, and communication shortfalls indicate significant opportunities to improve future response. Now that the dust has settled after the US evacuation of Afghanistan, academics and policy experts alike are just beginning to process and analyze the lessons learned from these historic operations.

As the number and scale of complex humanitarian emergencies worldwide continues to grow, so too does the need for increased coordination between civilian actors and military actors. It is critical to understand the perceptions and experiences of this type of coordination from the

⁷The bases include: Ft Lee, VA (TF – Eagle); Ft McCoy, WI (TF – McCoy); Ft Bliss, TX (TF – Bliss); Ft Pickett, VA (TF – Pickett); Camp Atterbury, IN (TF – Atterbury); Marine Corps Base Quantico, VA (TF – Quantico); and the two Air Force bases in JB Mason-Dix- Lakehurst, NJ (JTF – Liberty) and Holloman AFB, NM (TF – Holloman).

⁸ This "welcome center" featured sleeping cots, a medical unit, processing halls and children's play areas. (Bowman, Tom, and Monika Evstatieva. "What It's Like Inside The U.S. Processing Center Welcoming Thousands Of Afghans." NPR, September 7, 2021. <https://www.npr.org/2021/09/07/1034794347/what-its-like-inside-the-u-s-processing-center-welcoming-thousands-of-afghans>.
; Hackman, Michelle. "U.S. Refugee Organizations Race to Prepare for Influx of Afghans." The Wall Street Journal, August 31, 2021, sec. World. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-refugee-organizations-race-to-prepare-for-influx-of-afghans-11630411200>). Despite extreme domestic political polarization, American citizens seem to be united across deep divides in support of resettling the evacuated Afghans—this is true even in groups that are typically anti-immigration (Jordan, Miriam, and Jennifer Steinhauer. "Americans Stretch Across Political Divides to Welcome Afghan Refugees." *The New York Times*, September 16, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/06/us/afghan-refugees-volunteers.html>).

crisis-affected communities themselves.⁹ This report examines OAR and OAW from the perspectives of those most affected - the Afghan evacuees. This research is structured around two overarching questions:

1) What are the experiences and perceptions held by Afghan evacuees during Operation Allies Refuge and Operation Allies Welcome?

2) What are the immediate and long term needs within the Afghan evacuee population resettling in Rhode Island?

A deeper understanding of the days leading up to the US evacuation, the situation on the tarmac of the Kabul airport, the transfer to various way stations in the Middle East and Europe, and the experience of navigating the subsequent resettlement infrastructure within the US stands to teach us about key barriers and opportunities in civil-military interaction during largescale humanitarian evacuations. Learning about the successes and challenges of these twin operations from a grounded angle may contribute to improving future humanitarian evacuations and resettlement.

To shed light on these dynamics, this report draws on 32 interviews with Afghan evacuees who experienced both OAR and OAW and have resettled in Providence, Rhode Island. In addition to the in-depth interviews, the data collection for this report included the use of clinically validated mental health screeners with a subset of participants.

This report begins with a case background on the US evacuation of Afghanistan, historically situating it within the decades-long experience of interventionism in the country. Next, we review the relevant academic and practitioner literature. The following section details methodology. The report then discusses the results from the interviews, detailing the key themes to arise from the analysis. The report concludes with actionable recommendations.

⁹ Carinnes, Maria et al., "Humanitarian-Military Relations in Complex Emergencies: Evidence, Insights, and Recommendations a Report of the Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Studies at The," 2022, https://watson.brown.edu/chrhs/files/chrhs/imce/partnerships/Civ-Mil/PRM%20Report%205_26.pdf.

II. Case Background

a. History of Recent Afghan Displacement by Conflict

The most recent crisis caused by the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021 should be viewed in light of the Afghan peoples' long history of displacement by armed conflict and natural disasters. Post-colonial Afghan displacement began nearly 50 years ago, with 400,000 Afghans seeking refuge in Pakistan after fleeing violence caused by the communist-led Nur Muhammad Taraki and Hafizullah Amin governments.¹⁰ The 1979 Soviet Invasion on Christmas Eve led to an even greater number of Afghans fleeing to Pakistan.

The following year, Babrak Karmal became Afghanistan's Soviet-backed ruler, which prompted mujahideen, or holy warriors, to launch a jihad against Soviet forces.¹¹ The resulting war led to the death of 1 million Afghan civilians and 15,000 Soviet soldiers.¹² Once again, Afghans fled to Pakistan to seek refuge. By the end of 1980, there were more than 4 million Afghan refugees residing in Pakistan. In the following four years, the number of Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran grew to 5 million.¹³ During this time, the United States and Saudi Arabia funneled weapons to the mujahideen through Pakistan. The support from the United States continued as the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) supplied the mujahideen with Stinger anti-aircraft missiles to use against the Soviets in 1986.¹⁴

In 1987, Mohammad Najibullah became the president in place of Karmal, but the following year, Afghanistan, the Soviet Union, the US, and Pakistan signed the Geneva Accords leading to Soviet withdrawal. The last Soviet soldier left Afghanistan on 15 February 1989, and the Soviet Union eventually collapsed in 1991.¹⁵ Najibullah's pro-communist government also fell and Najibullah fled to the Kabul United Nations (UN) compound. After Najibullah escaped, mujahideen leaders stormed the capital. Under mujahideen leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Kabul was attacked, resulting in the death of 50,000 people.¹⁶

By 1994, the Taliban, or ultraconservative Afghan 'student-warriors,' took control of the southern Afghan city of Kandahar, ensuring that they would bring order by imposing strict control over Afghans in Kandahar. In 1996, al-Qaeda leader, Osama bin Laden, arrived in

¹⁰ Amnesty International, "Amnesty International," Amnesty.org, June 20, 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/06/afghanistan-refugees-forty-years/>.

¹¹ Hannah Bloch, "A Look at Afghanistan's 40 Years of Crisis — from the Soviet War to Taliban Recapture," NPR.org (National Public Radio, August 19, 2021), <https://www.npr.org/2021/08/19/1028472005/afghanistan-conflict-timeline>.

¹² Bloch, "A Look at Afghanistan's 40 Years of Crisis," 2021.

¹³ Amnesty International, "Amnesty International," Amnesty.org, June 20, 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/06/afghanistan-refugees-forty-years/>.

¹⁴ Hannah Bloch, "A Look at Afghanistan's 40 Years of Crisis — from the Soviet War to Taliban Recapture," NPR.org (National Public Radio, August 19, 2021),

¹⁵ Bloch, "A Look at Afghanistan's 40 Years of Crisis," 2021.

¹⁶ Bloch, "A Look at Afghanistan's 40 Years of Crisis," 2021.

Afghanistan and joined forces with Taliban supreme leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar. In that same year, the Taliban overtook Kabul, capturing and killing Najibullah. Between 1997 and 1998, the Taliban continued to impose their rule through public beatings and executions and by banning women and girls from working and receiving an education.¹⁷

Since the start of the post-9/11 wars, 5.9 million Afghans have either been internally displaced or fled the country.¹⁸ Following the events of 9/11, the US demanded the extradition of Osama bin Laden, but the Taliban refused. This resulted in the initiation of the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom. On 7 December 2001, the Taliban government collapsed. From 2002 to 2007, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) aided 2.7 million Afghans in repatriating back to Afghanistan from Pakistan, while 1.1 million Afghans returned on their own- this was the largest refugee return since 1972.¹⁹

By 2006, the Taliban reemerged while gaining control of territory in Southern Afghanistan.²⁰ As a result, in 2009 President Barack Obama ordered a US troop surge in Afghanistan, with the intent of their withdrawal by 2011. In 2012, NATO announced that it would withdraw its forces and transfer control to Afghan forces by 2014. In 2013, Afghan forces officially took over from NATO and by 2014 the US and NATO officially ended their missions. However, in 2015 NATO assisted Afghan forces through its Resolute Support mission. The Taliban increased their attacks and the Islamic State Khorasan (ISIS-K) emerged as a competitor to the Taliban. Conflict between the Afghan government, the Taliban, and ISIS-K persisted.

b. US Withdrawal from Afghanistan

After two decades of conflict, the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan began in mid-2018 under President Donald Trump. By August 2019, the then-president had reportedly expressed frustration over the perceived lack of progress in US military missions in Afghanistan and is quoted as saying he wanted to withdraw from the country "as quickly as we can."²¹

On 5 February 2020, the US and the Taliban signed a bilateral agreement in which the US would stage a drawdown of all troops, contractors, and civilian personnel by the end of April 2021. The Afghan government was not party to the original talks. Despite this, the agreement contained a prisoner swap, stating that up to 5,000 Taliban prisoners held by the Afghan government would be released in exchange for 1,000 prisoners held by the Taliban. Intra-

¹⁷ Bloch, "A Look at Afghanistan's 40 Years of Crisis," 2021.

¹⁸ "Afghan Refugees | Costs of War," Brown.edu, August 2021, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs/human/refugees/afghan>.

¹⁹ "Afghan Refugees | Costs of War," 2021

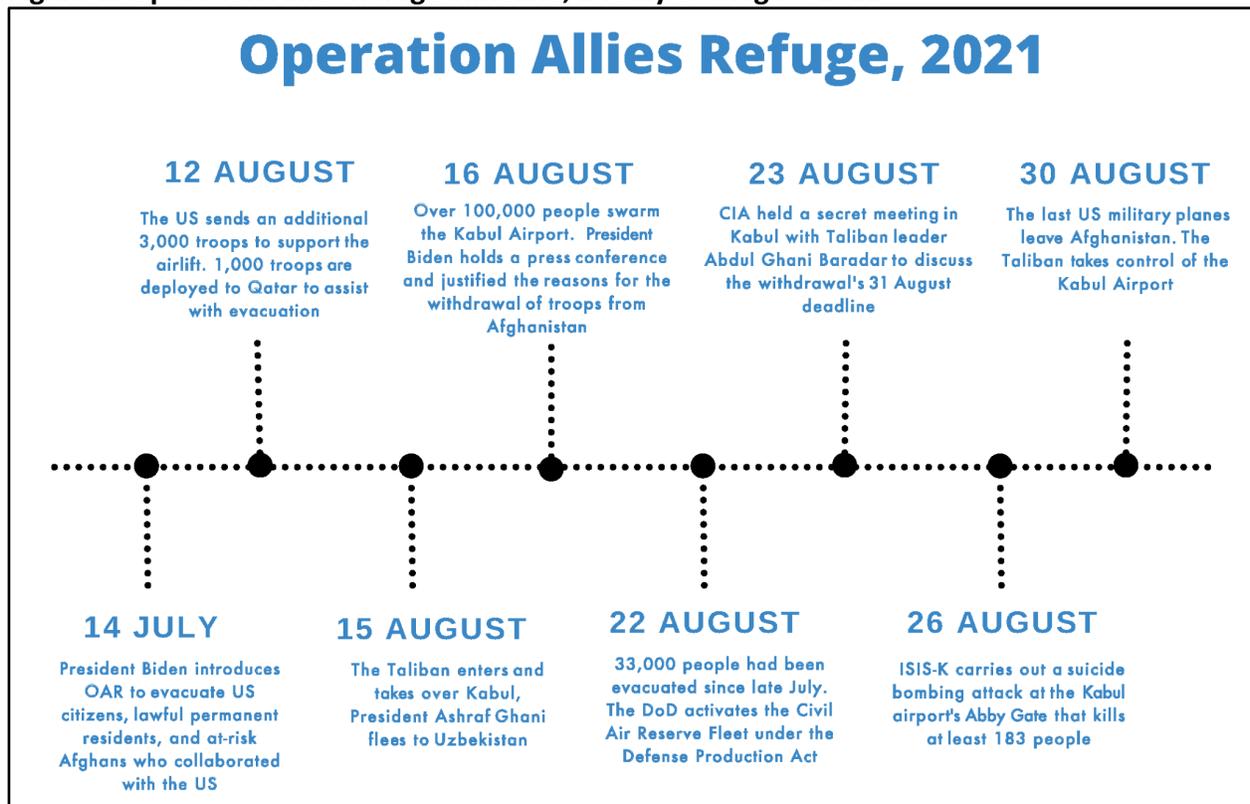
²⁰ Bloch, "A Look at Afghanistan's 40 Years of Crisis," 2021.

²¹ Kevin Baron, "Trump Says US Troops Shouldn't be 'Policemen' in Afghanistan. So Why Are They There?" *DefenseOne*, July 22, 2019

Afghan talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government began in Doha, Qatar in September 2020.²²

As the troop drawdown continued throughout 2020, diplomats from the US side stated that the Taliban was not in full compliance with the Doha talks as the released Taliban prisoners reportedly were returning to the battlefield.²³ Additionally, communications from the then-US president via Twitter and from the negotiating team in the talks were not in alignment regarding whether any troops would remain in Afghanistan.²⁴ Adding to this confusion, the Biden Administration replaced the Trump Administration after a contentious election in the US.

Figure 1: Operation Allies Refuge Timeline, 14 July-30 August 2021



On 14 April 2021, President Biden stated that the final drawdown of troops from Afghanistan would begin on 1 May and end on 11 September 2021.²⁵ The Taliban saw this as the Americans renegeing on the original Trump-era promise to reach full withdrawal by 1 May 2021. Policy

²² Reuters Staff. "Afghan Prisoner Release: What It Is, What It Means for Peace." *Reuters*, August 9, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-taliban-factbox-idCAKCN2550BS>.

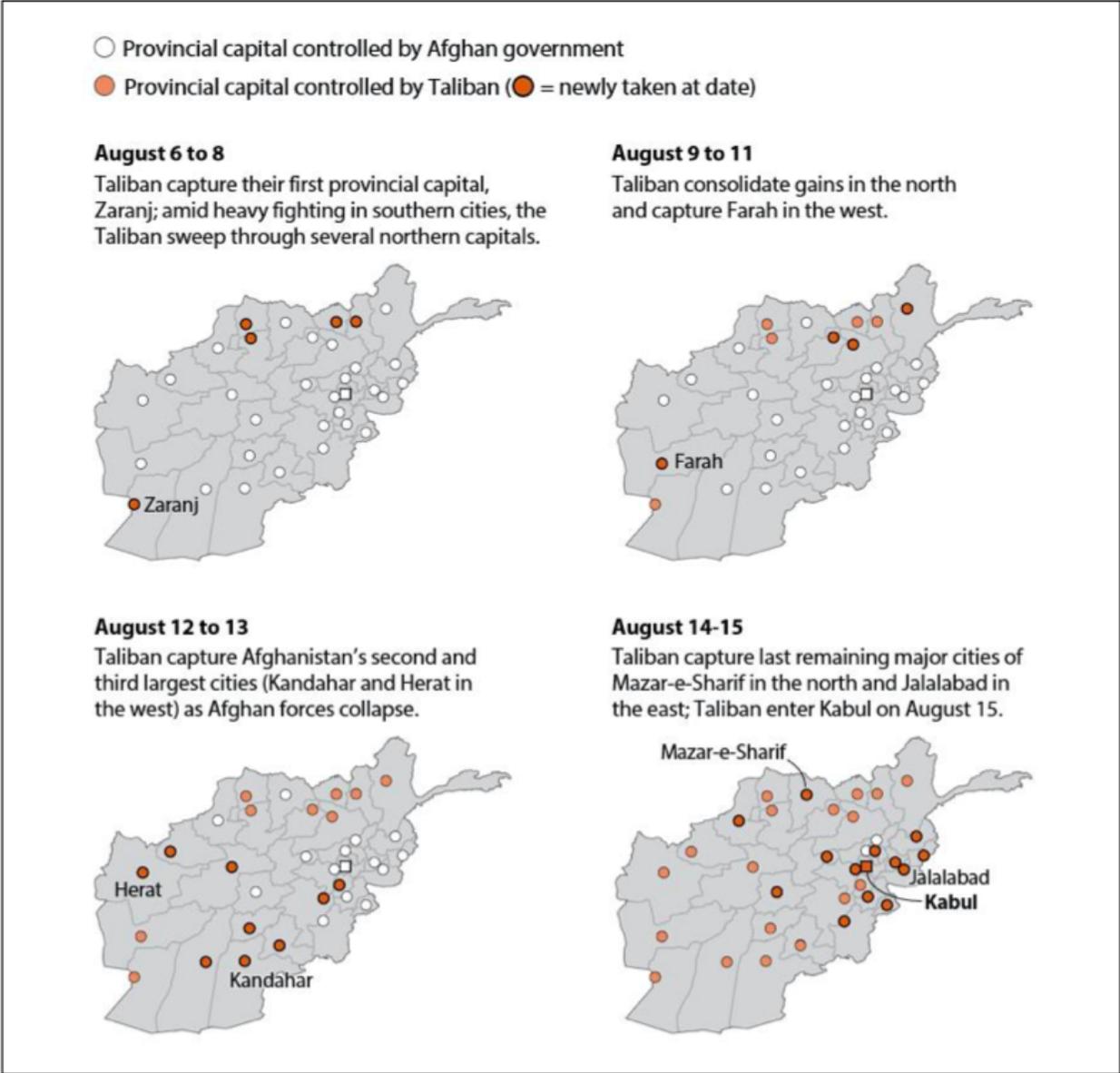
²³ O'Donnell, Lynne. "Defying Peace Deal, Freed Taliban Return to Battlefield." *Foreign Policy*, September 3, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/03/defying-peace-deal-freed-taliban-prisoners-return-battlefield-afghanistan/>.

²⁴ "US troops in Afghanistan should be 'home by Christmas': Trump," *Reuters*, October 7, 2020

²⁵ Cronk, Terri Moon, "DOD Makes Strides in its Women, Peace and Security Program," DoD News, March 31, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2985272/dod-makes-strides-in-its-women-peace-and-security-program/>

experts were in disagreement over whether a small number of US troops should stay behind in order to protect the Intra-Afghan peace agreements but ultimately the Biden Administration decided that only a couple thousand troops would not be able to secure the process.²⁶

Figure 2: Taliban Advance in Afghanistan from 6-15 August 2021



Source: Congressional Research Service²⁷

²⁶ Thomas, Clayton. "US Military Withdrawal and Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan: Frequently Asked Questions," September 17, 2021.

²⁷ Thomas, Clayton. "U.S. Military Withdrawal and Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan: Frequently Asked Questions." Congressional Research Service, n.d. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46879>.

In July 2021, US Central Command (CENTCOM) reported that the withdrawal process was at 90%.²⁸ Concurrently, most NATO allies and other US partners had withdrawn their personnel and Biden announced that the last day of the US's military mission will be 31 August 2021.²⁹

However, the months leading up to the 31 August target was marked by a rapid Taliban advance that ended in the capture of Kabul and necessitated the dramatic airlift in the final days. Some reports show that the Taliban were able to capture a quarter of the country in May and June.³⁰ The week after the Taliban took over their first provincial capital, they controlled half of the country's provincial capitals- these rapid advancements reportedly surprised officials at the highest levels.³¹ After the fall of Jalalabad and Mazer-e-Sharif, the Taliban entered Kabul on 15 August.

The Biden administration pointed fingers at the Afghan government for the rapid deterioration, saying: "American troops cannot and should not be fighting in a war and dying in a war that Afghan forces are not willing to fight for themselves. We spent over a trillion dollars. We trained and equipped an Afghan military force of some 300,000 strong — incredibly well equipped — a force larger in size than the militaries of many of our NATO allies."³² Critics argue that the US did not factor in effective war termination and questioned the robustness of the evacuation plan.³³ Some policymakers saw the failure of the US withdrawal as "so general that there was no point in seeking a scapegoat" to hold accountable.³⁴ As of today, more than 6 million Afghans have been displaced from their homes.³⁵

²⁸ US Central Command. "Update on Withdrawal of US Forces from Afghanistan July 5, 2021," July 6, 2021. <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/2682484/update-on-withdrawal-of-us-forces-from-afghanistan-july-5-2021/>.

²⁹ Miller, Zeke, and Aamer Madhani. "'Overdue': Biden Sets Aug. 31 for US Exit from Afghanistan." AP NEWS, July 8, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-afghanistan-government-and-politics-86f939c746c7bc56bb9f11f095a95366>.

³⁰ Clark, Kate and Obaid Ali. "A Quarter of Afghanistan's Districts Fall to the Taliban amid Calls for a 'Second Resistance,'" *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, July 2, 2021

³¹ Miller, Kenneth E., Patricia Omidian, Abdul Samad Quraishy, Naseema Quraishy, Mohammed Nader Nasiry, Seema Nasiry, Nazar Mohammed Karyar, and Abdul Aziz Yaqubi. "The Afghan Symptom Checklist: A Culturally Grounded Approach to Mental Health Assessment in a Conflict Zone." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 76, no. 4 (October 2006): 423–33. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0002-9432.76.4.423>

³² Biden, Joe. "Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan," The White House, August 16, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/16/remarks-by-president-biden-on-afghanistan/>.

³³ Cole, Devan et al., "Top Republican on Foreign Affairs Committee Slams Biden over 'Unmitigated Disaster' in Afghanistan | CNN Politics," CNN, August 15, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/15/politics/michael-mccaul-afghanistan-withdrawal-criticism-cnntv/index.html>.

³⁴ "Governor McKee Announces Afghan Relief RI Effort to Support Afghan Evacuees, Launches Fundraising Initiative with Rhode Island Foundation | Governor's Office, State of Rhode Island," governor.ri.gov, November 8, 2021, <https://governor.ri.gov/press-releases/governor-mckee-announces-afghan-relief-ri-effort-support-afghan-evacuees-launches>.

³⁵ UNHCR, "Afghanistan Refugee Crisis Explained," www.unrefugees.org, June 29, 2022, <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/afghanistan-refugee-crisis-explained/>.

c. Operation Allies Refuge

On 14 July 2021, President Biden introduced OAR to support the evacuation of US citizens, lawful permanent residents, and at-risk Afghans who worked with the US. The operation also supported the withdrawal of regional and NATO allies through the Hamid Karzai International Airport. The DoS originally asked the DoD for assistance evacuating 3500-5000 US citizens and SIV holders. OAR started in the last week of July and by the end of that month, 221 Afghans had been evacuated. From Kabul, evacuees traveled to nine intermediate staging sites throughout Europe, then through US bases in Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Spain, Italy, and Germany for processing before traveling onward to the US. OAR represents the largest non-combatant evacuation in US Air Force history, airlifting 124,000 people from Afghanistan.³⁶

Image 1: OAR Evacuation Landing Sites

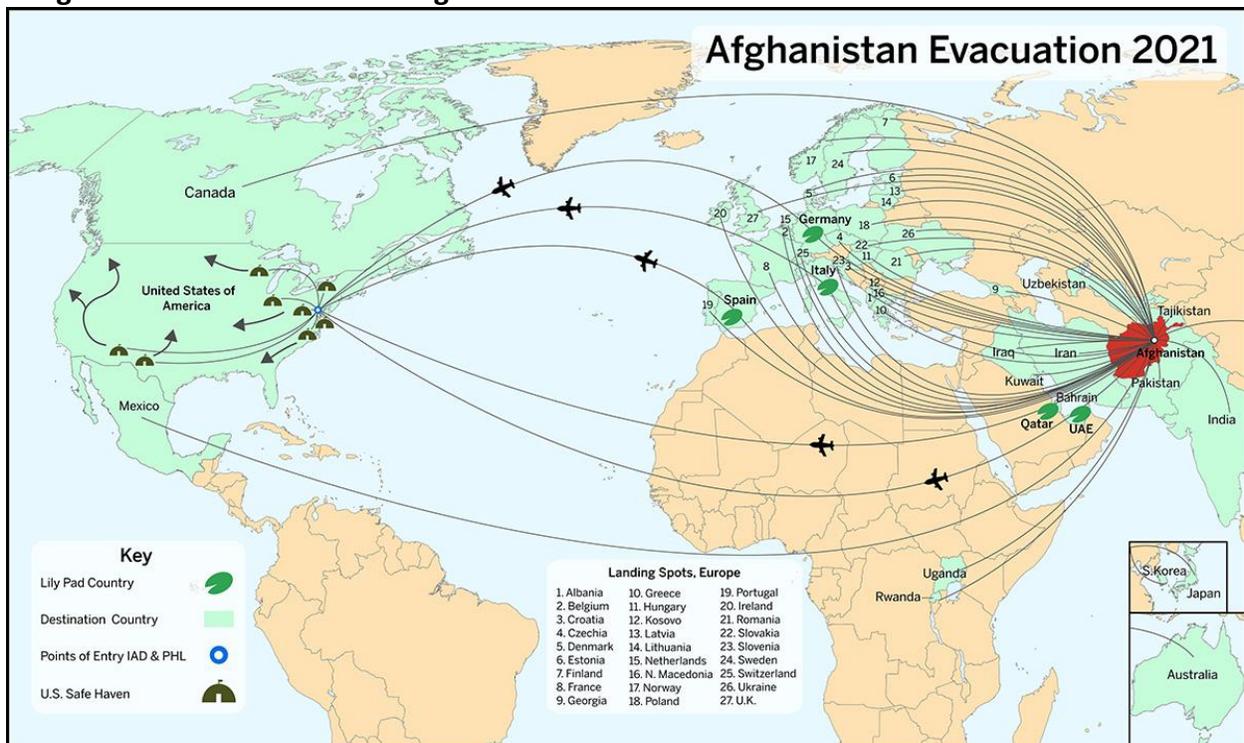


Photo Credit: American Foreign Service Association³⁷

On 12 August, as the Taliban rapidly advanced across the country, the US sent an additional 3,000 troops to support the airlift at the Hamid Karzai International Airport.³⁸ An additional 1,000 troops were deployed to Qatar to assist with overseas processing of evacuees. After the

³⁶ US Department of Defense, "Secretary of Defense Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Milley Press Briefing," September 1, 2021.

³⁷ Blevins, Chad. "Operation Allies Refuge: The FS View from the Front Lines." AFSA, n.d. <https://afsa.org/operation-allies-refuge-fs-view-front-lines>.

³⁸ Gibbons-Neff, Thomas et al., "US Is Sending 3,000 Troops back to Afghanistan to Begin Evacuations," *The New York Times*, August 12, 2021, sec. US, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/12/us/politics/marines-evacuation-afghanistan.html>.

Taliban took Kabul on 15 August, the US further increased its number of troops at the airport, taking over security and air traffic control.³⁹ On 15 August, the Taliban entered Kabul and President Ashraf Ghani fled to Uzbekistan, ultimately being welcomed by the UAE government on humanitarian grounds.⁴⁰

In the final days of the evacuation, there was a near constant stream of planes leaving the airport.⁴¹ At one point, the operation had engaged half of the US's operational C-17s.⁴² On 22 August, President Biden announced that 28,000 people had been evacuated since 15 August, and that 33,000 total had been evacuated since late July. On the same day, the DoD activated the Civil Air Reserve Fleet (CRAF) under the Defense Production Act to support the evacuation.⁴³ CRAF provides emergency airlift support to the DoD and was created after the Berlin Airlift. These planes were manned by civilian pilots and were used to ferry Afghans from the international staging bases in the Middle East and Europe to onward temporary and permanent resettlement locations, while the US military planes went to and from Kabul. This operation far outperformed planners' expectations from early August, which estimated that it would take the US military weeks longer to airlift only 70,000 people out of Kabul.⁴⁴

While the Afghan National Army had largely collapsed in advance of the rapid progression of the Taliban forces, between 500 and 600 Afghan National Army (ANA) Commando Corps members guarded the perimeter of the airport. On 26 August, ISIS-K carried out a suicide bombing attack at the airport's Abby Gate that killed at least 183 people- 170 Afghan civilians and 13 US troops - and injured 200. This attack happened days after ISIS-K detainees escaped from Bagram and Pul-e-Charki prisons and the Pentagon issued warnings about heightened risks of terrorist attacks.⁴⁵

³⁹ Simon, Simon and Dave Mistich, "At the Kabul Airport, Evacuation Flights Forge Ahead Even as Another Attack Is Feared," NPR, August 28, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/08/28/1031976720/air-traffic-controller-in-afghanistan-describes-the-evacuations>.

⁴⁰ UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Statement on President Ashraf Ghani, August 18 2021.

⁴¹ Simon, Scott and Dave Mistich, "At the Kabul Airport, Evacuation Flights Forge Ahead Even as Another Attack Is Feared," NPR, August 28, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/08/28/1031976720/air-traffic-controller-in-afghanistan-describes-the-evacuations>.

⁴² McClanahan, Sarah. "Land at Your Own Risk: Air Guardsmen Honored for Valor during Operation Allies Refuge," Air Force, June 6, 2022, <https://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/3053699/land-at-your-own-risk-air-guardsmen-honored-for-valor-during-operation-allies-r/>.

⁴³ Congressional Research Service, "Afghanistan Evacuation: The Civil Reserve Air Fleet (CRAF) and the Defense Production Act (DPA)," Congress.gov, 2019, <https://crsreports.congress.gov>.

⁴⁴ Austin, Lloyd, "Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III Remarks before the Senate Armed Services Committee," US Department of Defense, September 28, 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/2791954/secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iii-remarks-before-the-senate-armed-service/>.

⁴⁵ Seligman, Lara, Andrew Desiderio, and Alexander Ward, "ISIS Terrorist Threats Jeopardize Afghanistan Evacuation, Pentagon Assessment Warns," POLITICO, August 24, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/08/24/isis-terrorist-threats-afghanistan-kabul-evacuation-506807>.

Using the conflict between the Taliban and ISIS-K as justification for their involvement, the Taliban's Badri-313 battalion acted as informal 'security' outside the airport. These Taliban soldiers used guns and whips against civilians, stating that they were controlling who could enter the airport to prevent another attack.⁴⁶ Just five days later, this same Taliban battalion took control over the Kabul Airport directly after the last US plane left and the withdrawal.⁴⁷

The security situation at the Kabul Airport deteriorated day by day as over a hundred thousand people tried to gain entry to the airport and leave Afghanistan before the US withdrawal. In all, 195 people were killed during OAR.⁴⁸ Most of these casualties occurred during the 26 August Abby Gate attack.⁴⁹ Six other civilians were killed attempting to stowaway on planes; 11 people died in stampedes; others were killed and injured by gunshots exchanged between the Taliban and ANA commandos.⁵⁰

In the wake of the evacuation, countries either capped the number of Afghan refugees they were willing to accept or banned their entry. For example, Pakistan initially threatened to close its borders to Afghanistan entirely, given that the country already hosts 1.4 million Afghan refugees from past conflicts. Despite this, a total of 250,000 Afghans made their way into Pakistan to flee the reinstated Taliban government. These Afghan asylum seekers are currently facing harsh migrant crackdowns in the country, with hundreds facing repatriation to Afghanistan or imprisonment within Pakistani jails.⁵¹

The first wave of evacuees resettling in the US contained 37,000 people. The Biden Administration requested Congressional funding for resettling 65,000 Afghans by the end of

⁴⁶ Trofimov, Yaroslav and Vivian Salama, "In Its Last Days in Kabul, US Turns to Taliban as a Partner," *WSJ*, August 27, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-its-last-days-in-kabul-u-s-turns-to-taliban-as-a-partner-11630105650>.

⁴⁷ Joscelyn, Thomas and Bill Roggio, "Taliban's Special Forces Outfit Providing 'Security' at Kabul Airport | FDD's Long War Journal," *www.longwarjournal.org*, August 22, 2021, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2021/08/talibans-special-forces-outfit-providing-security-at-kabul-airport.php>

⁴⁸ Reuters Staff. "At Least 20 Deaths in Last Week during Kabul Airport Evacuation Effort -NATO Official." *Reuters*, August 22, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/least-20-deaths-last-week-during-kabul-airport-evacuation-effort-nato-official-2021-08-22/>.

⁴⁹ Shelbourne, Mallory. "One Explosive Device Responsible for Deaths of 13 US Service Members in Kabul Attack, Pentagon Says," *USNI News*, February 4, 2022, <https://news.usni.org/2022/02/04/one-explosive-device-responsible-for-deaths-of-13-service-members-in-kabul-attack>.

⁵⁰ Cooper, Helene, and Eric Schmitt. "Body Parts Found in Landing Gear of Flight From Kabul, Officials Say." *The New York Times*, August 17, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/17/us/politics/afghans-deaths-us-plane.html>.

Baker, Sinéad. "12 People Have Been Killed at Kabul Airport since Sunday as the Taliban Say They 'Don't Want to Hurt Anyone.'" *Business Insider*, August 19, 2021. <https://www.businessinsider.com/kabul-airport-12-dead-since-sunday-taliban-tells-people-leave-2021-8?r=US&IR=T>.

Reuters Staff. "Firefight Involving Western Forces Erupts amid Kabul Airport Evacuation Chaos." *Reuters*, August 23, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/germany-says-firefight-involving-western-forces-erupts-kabul-airport-2021-08-23/>.

⁵¹ Reed, Betsy. "Pakistan Sends Back Hundreds of Afghan Refugees to Face Taliban Repression," *the Guardian*, January 10, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/jan/10/pakistan-sends-back-hundreds-of-afghan-refugees-to-face-taliban-repression>.

September 2021 and 95,000 by September 2022.⁵² A rough total of 76,000 Afghans were evacuated for resettlement in the US during OAR, with 9,000 additional individuals leaving the country later via chartered and commercial flights.⁵³

The evacuees roughly fit into three categories. The first category are individuals with no direct connection to US government/military service. This group contains 36,000 individuals or about 40% of the total population. These individuals were technically not eligible for evacuation but were able to get on the planes leaving the Kabul Airport in 2021.⁵⁴ The second category contains individuals who are eligible for an SIV due to their work with the US government/military, but who did not have time to obtain the visa before entering the US. This group also contains 36,000 individuals, comprising another 40% of the population. The last 20% comprises the smallest category—individuals who already held an SIV prior to entering the US due to their work with the US government/military. It is important to remember that these numbers are contested, as there are disagreements over who is eligible.

The SIV program allowed Afghans who had worked for the US government or the International Security Assistance Force for at least 2 years of ‘faithful’ and ‘valuable’ service to petition for an SIV. It was a 14-step process that took an average of three and a half years. The P-2 Refugee Resettlement Program was intended for at-risk Afghans who did not meet the time-in-service requirement, worked for a US government-funded program or project, or were employed by a US based media organization or NGO.

Important questions remain regarding why some groups of Afghan nationals were eligible for SIVs while others were not, and who exactly was evacuated. Some critics accuse the US military and intelligence establishment of prioritizing the evacuation of individuals who belonged to shadowy CIA-affiliated units within the ANA, which have been accused of committing war crimes by human rights groups due to their controversial counterinsurgent night raids.⁵⁵ Members of these ‘Zero Units’ reportedly guarded the Kabul Airport during the airlift, policing who could enter and at times acting violently towards civilians.⁵⁶

⁵² Madhani, Aamer. “States Learning How Many Afghan Evacuees Coming Their Way.” *AP*, September 15, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/us-afghanistan-evacuees-262203820a617808f4a40a130e2d179a>.

⁵³ Kessler, Glenn. “Numbers behind Afghanistan Evacuation Come into Focus,” *Washington Post* (The Washington Post, May 25, 2022), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/05/25/numbers-behind-afghan-evacuation-come-into-focus/>.

⁵⁴ Department of Homeland Security, “Department of Homeland Security Operation Allies Welcome Afghan Evacuee Report,” Department of Homeland Security, December 2021, <https://www.dhs.gov/>.

⁵⁵ Andrew Quilty and Matthew Cole, “The CIA’s Afghan Proxies, Accused of War Crimes, Will Get a Fresh Start in the US,” *The Intercept*, October 5, 2021, <https://theintercept.com/2021/10/05/zero-units-cia-afghanistan-taliban/>.

⁵⁶ Quilty and Cole, “The CIA’s Afghan Proxies, Accused of War Crimes, Will Get a Fresh Start in the US,” October 5, 2021.

Other critics question eligibility categories, as they left out a wide swath of civilian workers—particularly women—who contributed to the US’s nation building project in Afghanistan.⁵⁷ Lastly, critics point to the fact (acknowledged by Defense officials) that many individuals who did not work for the US war effort managed to gain access to the airlift in the confusion, capacity, and screening problems at the airport and are now residing in the US.⁵⁸

d. Operation Allies Welcome

OAW was the US-based continuation of OAR. On 29 August 2021, President Joe Biden tasked the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) with leading resettlement efforts for vulnerable Afghans who partnered with the US military in Afghanistan over the last two decades.⁵⁹ Led by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Administrator Bob Fenton, the DHS created the Unified Coordination Group (UCG), which reported directly to the Secretary of Homeland Security.⁶⁰

In partnership with representatives from state and local governments, NGOs, and the private sector, the UCG oversaw the implementation of initial processing upon arrival to the US, COVID-19 testing, isolation of COVID-positive individuals, vaccinations, additional medical services, and screening and support for individuals who are neither US citizens nor lawful permanent residents.

OAW consisted of eight operational phases. Each phase aimed to provide Afghans with the necessary services to resettle within the US. In late February 2022, the last Afghan family departed the staging bases for resettlement and OAW concluded.

The first phase was Screening and Vetting Prior to Arrival in the United States.⁶¹ This screening occurred at overseas “lily pad” transit locations in countries including Qatar, the UAE, Spain, Italy, Bahrain, and Germany.⁶² Along with the DoD and the DoS, around 400 personnel from the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP), US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the TSA, the United States Coast Guard, and the United States Secret Service facilitated an extensive

⁵⁷Collins, Laura and Natalie Gonnella-Platts, “We Must Stop Excluding Afghan Women and Children from Visa Eligibility,” The Hill, February 15, 2022, <https://thehill.com/opinion/immigration/594282-we-must-stop-excluding-afghan-women-and-children-for-visa-eligibility/>.

⁵⁸ Austin, Lloyd. “Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III Remarks before the Senate Armed Services Committee,” US Department of Defense, September 28, 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/2791954/secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iii-remarks-before-the-senate-armed-service/>.

⁵⁹ Department of Homeland Security. “Fact Sheet on Operation Allies Welcome,” Department of Homeland Security, July 7, 2022, <https://www.dhs.gov/publication/fact-sheet-operation-allies-welcome>.

⁶⁰ Department of Homeland Security. “Fact Sheet on Operation Allies Welcome,” July 7, 2022

⁶¹ Screening and vetting began before the airlift. The resources toward it were greatly expanded in late August 2021, with representatives from these agencies traveling to the overseas “lily pad” locations.

⁶² Department of Homeland Security, “DHS Encountered Obstacles to Screen, Vet, and Inspect All Evacuees during the Recent Afghanistan Crisis (REDACTED),” www.oig.dhs.gov, September 6, 2022, <https://www.oig.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/assets/2022-09/OIG-22-64-Sep22-Redacted.pdf>.

processing, screening, and vetting procedure.⁶³ The process included biometric and biographic screenings consisting of fingerprints, photos, and other biographic data required to clear every Afghan before they were approved to travel to the US. Due to cultural, language, and logistical problems including lack of documentation, some travelers arrived in the US with incomplete screening, which may delay processing and paperwork for future immigration benefits.⁶⁴ Once in the country, Afghan nationals underwent a primary inspection at the airport and a secondary inspection, as needed (See Appendix 2.1 and 2.2).

The second stage was Humanitarian Parole. Following the screening and vetting process, Afghan nationals received humanitarian parole into the US on a case-by-case basis for a period of two years. While on parole, Afghans are subject to a few conditions, including receiving medical screening and necessary vaccinations as well as fulfilling reporting requirements. If these conditions are not upheld, Afghan nationals are at risk of losing their work authorizations and having their parole terminated. Parolees may also apply for immigration benefits through US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). In addition, some parolees may receive Afghan Placement and Assistance (APA) services from local refugee resettlement agencies.

The third stage was Processing of SIVs. Along with their dependents, Afghans who possessed SIVs were admitted as lawful permanent residents and aided by the DoS and NGOs during their resettlement process. Those who did not complete the SIV process are paroled by the DHS.⁶⁵ They have the option of pursuing SIV or applying for another immigration status through USCIS, and they are eligible to apply for work authorization. While the decisions around eligibility were contested, the official definition for who was SIV-eligible was an individual who “took significant risks to support our military and civilian personnel in Afghanistan, were employed by or on behalf of the US government in Afghanistan or our coalition forces, or are a family member of someone who did.”⁶⁶

The fourth stage was COVID-19 Testing, Vaccinations, and Other Medical Services. In addition to testing for COVID-19 before entering the US, Afghan nationals who are paroled into the country are required to receive measles-mumps-rubella, varicella, polio, and COVID-19 vaccinations as well as any necessary medical exams and screenings, which fall under the conditions of their humanitarian parole.⁶⁷ Due to the nature of vaccinations and the vast differences in ages and

⁶³ Department of Homeland Security, “DHS Encountered Obstacles to Screen, Vet, and Inspect All Evacuees during the Recent Afghanistan Crisis (REDACTED),” September 6, 2022

⁶⁴ The overseas screening process took an average of two hours per person when accounting for biometrics and language barriers. When moving 25,000 people per day between locations at the height of the airlift (or averaging 250 arrivals per half hour at the lily pad locations), it became logistically untenable to accomplish this for every person. The DHS Inspector General released a report stating problems with the inspection.

⁶⁵ US Northern Command. “Operation Allies Welcome,” 2021.

⁶⁶ US Northern Command. “Operation Allies Welcome,” 2021.

⁶⁷ Minnesota Department of Health, “Brief Overview for Clinicians Caring for Afghan New Arrivals Context,” October 22, 2021, <https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/about/afghanbrief.pdf>.

vaccination record availability, much of the medical support was conducted at one of the eight DoD-operated Safe Haven locations within the US.⁶⁸ All of these medical services were free.

The fifth stage was Processing at US Military Facilities. Once processing at the port of entry was completed, US citizens, lawful permanent residents, and SIV holders were able to leave the airport. Meanwhile, SIV applicants and other Afghan nationals were transported to US military facilities to receive medical screening and other pertinent services before moving to another destination for resettlement. The DoD provided temporary housing facilities, transportation, medical assistance, and general support at eight different locations, which included the Marine Corps Base Quantico, Virginia; Fort Pickett, Virginia; Fort Lee, Virginia; Holloman Air Force Base, New Mexico; Fort McCoy, Wisconsin; Fort Bliss, Texas; Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, New Jersey; and Camp Atterbury, Indiana.⁶⁹

At each site, a coalition of nearly two dozen interagency and non-governmental organizations worked together to provide coordinated assistance from health care to immigration paperwork processing. Each of the bases were equipped with medical care and limited mental health services. At that point, Afghan evacuees were able to apply for work authorization through USCIS and were directed to additional resettlement resources. In addition, at these eight different facilities, the US Northern Command (NORTHCOM) employed gender advisors with the intent to: “Provide a gender perspective into decision making; build relationships and trust with the female guests; ensure women had equitable access to information and were able to voice their issues, concerns and ideas; and provide English classes and education on US cultural norms and expectations.”⁷⁰

The sixth stage was Applying for Immigration Status, Work Authorization, and Essential Coverage. USCIS personnel review applications for employment authorization, conduct immigration processing, provide administrative support to expedite the processing of applications for immigrant status and work authorization.⁷¹ DoS and the Department of Health and Human Services’ Office of Refugee Resettlement provided initial relocation support to Afghan evacuees granted parole. They also aid with ensuring that Afghans have access to health insurance.⁷² As of September 30, 2021, the Continuing Resolution passed by Congress authorized Afghan parolees to receive the same benefits and services as refugees.

⁶⁸ Masters, Nina B. et al., “Public Health Actions to Control Measles among Afghan Evacuees during Operation Allies Welcome — United States, September–November 2021,” *MMWR. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 71, no. 17 (April 29, 2022): 592–96, <https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm7117a2>.

⁶⁹ US Northern Command, “Operation Allies Welcome,” July 20, 2022.

⁷⁰ US Northern Command Public Affairs, “Gender Advisors Support Operation Allies Welcome Mission,” US Northern Command, May 2, 2022, <https://www.northcom.mil/Newsroom/News/Article/Article/3017105/gender-advisors-support-operation-allies-welcome-mission/#:~:text=Throughout%20the%20duration%20of%20Department%20of%20Defense%20%28DoD%29>.

⁷¹ Department of Homeland Security. “Fact Sheet on Operation Allies Welcome,” July 7, 2022

⁷² Department of Homeland Security. “Fact Sheet on Operation Allies Welcome,” July 7, 2022

The seventh stage was Resettlement Processing. DoS coordinated with over 200 local resettlement affiliates to facilitate resettlement processing. During this process, Afghans were briefed on the conditions of their parole and any violations that could jeopardize their immigration status. By way of the APA, Afghans were placed in various communities across the country.⁷³ The placement process took several factors into consideration, such as housing availability, community capacity, US-based family and friends, and any additional specified needs. The up-to-90-day program provided similar core services as those under the United States Refugee Admissions Program to include temporary housing, appropriate clothing, school enrollment, transportation support, cultural training, and assistance with language, public benefits, and employment.⁷⁴

The eighth stage was housing. Housing providers that wished to assist with refugee resettlement were asked to follow three requests. The first is that available units must have a maximum rent of \$2,000.⁷⁵ Second, they were asked to waive regular requirements such as credit check, background checks, and security deposits.⁷⁶ Lastly, a lease of up to one year was preferred. Regarding paying rent, the federal government allotted \$100 million to cover housing expenses for resettling refugees.⁷⁷ In addition, there were available funds from the Emergency Rental Assistance Program and other federal, state, and local non-profit funding sources.

e. Current Status of Humanitarian Parolees in the US and Afghanistan

Apart from individuals who already hold SIVs, most Afghan evacuees in the US are on humanitarian parole. This allows them to legally reside and work in the US for up to two years before they must file for a change-of-status through USCIS. Currently, this route does not have a clear pathway to permanent residency for individuals who are not SIV-eligible. All evacuees, including non-SIV eligible individuals, have been granted Temporary Protected Status against deportation. However, as the September 2023 deadline approaches, questions remain about what will happen to individuals who are not SIV-eligible after their humanitarian parole ends.

These individuals can still apply for asylum—a legitimate change of status with USCIS. However, the US asylum system is currently facing its largest backlog in history, at 1.6 million pending

⁷³ Office of the Spokesperson, “Briefing with Senior US Government Officials on Operation Allies Welcome Relocation Assistance Efforts for Non-SIV Holders - United States Department of State,” United States Department of State, September 14, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/briefing-with-senior-u-s-government-officials-on-operation-allies-welcome-relocation-assistance-efforts-for-non-siv-holders/>.

⁷⁴ US Citizenship and Immigration Service, “The United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) Consultation and Worldwide Processing Priorities | USCIS,” [www.uscis.gov](https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/refugees-and-asylum/usrap), August 6, 2021, <https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/refugees-and-asylum/usrap>.

⁷⁵ Ryan, Morgan. “Operation Allies Welcome | National Apartment Association,” [www.naahq.org](https://www.naahq.org/operation-allies-welcome#:~:text=What%20is%20Operation%20Allies%20Welcome%3F%20Operation%20Allies%20Welcome), 2022, <https://www.naahq.org/operation-allies-welcome#:~:text=What%20is%20Operation%20Allies%20Welcome%3F%20Operation%20Allies%20Welcome>.

⁷⁶ Ryan, Morgan. “Operation Allies Welcome | National Apartment Association,” 2022

⁷⁷ Ryan, Morgan. “Operation Allies Welcome | National Apartment Association,” 2022

applications.⁷⁸ If no Afghan evacuee-specific legislation is passed, the non-SIV eligible Afghan evacuees will be added to this total. The current wait time for an asylum hearing is just under five years.⁷⁹

Anywhere between 75,000-100,000 SIV-eligible Afghans were left behind after the US evacuation.⁸⁰ These Afghan nationals can still apply for humanitarian parole to enter the US. However, as of March 2023, completion of parolee applications requires an in-person interview at a US Embassy. It is currently not possible to complete this requirement in Afghanistan since the US Embassy Kabul has suspended operations, including all consular services.

For this reason, USCIS currently “cannot fully process requests for parole for individuals in Afghanistan.”⁸¹ As a workaround, USCIS issues a “Notice of Continued Parole Processing” to eligible petitioners, which stipulates that the applicant must arrange their own travel outside of Afghanistan “to a country where there is a US embassy or consulate before we can fully process your parole request.”⁸² Traveling outside of the country is of course extremely challenging for individuals who are being actively pursued by the Taliban for retaliatory strikes due to their prior work for the US. Many of these individuals must stay in hiding and hence have trouble finding work and affording food.

The cascading crises in Afghanistan elevate it as a key arena of humanitarian concern regarding human security and displacement risks. In addition to direct threats from the Taliban, these “involuntarily immobile” individuals are at risk of natural disasters as well as economic collapse.⁸³ Climate induced changes such as desertification threatens to compound the preexisting Afghan displacement crisis, making it a critical theater to study and anticipate humanitarian need.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ Flores, Rosa. “The US Asylum Backlog Is Nearing 1.6 Million, the Highest Number on Record,” *CNN*, December 27, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/12/26/us/asylum-backlog-highest-record/index.html>.

⁷⁹ TRAC Immigration, “A Mounting Asylum Backlog and Growing Wait Times,” *trac.syr.edu*, December 22, 2021, <https://trac.syr.edu/immigration/reports/672/>.

⁸⁰ Dan Luce, “‘Majority’ of Afghan Allies Who Wanted Special Visas Still in Afghanistan,” *NBC News*, August 31, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/small-fraction-america-s-afghan-allies-made-it-out-afghanistan-n1278141>.

⁸¹ US Citizenship and Immigration Service, “Information for Afghan Nationals on Requests to USCIS for Parole | USCIS,” *www.uscis.gov*, November 18, 2022, <https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/humanitarian-parole/information-for-afghan-nationals-on-requests-to-uscis-for-parole>.

⁸² US Citizenship and Immigration Service, “Information for Afghan Nationals on Requests to USCIS for Parole | USCIS,” November 18, 2022

⁸³ Nguyen, Hanh, Themba Lewis, and Hui Yin Chuah, “Unable to Leave: The Afghans Stuck in Afghanistan,” *The Diplomat*, October 13, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/unable-to-leave-the-afghans-stuck-in-afghanistan/>.

⁸⁴ “Climate Refugees | Othering & Belonging Institute,” *belonging.berkeley.edu*, n.d., <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/climate-refugees-4>. and Nasrat Sayed and Said Hashmat, “Climate Change Compounds Longstanding Displacement in Afghanistan - Afghanistan | ReliefWeb,” *reliefweb.int*, June 29, 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/climate-change-compounds-longstanding-displacement-afghanistan>.

III. Literature Review

a. US Withdrawal of Afghanistan

While academic writing on the 2021 US evacuation of Afghanistan is still scarce, there is a growing literature examining the airlift operation and the conditions leading to the withdrawal. These works include anthropologically grounded studies as well as personal, journalistic, and literary accounts to explain what happened and primarily ‘what went wrong.’

Arsalan Noori and Noah Coburn’s forthcoming (2023) book, *The Last Days of the Afghan Republic*, offers a humanized story of the US evacuation of Afghanistan. The book is grounded in interviews with Afghan nationals and the “agony of lives so clearly destroyed” by an event that was “completely avoidable.”⁸⁵ Noori and Coburn argue that the US evacuation of Afghanistan was an extension of its policy in the country for the past 20 years: “there was plenty of good intentions and money (and guns), but the strategy was not fully thought out. There was no endgame in place, government agencies were awful at cooperating, bureaucracies were slow to make decisions, and the politics and culture of Afghanistan were fundamentally misunderstood time and time again.”⁸⁶ Andrew Quilty’s book is also grounded in eyewitness accounts of the fall of Kabul, tracing the chronological accounts of several Afghan nationals through the month of August 2021. The longform journalistic piece is built upon Quilty’s early work on the rural-urban divide in Afghanistan and how this dynamic was a key driver of US failure in the country.⁸⁷

Scott Mann’s book takes a different tack, writing about the fall of Kabul from the perspective of a US service member who became involved in evacuating individual Afghan nationals from the country. This account focuses largely on the effects of blaming policy failure on veterans and people on the frontlines.⁸⁸ Also written from a participant’s perspective but with a more literary style, *The Fifth Act* (2022) traces the US evacuation of Afghanistan as a story of betrayal, both of US service people and Afghans. Elliot concludes that the US’s ‘one foot in, one foot out’ attitude towards its mission in Afghanistan is largely to blame for the chaotic withdrawal of Afghanistan: “Resources existed to build out of concrete, but why would we do that? At any given point in our twenty-year Afghan odyssey, we were always — in our minds, at least — only a year or two out from a drawdown followed by an eventual withdrawal.”⁸⁹

While most government reports are either classified or unfinished, a few publications on the US evacuation of Afghanistan exist alongside speeches, public statements, Congressional research reports by officials. The Department of Homeland Security Inspector General (DHS IG) issued a

⁸⁵ Noori, Arsalan, and Noah Coburn. *The Last Days of the Afghan Republic: A Doomed Evacuation Twenty Years in the Making*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023. 9.

⁸⁶ Noori, Arsalan, and Noah Coburn. *The Last Days of the Afghan Republic*, 11

⁸⁷ Quilty, Andrew. *August in Kabul: America’s Last Days in Afghanistan*. S.I.: MELBOURNE UNIV PRESS, 2022.

⁸⁸ Mann, Scott. *Operation Pineapple Express: The Incredible Story of a Group of Americans Who Undertook One Last Mission and Honored a Promise in Afghanistan*. S.I.: SIMON & SCHUSTER, 2023.

⁸⁹ Ackerman, Elliot. *The Fifth Act: America’s End in Afghanistan*. New York: Penguin Press, 2022.

redacted report on the US evacuation of Afghanistan. The lessons learned and recommendations from DoD and DoS reports are classified or unfinished.

b. Family, Society, and Conflict in Afghanistan

To contextualize the key themes explored in the interview data and this report's recommendations, it is necessary to give a brief overview of the salience and structures of family and kinship in Afghan society. As a complex construct, 'culture' has been studied across disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, management, and political science. As such, there is debate and evolution in scholars' thinking on key dimensions of culture. One enduring concept relevant to this study is the dimension of individualism-collectivism. Individualism can be defined as viewing the "self" as independent and separate from others," whereas collectivism can be broadly defined as an "interdependent self."⁹⁰

The features and forms of the concept of 'family' differs between individualist and collectivist societies, with American society being highly individualistic and Afghan society being highly collectivistic.⁹¹ In Afghanistan, a person's sense of self is typically enmeshed within broader kinship ties.⁹² While there is variation amongst ethnicities and/or economic classes, family dynamics tend to be patriarchal with the male head of household in charge of major decisions such as economics, while women act as homemakers. Afghan families tend to be large and intergenerational, sometimes up to three or four generations, including in-laws. As such, the Euro-American concept of the 'immediate' or 'nuclear' family - spouses and their children - does not travel well to this cultural context.

The process of becoming a refugee and fleeing violence can alter family structures of a society. Both immigrant and refugee families face challenges when they try to build new lives in host countries. However, immigrants and refugees often encounter different obstacles and hardships, as refugee families "may not have chosen the time, means or location of their migration, and often face unique challenges in maintaining a connection with their country of origin and with family left behind."⁹³ Additionally, a broader collapse of social and or political order can be mirrored in the relationships within familial units.⁹⁴ Refugee families may have

⁹⁰ Fatehi, Kamal, Jennifer L Priestley, and Gita Taasoobshirazi. "The Expanded View of Individualism and Collectivism: One, Two, or Four Dimensions?" *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management* 20, no. 1 (April 2020): 7–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470595820913077>.

⁹¹ Krys, Kuba, John M. Zelenski, Colin A. Capaldi, Joonha Park, Wijnand Tilburg, Yvette Osch, Brian W. Haas, et al. "Putting the 'We' Into Well-being: Using Collectivism-Themed Measures of Well-Being Attenuates Well-being's Association With Individualism." *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* 22, no. 3 (September 2019): 256–67. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajsp.12364>.

⁹² Bullough, Amanda, Maija Renko, and Dina Abdelzaher. "Women's Business Ownership: Operating Within the Context of Institutional and In-Group Collectivism." *Journal of Management* 43, no. 7 (September 2017): 2037–64. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206314561302>.

⁹³ Hynie, Michaela, Sepali Guruge, and Yogendra B. Shakya. "Family Relationships of Afghan, Karen and Sudanese Refugee Youth." *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 44, no. 3 (2013): 11-28. doi:10.1353/ces.2013.0011.

⁹⁴ Boyden, Jo, Joanna de Berry, Thomas Feeny, and Jason Hart. *Children affected by armed conflict in South Asia: A review of trends and issues identified through secondary research*. Oxford: Refugee Studies Centre, 2002.

witnessed violence and been involuntarily separated from family members, which can have lasting intergenerational effects.

c. Afghan Refugee Mental Health

Much of the literature on Afghan refugees resettled in the US focuses on prior waves of Afghan refugees resettled in the US and is limited to the mental health needs of this community. One of the chief findings from the existing literature is that there is a general “need” for greater “mental health literacy” (MHL) amongst the Afghan refugee population. MHL, amongst other things, assesses whether an individual understands that their traumatic experiences can manifest in the form of mental health disorders, and that medical services exist to treat these disorders.⁹⁵

This literature also finds that Afghan refugees and asylum seekers “who continue to seek international protection with prolonged exposure to war” disproportionately suffer from depressive and post-traumatic stress disorders.⁹⁶ This distress is theorized as being rooted in “cultural conflicts and loss.”⁹⁷ This literature demonstrates that while the Afghan refugee population may have significant needs in terms of mental health services, greater attention needs to be paid to their culturally specific help-seeking patterns.

Other studies show that this population could potentially benefit from health education topics including stress management, heart health, nutrition, raising children in the United States, aging in the United States, and diabetes.⁹⁸ These needs - as well as treatment seeking behavior - should be viewed through a gender lens, as cultural characteristics have been shown to influence Afghan women's access to health care, women's approach toward preventive care, control of information regarding sexuality, and spousal abuse.⁹⁹ For example, Afghan women have been shown to exhibit and explain symptoms of depression somatically, which is different

⁹⁵ Yaser, Anisa, Shameran Slewa-Younan, Caroline A. Smith, Rebecca E. Olson, Maria Gabriela Uribe Guajardo, and Jonathan Mond. “Beliefs and Knowledge about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder amongst Resettled Afghan Refugees in Australia.” *International Journal of Mental Health Systems* 10, no. 1 (December 2016): 31. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13033-016-0065-7>.

⁹⁶ Slewa-Younan, Shameran, Anisa Yaser, Maria Gabriela Uribe Guajardo, Haider Mannan, Caroline A. Smith, and Jonathan M. Mond. “The Mental Health and Help-Seeking Behaviour of Resettled Afghan Refugees in Australia.” *International Journal of Mental Health Systems* 11, no. 1 (December 2017): 49. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13033-017-0157-z>.

Alemi, Qais, Sigrid James, Romalene Cruz, Veronica Zepeda, and Michael Racadio. “Psychological Distress in Afghan Refugees: A Mixed-Method Systematic Review.” *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health* 16, no. 6 (December 2014): 1247–61. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10903-013-9861-1>.

⁹⁷ Alemi, Qais, Sigrid James, Hafifa Siddiq, and Susanne Montgomery. “Correlates and Predictors of Psychological Distress among Afghan Refugees in San Diego County.” *International Journal of Culture and Mental Health* 8, no. 3 (July 3, 2015): 274–88. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17542863.2015.1006647>.

⁹⁸ Public Health Nursing, “Afghan Health Education Project: A Community Survey,” 1995.

⁹⁹ Journal of Transcultural Nursing, “A Qualitative Inquiry of Older Afghan Refugee Women’s Individual and Sociocultural Factors of Health and Health Care Experiences in the United States,” 15 January 2023; Health Care for Women International, “Health issues among Afghan women in California,” June 2020

from Afghan men.¹⁰⁰ Children and adolescent Afghan refugees also exhibit unique needs, many having experienced traumatic events in formative years.¹⁰¹

In addition to the common economic challenges facing refugees resettling in the US context, Afghan refugees may face specific obstacles. The Afghan refugees from the 1980s are generally used as an example of successful economic integration of a resettled population into US society. However, more recent studies seem to indicate lower income levels and economic integration difficulties amongst later-wave Afghan refugees (Stempel and Alemi, 2020). Whether this trend continues with the 2021 evacuee wave of Afghan refugees is of course a long-term question in need of empirics (and the pandemic economy will certainly play a large mediating factor); but knowledge of these trends may assist refugee resettlement organizations in providing support to avoid poor economic integration.

Policy engagement with large global issues such as security, sovereignty, and migration oftentimes take place through the “everyday practices” of “local actors,” like those who work within state-level refugee assistance programs.¹⁰² In this way, locally implementable policies can be seen as buttressing larger principled norms such as refugee protection.¹⁰³ Therefore, academics and practitioners alike stand to learn from studying these international processes from the bottom-up.¹⁰⁴ This report takes a grounded approach to studying what has been termed the “Afghan refugee crisis.”¹⁰⁵ The authors hope that the key insights elucidated from these interviews might inform local governmental and non-governmental decision making around refugee resettlement, as subnational authorities can impact refugee post-resettlement experiences in a variety of ways.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁰ Medical Anthropology Quarterly | International Journal for the Analysis of Health, “Afghan Refugee Explanatory Models of Depression: Exploring Core Cultural Beliefs and Gender Variations,” 26 April 2016.

¹⁰¹ The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease, “Depression and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Among a Community Sample of Adolescent and Young Adult Afghan Refugees,” January 1995.

¹⁰² Acharya, Amitav. ‘How ideas spread: whose norms matter? Norm localization and institutional change in Asian regionalism’, *International Organization* 58: 2, 2004, pp. 239–75

¹⁰³ Betts, Alexander, Fulya Memişoğlu and Ali Ali, ‘What difference do mayors make? The role of municipal authorities in Turkey and Lebanon’s response to Syrian refugees’, *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34: 1, 2021, pp. 491–519 at p. 494.

¹⁰⁴ Acharya, Amitav. ‘How ideas spread,’ 2011, 96.

¹⁰⁵ Coen, Alise. “Localizing refugeehood: norms and the US resettlement of Afghan allies,” *International Affairs*, Volume 98, Issue 6, November 2022, Pages 2021–2038, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iia219>

¹⁰⁶ Gowayed, Heba. “Resettled and unsettled: Syrian refugees and the intersection of race and legal status in the United States,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 43: 2, 2020, pp. 275–93.

IV. Methods

a. Ethics

This project received ethics approval from Brown University's Institutional Review Board (Protocol #3147). All research was conducted according to best practice. Given the vulnerable nature of the population, the research team devised a safety plan that was overseen by a clinical physician in case a participant experienced a mental health crisis during the study. Protocols ranged from suggesting a break from the study to cessation of the interview to referral for urgent mental health care. All participants were offered a list of local mental health resources. Due to the sensitive nature of the topics being discussed, Brown IRB granted the research team approval for non-written consent. Consent scripts were read in the participant's preferred language. Interviews were de-identified and confidential. All digital data was encrypted and stored on a secure server; paper-based data was de-identified and kept behind two locks, separate from the key. Noah Ruttenberg and Perri Peltz generously provided funding to support this project.

b. Participant Recruitment

The Brown University research team partnered with the Providence-based nonprofit post-resettlement organization the Refugee Dream Center (RDC) to recruit participants for this study. The RDC's Afghan case manager handled the interview scheduling with guidance from the lead Brown researcher on how to systematically sample the population. The team recruited participants that were between the ages of 18-65 who were evacuated from Kabul during OAR and who experienced OAW once they arrived to the US. The team used purposive sampling to ensure the participation of males and females, different ethnic groups, and individuals from different immigration categories.

c. Data Collection

This report draws on 32 in-depth semi-structured interviews with Afghan evacuees who experienced OAR and OAW firsthand before resettling in Rhode Island. 23 of these individuals also consented to completing clinically validated mental health questionnaires - PCL-5, GAD-7, and PHQ-9 - to screen for depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) respectively.

The mental health screeners and the first half of the interview protocol were designed to gather information on the immediate needs of the population. The second half of the interview was designed to elicit information and stories about the participant's experiences working with the US government or military (when applicable) and their experiences of OAR and OAW. Interviewees who consented to the mental health screeners filled them out prior to the interview. Administering both study procedures lasted 60-90 minutes, while interview-only appointments were 30-60 minutes.

Data collection took place in Providence, RI from October 2021 to September 2022 as evacuees arrived in Rhode Island. Interviews mostly took place in-person at the RDC office in downtown Providence, RI but also took place over Zoom or WhatsApp when necessary. Interviews were conducted in English, Dari and Pashto using simultaneous translation by native speakers. The mental health screeners were translated into Dari and Pashto, and when necessary, the translators helped explain concepts in a culturally relevant manner.

d. Data Analysis

The analysis phase took place from September 2022-January 2023. Interviews were transcribed and checked for translation accuracy by two native Dari and Pashto speakers. After consensus was reached on translations, transcripts were uploaded to NVivo. The transcripts were kept in the same project file but were sorted into subfolders according to whether the participant worked with the US military/government, or if they were a dependent/other. These two subtypes were coded alongside one another but can also be separated by type for different analytical insights. The project yielded a single refined codebook.

The research team utilized a grounded, iterative process to identify key themes and create several drafts of a codebook. The mental health screeners were calculated and recorded in excel. These screeners were used to triangulate and add validity to interview data, rather than stand on their own for research purposes.

The research team wrote memos and had extensive discussions about findings to leverage different analytical insights. Through a process of consensus coding, the research team came to agree on the main findings of the data. These memos identified the key themes presented in this report.

e. Limitations

The team strived for gender inclusivity in the sample but faced obstacles. The most intensive interview collection took place over Ramadan 2022 and the team had trouble connecting with women who were largely occupied with iftar preparation and childcare. When the team could reach a culturally acceptable agreement with families, women were interviewed without a male guardian by a female interviewer. However, in some cases, women needed to be interviewed with a male guardian present. The research team recognizes the limits of some of these interviews but still treats them as important sources of data.

The authors also want to add a note of methodological caution regarding interviewee statements. Any data based on interviews must be understood as imperfect information - researchers have no way of telling if the statements are true reflections of a participant's perceptions or merely a framing presented to the researcher. There is a large social desirability factor in asking recent evacuees their perceptions of the government that evacuated them and in many cases was their former employer. While many individuals interviewed for this project expressed gratitude to various actors and the report explores those themes, it should be noted that this gratitude was often complicated and mixed. Additionally, expressions of gratitude could be interpreted as expressions of fear over losing benefits or being sent back to

Afghanistan. Expressions of gratitude towards singular US service people should not also not be read as endorsements for US policy or history in Afghanistan. While the respondents did not give the researchers reason to doubt their statements about the US or their experiences of the operations, these quotes should be taken in their social contexts.

V. Key Themes

This section explores the key themes that arose from the interviews conducted with Afghan refugees, which included individuals with the three different legal statuses: SIV holders, SIV-eligible, and non-SIV eligible. It is structured roughly chronologically, opening with participants' perceptions of their lives and livelihoods in Afghanistan working with the US or allies, to their experiences of the fall of Kabul and OAR, to their experiences of OAW and subsequent resettling in RI. It concludes with participants' concerns and hopes for their futures in their new country.

Names have been redacted from interviewee quotes. Where it is not analytically necessary, familial relationships, gender, and locations are also not specified.

a. Risks and Rewards: Working for the US Government and Military in Afghanistan

A section of the interview protocol was designed to elicit participant observations and attitudes towards their work and/or interactions with US government and military in Afghanistan. For those individuals who worked with the US, questions focused on their work experiences as well as their experiences of OAR and OAW. For those who fell into the "Dependents/Other" segment, when applicable, researchers asked about family members' work with the US but mainly focused on their firsthand experiences of OAR and OAW.

The individuals in this study who worked with the US military and government fulfilled a variety of roles. These positions included: pilots, engineers, security guards, intelligence officers, interpreters, contractors, administrative clerks, frontline soldiers, special forces, and presidential protection. Some of the participants were in the ANA from the earliest days of the US War in Afghanistan, fighting in the most dangerous parts of the country like Helmand Province.

According to participants who served in these roles, they received a variety of technical training from the US government including firearms, dismantling bombs, flying military aircraft, spycraft, administrative software, and personal security. Importantly for their subsequent evacuation and resettlement in the US, several of these individuals were also taught English—a skill that was helpful for more lucrative employment in Afghanistan but also for obtaining employment post-resettlement in the US. It is notable that the participants who worked with the US government/military in Afghanistan tended to be more proficient in English than other interviewees.

Most of these individuals told researchers that they had a good life in Afghanistan while working with the US. In particular, they mentioned higher salaries than they might otherwise earn: "I was with US embassy and everything was smoothly going and I was enjoying my life and we had good salaries." Several described a sense of pride working against the Taliban,

something that they pointed to as a reason for why they felt unsafe after the fall of Kabul and needed to evacuate.

Interviewees also told researchers about collegial and friendly relationships with their US counterparts. These bonds were oftentimes formed during combat, as the participant quote below explains:

“Part of a bomb exploded near me and part of it just went through my arm and passed through me. And that also injured my leg. They took me back to the base and they helped me to get better... I even have documents documenting everything about my injury and how American soldiers helped me.”

Several maintain contact with the US service members they worked with after having been evacuated. One individual stays in contact with their US counterparts through an interpreter, saying that the US supervisors are still there for them when they have questions or concerns. Another interviewee told a story about building a bond with the US service member who taught them how to fly a jet for surveillance missions:

“The first time was difficult little bit to fly but [US SERVICE MEMBER] is a good guy and teached me very well... We have got some pictures and also the video. Still I have contact with him; he’s a good guy.”

Given the nature of their work, the benefits of working with the US carried major challenges and risks to personal and familial safety. Many of those who worked for the ANA described the difficulties of being away from their families, who tended to live in remote provinces. In the words of one former soldier, if they received a “clue on the Taliban, we would just go and fight.”

Several participants described the constant danger of their work. For example, one individual said their “specialty” was walking around city streets near US installations looking for bombs to disarm. Another described their work as a plain-clothed agent who would keep a lookout for suspicious activity around US points of interest and critical infrastructure in the area they lived. In the words of one of these individuals: “Everyday, I felt that ‘I might die today.’”

Given the danger of this work, several interviewees described the deaths of both allies and alleged belligerents. Unsolicited by the researchers, some individuals were willing to share their most harrowing stories, including firefights, bomb dismantling gone wrong, and intervening in active terrorist attacks. For example, the excerpt below describes a particularly grisly experience on the job, recounted to the research team by an interviewee who was tasked with real-time intervention in terrorist attacks:

“One day on our mission, it was reported that there was a suicide attacker with a red vehicle... But what they [the terrorists] did at the last minute: they changed their vehicle from red to silver... We just saw it was coming and wasn’t so far

from us. And when it blasted it killed our colleagues and we couldn't do anything. One of my colleagues lost half of his head; it had gone out with the blast. The other lost his leg... When the vehicle blasted, the motor of the vehicle- the engine- came directly to the chest of my colleague."

Even those who worked as civilians described witnessing violence as part of their job. One interviewee worked as a guard at both the US Embassy and a hotel that housed US government offices. The Taliban targeted the hotel in a terrorist attack, and the interviewee described: "many of my colleagues died in there."

b. Operation Allies Refuge: Chaos and Uncertainty in Kabul

The lead-up to the US evacuation of Afghanistan was chaotic and urgent. After the fall of Kabul on 15 August 2021, Hamid Karzai International Airport remained the only non-Taliban controlled route out of the country, being protected by several thousand NATO troops. On 16 August, over 100,000 people swarmed the airport, trying to gain access to the departing planes. Thus, it makes sense that nearly every interviewee described a traumatic experience of the evacuation both in terms of how they learned of their eligibility for evacuation and the actual airlift operation at the Kabul airport.

Conversations with interviewees reflected disbelief at the pace of the country's fall to the Taliban. One individual who worked at the US embassy in administration described their shock and unwillingness to believe that Kabul could fall, even when the Taliban forces were two hours away from the capital:

"I myself never think that Taliban came in Afghanistan again- maybe come in some provinces but they'll never come in Kabul anymore. Never we thought of this, you know. But it happened suddenly; we have received an email from the US embassy. They told us that you should not come anymore to the office. Please stay at home. So it was night before the Taliban came to in Kabul, right? They came to the close provinces around Kabul. It was almost two hours far from Kabul- on that time even, I didn't think that the Taliban came over and tomorrow will be inside Kabul. Never thought that."

A member of the ANA echoed this disbelief at the revolution's pace, stating: "everything happen suddenly. We didn't have any expectation for it; we didn't know about that. Everything come *that* suddenly." Members of the Afghan security establishment described the kinetic situation, exemplified in the quote below from an interviewee who fought against the Taliban with their unit to reach Kabul:

"We had an order from our supervisors to never give up. Come with your supplies to the airport. We didn't give up for them [Taliban] and we fought with them and came to Kabul. When we came inside Kabul, we were in the city and the Taliban were also in the city. We fought with each other in the city."

It is important to note that for individuals who lived outside of the internationalized capital, the rapid onset and strength of the Taliban - who had set up shadow governments in more rural provinces - was less shocking.¹⁰⁷

Leading up to the US evacuation, many reported that they were notified with a moment's notice when it was time for them to leave their country. Once notified, generally via email, they were forced to quickly gather their belongings and make their way to the airport in Kabul, sometimes on their own.

One participant described receiving an email informing them and their family to come to the airport at three in the morning. However, the crowds were so large that they ended up waiting from three to 11 in the morning trying to reach the gate and eventually had to return home for safety reasons. The interviewee then called their supervisor at the Embassy, who arranged for the interviewee's entire department to be picked up in vehicles and escorted to the airport. The interviewee's spouse elaborated on the story, saying that the US Embassy advised their spouse via email each day to "please wait" to go to the airport until they sent official transportation. They were left in a state of limbo, wondering when and if the transports were coming.

Another eligible participant and their spouse attempted to make it to the airport with the help of a US ally's embassy. After days of attempting to evacuate and not being able to make it to the airport due to the Taliban and the crowds, they missed their flight and the last day of the evacuation passed.¹⁰⁸ They recount the story below:

"The [US ALLY] embassy personnel would take us to airport everyday for an attempt to evacuate. There were a lot of people and Taliban wouldn't allow it. Their was firing and hitting and shouting. We stayed in a tent close to the airport and there wasn't anything in there. We couldn't sleep. We stayed there for two days and because we couldn't bear it anymore, we got back to a safer place."

The Taliban's surrounding of the airport caused stress, uncertainty and physical injuries to multiple people we spoke with. Several of these people tried to gain entry to the Kabul Airport for days due to the Taliban repeatedly not letting them in. One interviewee lamented: "The hardest thing was when Taliban would hit my children in front of me." Another person recounted a similar story about the Taliban beating their children outside the airport and that they had to return home and wait for an official escort.

Some participants also reported that they were given little information about if they were eligible, or at the very least did not understand the information they were given. In the words of one Afghan soldier:

¹⁰⁷ Noori, Arsalan, and Noah Coburn. *The Last Days of the Afghan Republic: A Doomed Evacuation Twenty Years in the Making*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023.

¹⁰⁸ These individuals were eventually able to leave Afghanistan on a chartered flight two months later.

“I didn't have any information when I should go to the airport, which way should I should go to the airport, how I should go to the airport. And we were just informed that you reach out yourself to the airport and we had one week to come to the airport and get in.”

Another interviewee - also a soldier for the ANA - described fighting the Taliban with their unit all the way to the Kabul Airport from another province, guarding the airport for seven days, and then being evacuated themselves. This individual reports not understanding that they were to be evacuated until the day of their evacuation. Another interviewee who fought with the ANA reported the same story, only they were evacuated on the same day they retreated from their base and had no time to contact eligible family members to join. In their words: “it’s difficult. It is so difficult.” A different participant who served in the ANA provided more details on a similarly information-scarce situation in the days leading up to their evacuation:

“[We] heard from our supervisors and from their colonel- so they said that ‘we are not going to fight anymore with them [Taliban] and we stopped everything.’ So we moved from there [the base] to cover and the capital...”

It was three days inside the airport. I was there only three days and the situation was not good so I could not go to visit my family. And they were not in Kabul- they were in other province, [NAME OF PROVINCE], so they were far from me. We couldn't go and visit them and there were Taliban spread everywhere, so we couldn't go out.

When we were inside the base, our supervisors when they told them that we should not fight anymore with them, we're going to submit everything and we are leaving here and we came to Kabul- and this even we didn't have full information, what will happen in the future.

So what will be going on in the future? So I think when we came to the Kabul airport, then I understood that we are going to America; ‘Wow.’”

One ANA service member we spoke to had been in the middle of their vacation when the evacuation orders went out. Through their own account, they learned via television - not official sources - that members of the Army were to be evacuated. Even though they did not believe that the US was really evacuating ANA service members, they recounted making the decision to go to the Kabul Airport just in case:

“I was on vacation for 14 days. I was at home. So everything happened and I was not at base and nobody told me about this: that where I should go and every person was busy with themself- even the managers, the supervisors. So I was the person to take the decision and I came from home [to Kabul]. With my ID

card, with my badge, with the employee badge. So I came to the gate of the airport and the US army allowed me to come in and this was what happened.

It was very bad situation back then and everybody was in rush to go out. Every person was trying to be saved, and I'm also one of them. I could not even check my family. Every person left and just for saving myself, I came to the airport and came out of there... it was a time that people were rushing and were escaping from the place.”

Some people reported learning of the evacuation solely through communications with relatives living abroad rather than through official channels, as reflected in this quote: “My sister in London told me to leave Afghanistan, so I went to the airport and left just like that.”

This confusion and panic led to at least one interviewee who was not eligible to see an opportunity to better their lives. They stated simply:

“If I can be a part of the evacuation, which is going to a country which is ‘opportunity land,’ why not? Why not take that?... It was pretty impossible for me to make a career just like I can make it here [in the US] to make it in Afghanistan. And after the invasion, like everything is done”

Some members of the Army we spoke to understood they were to be evacuated and had enough time to send for their families to join. However, even in these cases, they did not know what day they would leave and one interviewee stated he was informed two hours before his flight was to depart.

In several instances amidst the chaos it was ad hoc, real-time decision making of US service members that granted both eligible and non-eligible Afghans the ability to leave Afghanistan. One Afghan soldier explained that their American counterparts protected their unit of Afghan soldiers - which at this point was deep inside Taliban controlled territory - by getting them to an abandoned base so they could hide out until the Americans could arrange transport to the Kabul Airport. Because the Taliban had already raided the base, the interviewee said their unit went without food for a couple of days until US soldiers were able to move them to the Kabul airport, where they were then able to call their family to have them join.

Several interviewees stated that their US colleagues personally helped them evacuate, above and beyond their responsibilities. For example, one interviewee described being able to escape Afghanistan by flying a commercial plane into a neighboring country. After convincing the foreign airport to let them land, they contacted their US counterparts. Over the course of the next month, the same US service members were able to coordinate their travel to the staging base in Dubai and onward to Abu Dhabi so that they could eventually reach the US. After resettling in their final destination, the participant stated that they still maintain contact with the US service members that helped them.

In other cases, non-eligible individuals recounted the negotiations and pleading with US service members that allowed them to access the airport and be evacuated. One participant who was not eligible for evacuation stated: “I went to the airport and the US soldiers really helped me to get out of the country. And we are really thankful for them.”

A non-eligible relative of an SIV-holder had a similar experience when they went to the airport with their eligible relative:

“When I got to know that my [eligible relative] is leaving because of the Taliban, I thought that I should leave. But when I came to the airport, my [RELATIVE] went in and I couldn't go with him because I wasn't working with the US government and that was clear. The US government did not allow me to come in [to the airport]. So my [RELATIVE] came inside the airport without me but I insisted that I have my college documentation, certificates or something.

So I explained it all for the US [service member]. They asked me: ‘where are you going? Do you have anything to come in?’ he said. I told him the truth: ‘that I'm a college student. I have nothing. I haven't worked with this government but I have to prolong my education if it's possible that I will go in [to the airport].’ So they made a kindness for me and they put me in [the airport] and I came here.”

Another interviewee tells a similar story of successfully asking a US service member to let them into the airport without proper documentation:

“All the airport gates were closed, there was only one gate open and I went and showed them I was a reporter and asked if they could please help me. They helped me and I ran away. She was a US soldier- she helped me and I got on the plane.”

In another case, an interviewee who had not worked with the US could not discern if their past job working inside the Kabul Airport made them eligible for evacuation. They decided to go to the airport with their friend on the off chance that they could be evacuated, assuming that if they couldn't, they could simply return home:

“I told my friend: I may not be able to get into the airport. I don't have any documentation. For a while, I worked as a [AIRPORT VENDOR]. But my friend pressured and he told me: ‘Let's go; there's a chance that we can go. At least if we can go, that's okay. Otherwise, we can come back’”

However, the situation was much more violent at the airport than they had anticipated due to the large crowds and Taliban presence; they stated that they saw three people die that day and were scared that they might die, too. At their zenith of desperation in the crowd, they reported:

“One of the army from the US government- he was very kind with me and took my hands. I just showed him my ID and he took my hand and said: “come in.” We went inside to the gate and we went to the airport.”

In addition to the confusion and negotiations over eligibility, people described exceptionally traumatic experiences at the Kabul Airport. One eligible evacuee fought against crowd repellent gas that was being used by the ANA on those trying to force their way through the airport gates. In their words: “It was hell. It was a very bad day.” Another participant said: “we could hear the sound of gunshots” as they were waiting on the tarmac to board their plane. A woman we spoke to described becoming pressed against an airport fence with their young daughter by a crowd and witnessing a terrorist attack. She explained that “for 20 or 30 minutes, we were just seeing deaths really close.”

After fighting across three different Taliban-occupied territories to get to the Kabul Airport, an interviewee who was a member of the ANA lost a comrade right before they were to evacuate in a seemingly random accident on the tarmac:

“When we came to the airport [we] had to guard there for three days. We were guards so when our shift finished, one of my colleagues wanted to check the machine gun and see how it worked and it blasted and he died. I don’t know what happened with that machine gun but it blasted and killed my colleague...

It was almost the end of the day we were almost finished but it blasted. It was very bad news. Everything went down in that time. The foreign people- American government soldiers also didn’t know what happened there. They thought Taliban people came in and were shooting. In that situation if you hear the sound of bullets any person cannot control that, maybe be ready for fighting.”

Even those individuals who had comparatively smooth experiences getting to the airport still witnessed stressful situations, such as seeing individuals clinging to the outside of the departing planes:

“The first time we went there [to the airport] we couldn’t get past the crowd of people there so we got back home and US embassy told my [RELATIVE] when to leave the house and would notify us when to leave. When we got the message - the email - we left the house, got a taxi, went straight to the airport, [they] opened the gate because Americans said so. We got into a bus that took us straight into the airport.

There were like 50 to 60 people that day that got into the airport with us in the buses. We got to get out easily without much problem and we waited like 4 hours for the airplane to come and get us.

After we got out was when the Taliban and other terrorists made their move and really bad stuff happened. People were sticking themselves onto the airplane, holding on."

Another interviewee told researchers that the airlift was their first experience flying and that the flight alone was challenging and frightening:

"I didn't have any flight experience before. It was my first experience with the airplanes and that was US air force airplanes, and it was all cross-seating. There was not any chairs- there wasn't any seats to sit on. We all sat across on the floor of that airplane and many people were there, so it was a very bad experience. And it was shocking; it was painful. It was difficult for me. I mean, that's for the first time I went inside the airplane and with such a situation, it was hard. It was difficult.

Interviewees described having overall negative experiences on the US bases outside of the US, while (as will be detailed in the next section) they described overall positive experiences in the bases within the US. While the stressful and traumatic experiences of the Kabul evacuation could account for a portion of this differentiated experience, interviewees did describe notable challenges in the international US bases.

One interviewee described heat exhaustion from lack of shade in Qatar: "Qatar we stayed there for 13 nights. So there was very hot and our childrens got burned; their bodies." In a separate interview, another participant reported similarly negative experiences in Qatar:

"It was one of the worst moments in my life. It was not a pleasant place to live in, because you were forced to live with others, and we did not have any privacy. Sometimes some families were forced to live together without any privacy."

Another interviewee explained that there was a lack of basic supplies in Germany:

"In Germany, my life was miserable. I couldn't find good food... or personal care stuff that there was nothing. I was just waiting there without like getting any help, but in New Jersey was good. And my experience with the New Jersey camp was not bad at all."

However, not all interviewees described experiencing the same challenging conditions. For example, one person stated: "in Qatar we had everything and we had really nice rooms and they had everything inside." Another person had a similarly positive experience in Qatar with their family:

"We spent 15 days at Qatar. We had nice rooms. We received clothes. We received everything very clean and new, and they had very good reaction with us and we are very happy from them."

c. Operation Allies Welcome: Glimpses of Hope, Lingering Sorrow

The individuals we spoke with described generally positive experiences on the eight staging bases within the US. Complaints tended to be about the length of time they needed to stay on the base, with one participant saying that they were kept for 6 months before their onward journey for resettlement. Due to these long wait times, some individuals said they suffered boredom, malaise, and depression.

As mentioned above, several participants directly compared their 'bad' experiences in the international US bases to their 'good' experiences in the US safe haven bases. This is notable, as participants generally spent much shorter times in the international bases:

“And after 13 days we came to the Indiana camp [from Qatar]- we stayed there for three months. There was a lot of facilities at the base when we came to the Indiana, but where we stayed in first Qatar- there wasn't good. There was not good so much because it was hot. And also a lot of the facilities there was missing.”

Still, interviewees generally expressed gratitude towards the people working on the bases for their work. Again, it is important to remember that gratitude towards those who individuals viewed as helping alleviate suffering is not endorsement of the US military mission in Afghanistan and needs to be considered in terms of unintentional social desirability effects. In the words of one former Afghan soldier: “I'm also personally thankful from the US government that they supported us a lot.” Referring to the base camp they were assigned, an interviewee claimed that the people working there treated them like a 'king:'

“When I got to the camp, they behaved like we were kings there, so yeah basically they behaved to us what was really good. Whenever we got sick, they took us to the doctor and were really caring. and we're really appreciative of what they did for us.”

Others echoed this gratitude for their treatment on the US base camps, reflected in the three quotes from separate interviewees below:

1. **“They were telling us that we will have a great life in US, but when we got to US, they brought us to the camp and it was very dark and hard to live in tents and I was thinking: 'this is going be my life.' I was crying, but there was a US soldier that was telling me that: 'you will have a great life and your children are going to go to school here.' And they were also crying with me, which gave me comfort. This gave me confidence.”**
2. **“I think it was the best camp. The food was great, the clothing, everything we needed they provided.”**

3. **“The facilities were inside the camp- there was a lot, like we had food service, they served food for us; a free clinic. We had doctors and also we had rooms for service the main room and for my family. So these are the facilities that we received inside the base. And that's a lot. So we are thankful for.”**

As covered earlier, multiple evacuees described maintaining contact with their old US supervisors after leaving Afghanistan. According to an interviewee, one US supervisor went as far as visiting them on one of the staging bases in the US to personally make sure they were alright and to offer them assistance finding a US government job once they were eligible.

These glimpses of hope after arriving to the US were of course tempered with a great sense of displacement and loss. One interviewee explained how alien everything felt in the US Midwest versus Afghanistan:

“We spent three months in Wisconsin in a place that everything was different. The food was different, the people were different, the situation, the weather was different and the location where we are sitting, it was different.”

Other interviewees describe experiencing the same mixture of emotions on a different US base, especially in regard to familial separation. The following three quotes from different interviewees exemplify these complicated feelings:

1. **“They [in the US Base Camp] did everything for us. Food supplies, clothes, supplied housing, everything. But the bad things: remembering of families. Memories keep coming to our minds. Families are far; we are very far from them, that restlessness.”**
2. **“We all were hoping for our family to be okay and we were really needing our family to see [sic]. They were helping us [on the base]; we were just missing our families.”**
3. **“We are refugees right now. It is clear that we are refugees but we are thankful from these people [on the US bases]. They're good.”**

d. Applying a Gender Lens: Differing Burdens, Differing Levels of Agency

The experience of male and female Afghan evacuees varied drastically at every stage of both OAR and OAW. As discussed earlier, only individuals eligible for the SIV and their immediate family members were supposed to be evacuated. Despite bearing the brunt of abuses under pre- 2001 and post-2021 Taliban rule in Afghanistan and the fact that female civilians played critical roles in the post-2001 development of Afghanistan, the professions delineated in SIV-eligibility were overwhelmingly dominated by men. This means that even in cases where women and girls were evacuated, they were in large part brought along as dependents. All

women interviewed for this research fell into the “Dependent/Other” category—meaning they were not the primary SIV or parolee applicants.

Fundamentally, men and women experienced different levels of agency in their choice to evacuate Afghanistan. As dependents on male relatives’ applications, women oftentimes did not get final decision-making power. This led to situations in which women eligible for evacuation as dependents were left behind—not necessarily by their own choice. For example, one interviewee describes how the perceived danger of the crowds of men at the airport led him to leave his wife at home while he evacuated:

“The situation was very bad. The gates had big crowds of people and dangerous—especially for women. It was safer for her to stay home and for me to come here.”

In another incident, a female interviewee lamented that her eldest daughter—who was eligible for evacuation—was unable to leave Afghanistan. When asked for the reason, she simply explained that a woman becomes part of her husband’s family once she is married, so it would not have been appropriate for her to leave her new family. When paired with how many male evacuees left their families and wives, this statement exemplifies the importance of gender as a variable in decisions surrounding evacuation.

One story about ensuring the safety of women and young girls against the backdrop of a Taliban resurgence stands out from our interviews. We spoke with two individuals who established an organization promoting Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) education and business management training for girls in Afghanistan. The programs were aimed at giving girls and young women the tools and skills they needed to be more independent from male relatives. Reminiscing on their favorite moments during this work, the interviewee stated:

“The best memory was when our student would start their business. When we see them start from very little amount of cash and make a successful business was a really happy memory. Girls very doing many different businesses. It did not matter what kind of business it was, but they wanted to have some sort of income. Like some of them would do tailoring, makeup, or cooking. Some of them would make pickles or learn how to draw.

One particular memory that stuck with me was the one that was cooking and they made a lot of money in a short amount of time. Their father was against it at first but then when they say it is a successful business they also started working with them.”

These two interviewees described challenging times in the lead up to the evacuation, explaining that they and their all-girl STEM team had to move from one part of the country to another as the Taliban began to reclaim territories. The interviewee was able to shelter the girls’ team in

the embassy of a US ally. Through the help of this ally, the girls' team was evacuated during OAR, while the interviewees stayed behind in Afghanistan with other members of the organization. They spent an additional two months in Afghanistan after the US evacuation "in a really bad situation" before being able to leave on a chartered plane with their staff.

Post-resettlement, gender expectations continue to play a formative role in evacuee's experiences, particularly in the realm of home economics. Most of the applicants were their family's only breadwinner and therefore could not set aside those responsibilities to provide once they resettled in the US. One male respondent described how he started working at seven years old in his father's business once his father became ill, and ultimately taking it over directly after high school:

"I was the breadwinner of my family. So I had to do that. I just completed my 12 years of education with high school. I couldn't go ahead [with higher education] because of responsibility that was on my shoulder. So, since I knew that I'm man, I have to work. And womens are working from home in our village and the mens are working from outside for them."

Many male interviewees described how they were struggling to replicate this dynamic in the US with greatly heightened costs of living. These individuals also describe having no other choice but to send money to Afghanistan to support their families abroad financially. They explain that these remittances are making their lives harder in the US because they must take care of rent, food and other necessities for themselves on top of meeting the needs of their families back in Afghanistan. Since most of these interviewees were the sole earners in their households, their families back home are now struggling:

"If someone is coming to ask me 'what do you want to do in America?' I told them I just want to make money and support my families because in Afghanistan, [they have] no job, no money, and also nobody is going to help them."

When asked if they had anything they would like to say at the end of an interview, another participant who had been the sole earner stated:

"I just want the US government to help us and find us work because we don't know how to find everything. The most important thing is work, we need to find jobs."

Two other participants echoed this desire, shown in the quotes below, stating explicitly that they had family back home who counted on their paycheck:

"What we want is work. We have to work and the family that we have back home, they're expecting us to send them money and they're all looking for us."

“I just am looking forward to find job, and this is the main goal that I should reach out to that. And because I have big family back home, I need to support them and they're always looking for us. It is a big responsibility to help them out. They don't have any money.”

Another interviewee made a generalization about the other Afghan evacuees (presumably men), claiming that there is a collectively held desire to work:

“It's not only me, but there are like many people waiting for a job and our only concern is to find a job and actually make money and help and support their family back there.”

This economic difficulty is of course compounded by the cultural expectation that keeps women out of the workplace. The women in the household are generally not used to working outside the home and most of them do not speak English—in some cases, they only speak Pashto and not the more commonly understood Dari or Persian. Women’s literacy rates and ability to speak a second language are much lower than Afghan men (literacy rates of 23% versus 52%), meaning that the burden of resettlement in the US is especially difficult for them. As one woman stated: “my children are really young, so I should take care of them, so I might not be able to work outside of our house.”

Female Afghan evacuees describe feeling particularly isolated post-resettlement. Since men work and socialize outside of the home, male evacuees describe being able to start building social networks that make resettlement smoother and less individually burdensome. Women, on the other hand, isolated in the home and tending to children, have for the most part not been able to build similar networks in the US that would help them function in a new society. In the words of one female interviewee describing her and her daughter’s experiences: “We don’t have any connections right now; we are alone right now.”

e. Family: Separations, Obligations, and Ongoing Risks

Themes around ‘family’ were the largest cluster by far and dealt with topics of separation, ongoing financial obligations, and concerns over physical safety of loved ones. A key theme to arise across almost every interview was ‘family separation.’ Interviewees reported being separated from their families in a variety of ways. Some described being separated from family members at the Kabul Airport, while others left for the airport by themselves.

Many military personnel did not get the chance to take their eligible family members with them. One ANA service member recounted the agonizing choice to leave their family behind after learning that they would need to first get through the Taliban’s line guarding the outer gates to the airport. According to their account, the Taliban had encircled the airport and the ANA was on the frontlines, holding them back with gunshots and crowd repellent gas—the US service members acted as the last line of defense inside the airport. They explained their reasoning in the quote below:

“They might shoot me because I worked for many, many years [with the Afghan Army]. But then, [if] I couldn't leave by myself to go safely from Afghanistan, how should I bring my family? You know, it is difficult really when you fight with someone and you go with your family; it is unacceptable. Maybe they will shoot you directly!”

Researchers were told several stories about families being separated at the Kabul Airport. One interviewee who made it to the airport tarmac with their sibling described how their sibling had second thoughts about leaving their family behind in Afghanistan and made a snap decision to return home. Another interviewee described how a terrorist attack separated them from their family members at the airport:

Interviewer: Your [RELATIVE] should have been able to come with you. So what happened?

Interviewee: Actually she was with us, but her child was left behind the airport gates so she went back to get her child and come back but there was an explosion right outside of the airport at that exact time and she was not able to come back.

One woman went to the airport with her family but became separated in the crowds on the tarmac. Her young daughter was pulled onto one of the planes and it became clear that she needed to decide between letting her young child go to the US by themselves or board the plane and leave the rest of their family in Afghanistan. The interviewee explains that she had to make this monumental decision in a matter of seconds. She chose to board the plane to accompany her child; the rest of her family did not make it on a plane and are still in Afghanistan.

Those who had to leave family members behind after the evacuation described a heightened concern for their safety and vulnerability to retaliatory attacks. These fears are reflected in the quote below, which is from an individual who has a close relative that worked in the US:

“The Taliban would threaten us because my [RELATIVE] was working in the US Embassy, and that was really dangerous. Our neighbors would inform the Taliban that my [RELATIVE] was working with the US embassy.”

Another interviewee recounts a similar story of being sought after by the Taliban who wanted the whereabouts of a relative. The interviewee said that his relative, who worked with both Presidents of Afghanistan, needed to relocate every several hours daily after the fall of Kabul until he could be evacuated:

“[The Taliban] are coming in my home and ask me: ‘Where’s your [RELATIVE]?’ and I told him: ‘He’s not here.’ And [for] two or three days in the morning, in the

afternoon, and sometimes at night - he's coming and ask me: "where's your [RELATIVE]?"

And two times I'm not at home and Taliban is coming and asking my mother: 'Where's your [RELATIVE]?' and she told them: 'He's not at home, why are you coming to ask for him?'

The Taliban say: 'Because your [RELATIVE] is working with the Afghanistan government and also he's working with the President.'

Even after the interviewee resettled in the US with the relative in the story above, the participant was still hounded by people they assumed to be Taliban. The relative gave the interviewee their phone in the US and several times the interviewee received threatening calls on the mobile. The callers were apparently mistaking the interviewee for their relative, as the caller reportedly said: "Where are you? I won't leave you. I'll find you."

Another interviewee described how their close relative who was eligible for evacuation was unable to make it to the Kabul Airport in time, so they instead escaped from Afghanistan to Pakistan because the Taliban was searching for them.

Several people described retaliatory strikes against their family members who they left behind in Afghanistan. One interviewee stated: "Three of my cousins were working in government and military and Taliban even took them and were torturing them. It was really hard for my family."

Another person explained that their family back home was suffering property theft as a form of retaliation in addition to physical abuse. According to the interviewee, the assailants told their family that they were suffering such acts because the interviewee's parents had let them work with the US government:

"My family is 10 people and they are in a very bad situation because the Taliban came in our house and took our property... aren't giving us our salaries. The people working with the US government- they are finding that out and wanting to take their properties. They have beat my father back home... So that's not good and I am feeling very upset about that..."

The Taliban came to our house and asked my father for me: 'Where is your son?' And [they claimed] that this person that I was working with, these people were 'not Muslim.' I was working with people that 'did not know about Islam; this is not right in our religion...' They told my father: 'Why do you allow your son to work with foreigners, with the US government? This is not good.'"

Those interviewees who did not work with the US government also expressed concern about the safety of family members under a Taliban government, as shown in the two separate respondent quotes below:

1. **“Right now I feel very bad because my family is over there... They’re afraid and they cannot go out too much... We are alone.”**
2. **“I am just hoping for my family to be okay in Afghanistan. The Taliban got my child and were beating my child and I was not happy about that.”**

Many describe concerns about family safety as overriding all other concerns about resettlement in the US. One person stated “that would be everything for me” if they could bring their family members to the US. Another describes their inability to settle and be self-sufficient until they are reunited with their pregnant spouse:

“My first goal - and I'm going to consist on it and focus on it - is bringing out my family from back home. I am not feeling ok with my family away from me in war. So that's so important... My wife, she's over there, and I'm here. They might be in danger. You know, how hard it is to be separate, you know, from family. That's hard. Until I bring my family here, even I cannot go on with my education. I'm stressed. Yeah, I cannot feel rested.”

One evacuee’s story stood out as having an unusually happy ending amongst the other accounts of family separation. An interviewee recounted how they and their sibling had arrived at the Kabul Airport on different days and due to their cellphones having no charge, they had no idea if the other had made it out. The interviewee had traveled from Kabul, to Qatar, to Germany before being able to confirm that their sibling had been evacuated too. The siblings went to different base camps in the US, before finally being reunited in RI two days prior to participating in an interview for this study.

As would be expected, many respondents shared stories of life milestones interrupted by the evacuation. Two separate participants described having their upcoming weddings upended - one of these two had been shopping for their wedding when the Taliban first entered Kabul. Others missed the birth of a child, due to separation from their spouse. Many others had their educational programs interrupted, ranging from dentistry to economics.

Participants described a deep sense of loss at the overall situation. As one interviewee stated succinctly: “After Afghanistan go into crisis, I lose my everything; I lose my home, I lose my family.” Another person echoed this sentiment: “You know, a person that lives 20 years/25 years in a country and prepares everything for themselves: home, car, right? Everything, and suddenly you leave everything and come out. It is so difficult.”

This sense of loss is from a personal perspective but also from the perspective of homeland:

“The revolution that came in Afghanistan... [The] feeling of that is very hard and it was difficult to live anymore there. So that's why it made me to come out of my country.

I'm crying because of my homeland; it is disappointing. The pain of the homeland. The dreams that I had back home in Afghanistan: to study and educate. It all remains there... I lost all my interest in staying in Afghanistan. And everything was disappointing; work, education, everything. So that's why I decided to leave."

A female interviewee's reflections on their experience in one of the C-17s captures well the sorrow many others described in leaving their homeland under such circumstances and the inability to say a proper farewell to their country:

"The windows of the airplane were very high and we couldn't look out- watch from the windows outside what's going on in Afghanistan. I always told my husband that it was bitter. I didn't see Afghanistan from the air.

How does look like? I saw Germany. I saw Qatar. I saw Washington, but I didn't see my own country. How was it?"

f. Resettling in Rhode Island: Hopes and Concerns for the Future

The final portion of the interview protocol focused on the participants' experiences resettling in RI and how they described their short- medium- and long term needs and goals. These interviews were collected shortly after the Afghan evacuees assigned to Rhode Island had arrived in Providence, so participants had been in the state anywhere from a couple of months to a couple of days. While all participants were in their resettlement phase at that time, participants are now all in post-resettlement.

Many participants described a smooth process in terms of their arrival to RI from one of the eight US bases. One interviewee reported feeling supported and comfortable from the start:

"So, after we left the camp, they treated us really well, getting us ready for our travel to Rhode Island. They helped us with our bags and took us to the airport terminal... After we came here [Rhode Island], our case worker was at the airport. They were really nice picking us up from the airport and taking us to a guest house."

One interviewee summed up: "it is a new life with the US government; with the US people. A new story." Another interviewee stated:

"When I came to the Rhode Island, I felt that I am free. I am Independent right now. So I have my own home so I can live, I can walk, and I'm free."

Most interviewees described never having heard of RI before, with one person making a joke that they never learned about the state in their economics class because it does not contribute to the US's GDP as much as states like California or New York. The same individual who

described a sense of displacement in the Wisconsin base described feeling a level of contentment with their resettlement experience in RI:

“We came to Rhode Island. The place- we didn't know anything about it. And right now we are happy. We have US government and these people around us and we can prepare something for our life and we are right now feeling happy and we are just spending and living. The first day that we came here we thought that maybe it is not good or it is boring, but after passing time and days, we found it better, we found it nice.”

Participants also expressed gratitude towards the assistance they received during their resettlement:

When I came out from Afghanistan, I had only 1,300 Afghani. If you are going to convert it to USD it is only maybe. \$15, maybe \$13. So I came with that. So since I'm here, I am living. So this is all the support of US government that he supports me.

Some individuals described being resettled in areas that are far from a city center or places that are easy to find work. For example, one participant stated that where they were given housing “looks like a village- it is far from downtown.” This challenge is compounded by the fact that most interviewees rely on public transportation because they do not own cars or have driver’s licenses. But some point to the benefits of being resettled in a small state, saying RI is good for refugees because it is “calm” and that they do not have to wait for benefits like those friends who were resettled in larger states like California.

Nearly all participants described anxiety around immigration issues and a desire to better understand benefits and paths forward that are available to them. Key amongst these concerns is family reunification—finding a way to bring those left behind in Afghanistan to the US. While these interviewees have access to pro bono legal services, some expressed a desire for more help and clarity. This was especially true for those who are not fluent in English.

As was discussed in a subsection above, finding gainful employment in the US that can support families in the US and abroad is a key concern for participants. All Afghan evacuees who resettled in RI received eight months of housing assistance and a stipend. After eight months, most recipients needed to begin working and providing for themselves. Considering the language barrier, most of them must work minimum wage jobs and they worry that they cannot afford housing in RI. This is especially true for big families who need to rent bigger houses.

Participants described a variety of health concerns that they wanted addressed post-resettlement. These ranged from physical pain issues like old combat injuries but also mundane ailments like back pain and dentistry concerns. While the mental health screeners issued in this project were meant to triangulate and validate the findings of the interviews due to the small

sample size, they did reveal potentially important insights on this population's mental health. Screeners suggesting anxiety were more prevalent in the population than those on depression and PTSD. Even in this small sample size, the instruments detected at least three cases of possible PTSD. The stories and experiences described in the interviews and the level of affectedness participants displayed during interviews certainly support these findings and suggest that more clinically-focused research is needed.

The researchers asked respondents if they were experiencing any difficulties in practicing their religion or culture, broadly conceived. Overall, people described feeling unconstrained to practice their religion. However, some did mention that they were living far away from mosques and have transportation issues. One key difficulty participants expressed was the challenge locating halal food. Some also mentioned general difficulties adapting to life in the US due to cultural disconnects: "It is difficult for me to adjust myself to the new environment here since the culture here is so different than mine."

Most of the respondents of different ages expressed their interest in education. A key concern came from those who already have a degree from Afghanistan and want to have their credentials to be recognized. Language barriers were another major concern. Many of the applicants described that they are interested in getting an education but they have language barriers, which also complicates understanding immigration procedures. Therefore, one of the most requested facilities was English language programs so that they could continue or start their education in the US.

Several interviewees expressed a desire to serve the Afghan population, both within the US and abroad. In addition to wanting to send remittances home to family members, which was explored in the subsection above, participants expressed a desire to help all displaced Afghans. The quotes from two separate interviewees below reflect these desires:

1. **"You can take the hand of someone that needs help because it's a hundred dollars. It's not too much for you in America, but it's very good help for someone living in Afghanistan. That's why I want to work with these people, to work with the people in this room to help Afghan people... "**
2. **"My target is working for the people. I'm from the people. So I like to work for the people. I'm here. What could I do?.. I will continue to help and serve."**

Several interviewees already volunteer and work with refugee post-resettlement organizations, either in administrative work or as interpreters.

VI. Conclusion and Recommendations

It is not controversial to conclude that the US withdrawal from Afghanistan was marred by strategic and bureaucratic challenges—this diagnosis has been echoed in many other reports focused on the policies and planning. The confusion in Kabul during August 2021 links back to a much larger issue of US government rhetoric regarding the mission in Afghanistan versus the reality on the ground. The challenges of the evacuation are reflections of the challenges that the US faced in Afghanistan over the past 20 years, especially in terms of understanding the internal politics of Afghanistan. The difficulty in signaling intent to pull out of Afghanistan over the years led to unclear communication with the President of Afghanistan, who for his part failed to be transparent about the political realities to the US. This confusion over the US evacuation very clearly trickled down to the lowest levels, as evidenced by the stories of panic and uncertainty on the airport tarmac.

Taken together, the information interviewees shared with researchers about their experiences of the US evacuation of Afghanistan and their subsequent resettling in the US tells a disturbing story that holds valuable lessons for future humanitarian evacuations and refugee resettlement/protection. Drawing on the case study, interviews, and mental health screeners, the following eight recommendations are relevant to the federal, state, and local levels of the US government, the UN system, and international and domestic NGOs. They address topics on micro and macro levels, ranging from humanitarian evacuation, processing displaced populations, civil-military interactions during domestic operations, refugee resettlement, and post-resettlement.¹⁰⁹

1. Address the disparities in which populations are eligible for evacuation

Interviewees were nearly unanimous in their sentiment that the biggest failure of the US evacuation was leaving far too many people behind in Afghanistan. This is not surprising, as a Biden Administration official stated that over 70,000 Afghans who applied for SIVs prior to September 2021 were still in Afghanistan.¹¹⁰ And these were just the individuals who were considered eligible under a strict set of criteria of what counted as relevant work for the US government along criteria of relative levels of ‘service’ and ‘risk.’¹¹¹ In reality, the definition of SIV-eligible individuals - and hence, the numbers of people left behind - are contested.

¹⁰⁹ Avoiding conflict in its entirety would be ideal to prevent large human displacement. However, these recommendations for improving the response to displaced people are meant as a responsible and realistic outlook for potential future incidents.

¹¹⁰ Ainsley, Julia. “Fear, Hiding, Frustration for Afghans Left behind a Year after US Exit,” NBC News, August 4, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/immigration/fear-hiding-frustration-afghans-left-one-year-us-evacuation-rcna41406>.

¹¹¹ travel.state.gov. “Special Immigrant Visas for Afghans - Who Were Employed by/on Behalf of the U.S. Government,” n.d. <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/immigrate/special-immg-visa-afghans-employed-us-gov.html>.

The US government's obligation to evacuate foreigners who work for the US government is a legal and moral obligation. The US is a party to a number of international conventions that establish the legal underpinnings of this obligation, such as: the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, which established the rights and obligations of consular officials and the people they represent; and the Hague Convention on the Safety of United Nations and Associated Personnel, which provided for the protection of UN and associated personnel in times of armed conflict.¹¹² The US also enacted domestic laws that specifically address this issue such as the Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act of 1998 which requires the US government to evacuate foreigners who work for the US government in times of crisis.¹¹³

In Afghanistan, the SIV process was never black and white in terms of who met the threshold and who did not. For example, there are even disparities between types of subcontractors who can receive SIVs, where military subcontractors are considered eligible but USAID subcontractors generally are not.¹¹⁴ The SIV program in Afghanistan was originally set up with Afghan national translators in mind but definitions over who 'counts' as eligible broadened over time to include other actors. This caused confusion as many Afghan nationals who worked for the US mission applied for the SIV, only to have their petitions denied. The denied petitions were disproportionately in the human rights and development fields, reportedly. Additionally, credible evidence exists that the evacuation of US-allied Afghan commando units responsible for human rights violations over the past two decades were given priority over other categories of evacuees.¹¹⁵

Many other Afghan nationals helped support the American war effort and the country's development over the past two decades in positions that were not considered eligible for evacuation. For example, in 2021, 30% of the Afghan parliament were women—individuals who inarguably contributed to the building of a democratic society in the country. Similarly, NGO workers were excluded from eligibility for evacuation, leaving nonprofit organizations to scramble to evacuate staff and rely on private military and security companies to provide safe passage.

This uncertainty led to an implicit government acknowledgement that the framework was insufficient, as some SIV applications were approved on a case-by-case basis along the overriding qualifications of "service and risk," as with individual women parliamentarians. This randomized, ad hoc selection of who was deserving of evacuation trickled down to the field

¹¹² "Vienna Convention on Consular Relations." Treaty Series, Vo1. 596. United Nations, 1963.

https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/9_2_1963.pdf

also "Convention on the Safety OF United Nations and Associated Personnel." Office of Legal Affairs Codification Division, n.d. <https://www.un.org/law/cod/safety.htm>.

¹¹³ "H.R.1757 - Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act of 1998." House - International Relations | Senate - Foreign Relations, October 21, 1998. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/105th-congress/house-bill/1757>.

¹¹⁴ Noori, Arsalan, and Noah Coburn. *The Last Days of the Afghan Republic: A Doomed Evacuation Twenty Years in the Making*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023.

¹¹⁵ Quilty, Andrew and Matthew Cole, "The CIA's Afghan Proxies, Accused of War Crimes, Will Get a Fresh Start in the US," *The Intercept*, October 5, 2021, <https://theintercept.com/2021/10/05/zero-units-cia-afghanistan-taliban/>.

level, as was seen in some of the interview stories of US service members helping individuals evacuate in the chaos at the Kabul airport. While these stories have been largely portrayed as heroic acts, making individual servicemembers de facto responsible for deciding who gets to leave a collapsing society at the expense of those who do not is symptomatic of a much larger upstream problem.

In addition to a limited definition of which professions make primary petitioners eligible for SIVs, there is also a major limitation in the definition of dependents. Primary petitioners were allowed to only bring their 'immediate family' along as dependents, with immediate family members being a spouse and children under the age of 18. The key issue with this stipulation is that it is based on an American understanding of 'immediate family,' which is largely meaningless in Afghan society. As was discussed in the case background, Afghan society is collectivistic and largely built upon intergenerational households. This definitional disconnect led to confusion over which family members were eligible and much emotional agony over impossible decisions regarding who to leave behind. It also created a generationally distinct group of evacuees, as the professions eligible favor younger individuals. As was evidenced in the interview data, this inability to bring certain family members along led some SIV-eligible individuals not to evacuate.

It is critical that US policymakers elevate the issue of those left behind in Afghanistan and not allow it to fade from relevance— these issues are ongoing. Furthermore, at least among the American constituency, aiding this specific population garners bipartisan support.¹¹⁶ Given the inherent issues in categories and definitions within the SIV program, a sustainable and effective policy answer is therefore not to *only* 'grant more visas' but to first interrogate the underlying reasons for the problems. Expanding the criteria for who is eligible for these visas should also be matched with diplomatic solutions that involve engaging the Taliban in hardball negotiations to move the large segment of 'involuntarily immobile' individuals out of Afghanistan. Lastly, the issues inherent to the SIV framework need to be addressed for possible future humanitarian evacuations of individuals working with the US government in other contexts.

2. Involve displaced populations awaiting resettlement in decision-making processes

Given the challenging circumstances, the efforts at international staging locations and US-based safe haven sites were nothing short of herculean. Although the conditions made the intermediate locations difficult for the evacuees, some best practices were ultimately developed that may alleviate this suffering for future evacuees and dispel some chaos for future planners. These include creating a communication process to give some agency to the displaced population awaiting resettlement and utilizing a combined review board to identify, assess, and address requirements.

¹¹⁶ Jordan, Miriam, and Jennifer Steinhauer. "Americans Stretch Across Political Divides to Welcome Afghan Refugees." *The New York Times*, September 16, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/06/us/afghan-refugees-volunteers.html>.

Many safe havens instituted a regular communication process with influential Afghan national stakeholders within each temporary housing environment. This supported the dissemination of information amongst community members but more importantly gave Afghan evacuees some agency in the operations and circumstances of their living environment while awaiting resettlement. This included giving them opportunities to highlight shortfalls, budding problem areas, and cultural concerns. This process helped identify issues like the need for toiletry kits upon arrival at the safe haven and expanded availability for cell phone charging in order to contact family.

Early on, these meetings - which were oftentimes structured like jirga councils - included only senior Afghan men. It was later adjusted to give a voice to Afghan women and ensure other interest groups were represented. The DoD instrumentalized its gender advisory board during OAW by sending Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) gender advisors to the safe havens to “make adjustments with task force military personnel and US interagency partners on how to allocate resources, implement programming, and deal with critical incident needs.”¹¹⁷ For example, one of these WPS advisory groups spoke with Afghan women on a safe haven base regarding their concerns about the short time windows for visiting the supply warehouses. The short time windows for gathering household supplies were designed with a single person in mind, but in practice, women were the ones who visited the warehouses and often brought their children, who made the trips longer than the allotted time. This WPS group successfully advised that the time windows be expanded to account for the needs of women with children.

For future large-scale refugee operations or evacuations, a repeatable templated framework for this dialog with the supported people engenders trust and increases the understanding for everyone involved. This framework should include a methodology to select and include a variety of interest groups. It should be flexible enough to accomplish this largely together and for smaller groups.

To address physical requirements for support from infrastructure changes, to process changes, to purchase requirements, the safe haven ultimately established a Contracting Acquisitions Review Board (CARB). The methodology of bringing applicable stakeholders together in a repeatable manner to specifically address shortfalls, rather than the specific board, is the important lesson. Having a central review point for all financial commitments, involving all stakeholders, increased efficiency and the speed of decision making, allowing urgently needed requirements to be approved quickly. Needs were identified or generated by stakeholders. The combined board would validate the requirement, ensure it could not be addressed by current resources, then develop the appropriate strategy to meet the need. Given the disparate funding sources often involved in humanitarian operations, this regular process provides an opportunity to highlight needs and combine resources, accountability, and decrease wasteful overlap.

¹¹⁷ Cronk, Terri Moon. “DOD Makes Strides in its Women, Peace and Security Program,” DoD News, March 31, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2985272/dod-makes-strides-in-its-women-peace-and-security-program/>

3. Provide better education and expectation management for civilian-military coordination through interaction, exercise, and preparation

The airlift and resettlement process for Afghans showcased the prototypical dependence on military resources for infrastructure support and indirect assistance, while direct assistance was provided by non-governmental organizations and ultimate control was left to civilian authorities. Many of these organizations took weeks to address working relationships and expectation management; aspects that could have been given a foundation with more regular interaction and structural templates based on previous experience.

UN guidelines recommend the use of foreign military and civil defense assets in response to a humanitarian or disaster emergency as a last resort.¹¹⁸ The term ‘last resort’ itself creates some ambiguity for those not familiar with the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) reference paper or the 1994 Oslo Guidelines at the heart of this terminology. That includes military members who may be called to assist in humanitarian operations. A common misperception is that the last resort principals are not intended to apply to military and civil defense organizations responding to crises within their own territory.¹¹⁹ All individuals with a shared interest in the humanitarian imperative to save lives and alleviate suffering would benefit from continued education in the civilian nature of response, how the government of the affected State has initial primary authority for action, and that exploring alternatives does not involve waiting to act.

The terminology of ‘last resort’ is meant to connote capability and capacity rather than first attempting to address a situation through other means. When the scope or scale of a particular situation is beyond the immediate civilian alternative or when the circumstances create high demand for assistance, it becomes a temporary ‘last resort’ situation.¹²⁰ The intent to protect actual or perceived neutrality, impartiality, and independence of aid organizations often becomes a barrier to early civil-military communication or certainly to practicing coordination frameworks outside of a disaster situation.

Exercising coordination frameworks between military, civilian government, and non-governmental organizations will lead to better education of all involved and should improve the speed and effectiveness of response to actual emergencies. These exercises may be as simple as regular “table-top” discussions between applicable stakeholders over responsibilities and communication pathways. Protecting the principles established in international humanitarian

¹¹⁸ Guidelines on the Use of Foreign Military and Civil Defence Assets in Disaster Relief, Rev. 1.1, Nov. 2007. See Also Guidelines on the Use of Military and Civil Defence Assets to Support United Nations Humanitarian Activities in Complex Emergencies, Rev. 1, Jan. 2006.

¹¹⁹ “What Is ‘Last Resort’?” UNOCHA, n.d.

<https://www.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/Last%20Resort%20Pamphlet%20-%20FINAL%20April%202012.pdf>.

¹²⁰ UNOCHA. “Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination,” n.d. <https://www.unocha.org/es/themes/humanitarian-civil-military-coordination>.

law requires clear communication and multinational efforts for any coordinated practice to take place. Additionally, using a rotation of forces with similar capability and organizations with similar humanitarian interests may not build relationships, but would still aid in creating a consultative dialog prior to, rather than after the onset of, an emergency response. Using scenarios of non-conflict zones in response to major natural, technological, or environmental disasters for exercise purposes, even if only for the principal coordinating members themselves, would be less controversial and pay dividends.

4. Further develop Interagency and NGO coordination frameworks

This event showcased the effective use of a Unified Coordination Group (UCG) framework for interagency government interaction (see Appendix 2.3). A UCG is a multi-agency task force designed to achieve unity of effort in whole-of-government operations.¹²¹ This framework should be expanded to include optional incorporation of NGO and other non-state actors who become crucial stakeholders for support and successful resettlement.

DoD Instruction 4000.19, Support Agreements establishes regulations for intragovernmental support agreements. These are often outlined in a Memorandum of Understanding.¹²² Although developing these internationally for potential future refugee or humanitarian operations is a daunting task, developing example or baseline agreements for US government agencies and NGOs with domestic operations is a good preparation step. Only one of the eight safe haven sites (Fort Lee) were able to successfully implement formal agreements.¹²³ The others had less time before the first arrivals.

Yet every location in OAW faced coordination challenges to create agreements between organizations or define roles and responsibilities. This included establishing standardized accountability procedures, enabling medical support with external state licenses, law enforcement responsibility, enforcement of quarantine orders, and funding and reimbursement requests.¹²⁴ Barriers to information sharing between organizations such as screening and vetting processes with limited biographic data only slow bureaucratic processes and negatively affect the experience of those being resettled. Templates should be developed using lessons from the agreements completed at Fort Lee.

¹²¹ Department of Homeland Security, *National Response Framework*, 4th ed. 2018, https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/NRF_FINALApproved_2011028.pdf.

¹²² Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment. "DOD INSTRUCTION 4000.19," December 16, 2020. <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/400019p.pdf?ver=AgPBMZwTey4t8dkHDRM4ng%3D%3D>.

¹²³ Center for Army Lessons Learned, *Commander's Guide to Supporting Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons*, No. 12-21, September 2012. <https://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/publications/12-21.pdf>

¹²⁴ Office of Inspector General. "The DHS Unified Coordination Group for Operation Allies Welcome Coordinated Afghan Resettlement but Faced Challenges in Funding and Authority." Department of Homeland Security, September 29, 2022. See also, Center for Army Lessons Learned, *Commander's Guide to Supporting Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons*, No. 12-21, September 2012. <https://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/publications/12-21.pdf>

Importantly, an improved framework for coordinating volunteer services that would have otherwise been provided by the federal government would improve operations beyond refugee assistance. Joint Federal Ethics Regulations and the Anti-Deficiency Act complicate federal agencies' ability to accept services or donations.¹²⁵ Yet these services significantly benefited the evacuee population. They included translation, education, medical and logistics services.

Depending on ad-hoc networks and communication frameworks is unnecessary when lessons abound in the recent experiences of supporting agencies to this displaced Afghan population. Expanding the current UCG framework to include NGOs should include best practices from the UN IASC. A common example is the cluster approach.¹²⁶ Although criticized for being too bureaucratic and slow-moving, the IASC has been praised for its ability to bring together a wide range of international actors and develop effective coordination mechanisms.¹²⁷ It's currently used internationally to discuss common issues, develop joint policy, and share information.¹²⁸ Adopting some of the IASC NGO collaboration mechanisms into the existing US government UCG framework would improve a functioning system with a coordination gap.

5. Redouble efforts to integrate gender into refugee resettlement considerations

Gender played a significant role in determining an individual's experiences of the evacuation and resettlement. As was reflected in the interviews, newly resettled Afghan women face unique obstacles in terms of learning English, pursuing educational opportunities, gaining employment, and establishing social networks.

Resettlement and post resettlement organizations should integrate socialization initiatives aimed directly at Afghan women into their programming to set them up for independent success in the US. The RDC's experimental initiative to bring Afghan women out of the home in a culturally attuned way serves as an excellent blueprint. When employees of the Center

¹²⁵ 31 USC. 1342 prevents federal agencies from accepting voluntary services unless the individual offering the service executes an advance written agreement that (1) states the services are offered without expectation of payment, and (2) expressly waives any future claims against the government.

¹²⁶ UNHCR. "Cluster Approach (IASC)," July 15, 2022. <https://emergency.unhcr.org/coordination-and-communication/cluster-system/cluster-approach-iasc>.

¹²⁷ There are a number of evaluations that showcase lessons learned. For instance, the report on the Typhoon Haiyan response was particularly useful. IASC. "Haiyan Typhoon Philippines Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation," January 29, 2015. <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/clone-evaluations/content/haiyan-typhoon-philippines-inter-agency-humanitarian-evaluation>. For an on-going response, the 2015 Syria lessons learned report by the evaluation steering group committee was also informative (IASC. "Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation Steering Group, Coordinated Accountability and Lessons Learning Syria, 2015," January 29, 2015. <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/clone-evaluations/content/inter-agency-humanitarian-evaluation-steering-group-coordinated>.)

¹²⁸ The IASC is chaired by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). The IASC has 18 members, including UN agencies, NGOs, and the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement. The IASC also has several working groups, which address specific issues such as food security, protection, and shelter. There are several different agencies and NGOs with consultative status.

realized that they were not seeing women at public events, they began asking open questions to the community to involve them in addressing the issue.

To act in a respectful manner, employees of the RDC met with the patriarchs of the community and discussed ideas about how to integrate women into society. This discussion-based exchange replicates the general structure of a jirga council, allowing for a feedback loop between community member input and programmatic engagement. The employees of RDC found that discussing the challenges of having a sole-earner household opened conversations about how to reduce isolation amongst women. In the next meeting, RDC employees introduced the patriarchs to a team of all-female volunteers, who would be paired with their female relatives. In the following meeting, the Afghan men, women, and female volunteers all met at the office to socialize and build relationships. Now, the all-female volunteers and the women go out in Providence together without the men.

A staged, consensus-building, culturally sensitive approach like this initiative is easily transferable to other organizations looking to empower women without running roughshod over cultural norms. This relationship building not only reduces isolation amongst Afghan women, but also offers opportunities for language-learning and informal sharing of concerns and interests in a low stakes environment.

6. Create a centralized and easily accessible information portal to address the key resettlement concerns and needs of all Afghan refugees including education and immigration

Due to eligibility criteria for evacuation, the Afghan refugee population in the US includes two very different types of groups with very different needs. These individuals roughly represent the larger urban/rural divide that characterizes Afghanistan, including people who lived and worked in Kabul and those who lived in rural provinces and generally fought with the ANA. Therefore, there is a gulf between these two groups in terms of English skills, education levels, familiarity with US culture, and general literacy. Any resettlement and post-resettlement recommendations should be inclusive of both groups.

Many refugees expressed confusion and uncertainty over how and where to find information critical to their resettlement. Gathering information on processes dealing with immigration and education is time intensive and stressful. However, this information is publicly available for volunteers or staff members with fluency in English, internet connectivity, and baseline understanding of desk research. For these reasons, having a dedicated team to build an accessible, centralized, and localized information hub would be relatively straightforward and go a long way to help alleviate these issues for Afghan evacuees.

The information hub needs to be functional and accessible. None of the participants we spoke with expressed issues with having access to the internet, particularly through smartphones. The key barrier to entry with information collection for this population is the language barrier, the time cost, and unfamiliarity with US systems and what questions to ask. To overcome the

language barrier, the team can make short informational YouTube videos or short podcasts on a central domain. These resources can focus on topics that the interview participants highlighted, such as how to transfer international educational and vocational accreditations to the US, how to find educational opportunities, gaining access to cultural needs like Halal food, and explainers on different immigration benefits.

7. Host a refugee-centered job fair with local businesses

Refugees and asylum-seekers bring a diversity of skills and work experience, and hence, significant economic potential. As benefits are coming to an end, Afghan evacuees have expressed concern about getting gainful and rewarding employment. Several mentioned that they worked at the associate level in Afghanistan, for example, but can only manage to find minimum wage jobs due to lack of access to opportunities. A possible solution to this issue is to host refugee and new immigrant job fairs with local businesses in collaboration with Chambers of Commerce.

Precedents for such fairs exist. In Greece, UNHCR supported a two-day job fair that paired recent refugees with 16 different local businesses, giving the attendees time to mingle and discuss opportunities.¹²⁹ Some US cities have hosted refugee-centered job fairs. In Denver, for example, dozens of local employers hosted an on-site hiring event tailored to refugees from Afghanistan and Ukraine.¹³⁰ The international Rescue Committee has also sponsored a traveling job fair.¹³¹ The RDC hosted a no-English required job fair in Providence last year.

8. Integrate culturally sensitive mental health care into refugee health care

The traumatic stories from the interviews and the anxiety and PTSD reflected in the mental health screeners underline the importance of integrating culturally sensitive mental health care into refugee resettlement. As more robust studies on Afghan refugee mental health show, moral injury and combat trauma is commonplace amongst the broader community.

Afghan refugees are required to undergo mental health examination as part of their immigration process. It is essential that this is not the only point of contact that these individuals have with mental health services. Furthermore, due to the vulnerable nature of the population, it is essential that safeguards are put in place to ensure that these separate mental health services do not jeopardize participant's immigration petitions.

¹²⁹ The UN Refugee Agency, "First Pilot Job Fair Matching Refugees with Local Employers Takes Place on Lesbos Island," unhcr.org (The UN Refugee Agency Greece, September 15, 2022), <https://www.unhcr.org/gr/en/28629-first-pilot-job-fair-matching-refugees-with-local-employers-takes-place-on-lesvos-island.html>.

¹³⁰ Reeves, Melissa. "Job Fair Tailored to Afghan, Ukrainian Newcomers to Colorado," 9News.com, October 20, 2022, <https://www.9news.com/article/news/local/hiring-fair-afghan-ukrainian/73-2b1d0e1a-2c25-4c0a-b36f-6e7409b9b029>.

¹³¹ International Rescue Committee, "Newcomer Hiring Fair! | International Rescue Committee (IRC)," [www.rescue.org](https://www.rescue.org/announcement/newcomer-hiring-fair), September 20, 2022, <https://www.rescue.org/announcement/newcomer-hiring-fair>.

Some successful models for mental health interventions focused on migrants who experienced trauma exist at international, national, and state levels but are not widely adopted. Internationally there have been large scale efforts to find solutions for addressing mental health in refugees. In 2022, the European Commission funded a study that evaluated the effectiveness of psychological interventions in Syrian refugees. This study took place over 8 countries in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. It focused on scalable interventions that were modified to be used by non-specialist providers to increase the access to mental health resources. Interventions labeled Problem Management Plus (PM+), Early Adolescent Skills for Emotions (EASE), and step-by-step (SBS) were implemented in several countries and were shown to be a cost-effective method in reducing anxiety and depression amongst Syrian refugees.¹³² These scalable/cost effective interventions may be effective and appropriate for the Afghan evacuee population in the US.

Nationally there has been an initiative implemented by the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants called Post Resettlement Behavioral Health Support for Afghan Arrivals. This was implemented in response to Operation Allies Welcome and is a multitiered program that is focused on providing culturally competent and trauma informed care for Afghan newcomers. This consists of a multilingual (Dari, Pashto, and English) national 24-hour hotline, telehealth services, community behavioral health teams in Texas, Washington, Florida, and Pennsylvania, and a Crisis Response Team. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this excellent resource is underutilized by clinicians. Ideally, clinicians who treat Afghan refugees can integrate this resource into their practice and make a discharge instruction sheet that can automatically print after visits with PCP or ER.

At the state level, California offers a good example of how public health workers can identify and address Afghan refugee mental health. The California public health department offers resources specifically for Afghan refugees including a long list of Behavioral health services for newly arrived Afghan individuals. This includes trauma management courses, individual therapy (often provided free of charge), couple and group therapy. These resources are offered in Dari, Farsi, and Pashto. This initiative offers a positive example of culturally and linguistically tailored resources.

A more informal approach to mental health care that is deeply enmeshed in the community is needed. Since there is relatively low MHL in the population and speaking about mental health issues is stigmatized (especially for men), it is critical to build trust in local health systems with Afghan refugees before more sensitive topics can be discussed. One possible route, for example, could be to integrate mental health care into primary care and telehealth, which fosters privacy.¹³³

¹³² “Fostering Responsive Mental Health Systems in the Syrian Refugee Crises: Scaling up Psychological Interventions with Syrian Refugees (STRENGTHS),” UNHCR, December 2022. <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/63dcf3927>

¹³³ Butler, Stuart M., and Nehath Sheriff, “The Challenge of Addressing the Health Care Needs of Afghan Evacuees,” Brookings, October 14, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2021/10/14/the-challenge-of-addressing-the-healthcare-needs-of-afghan-evacuees/>.

This approach is time-intensive, since it involves iterative interactions between health providers and evacuees.¹³⁴ For instance, due to language barriers and cultural differences, poor communication may lead to evacuees taking offense in what would otherwise appear to be everyday clinical interactions, maybe even causing them to disengage from the healthcare system altogether.¹³⁵

¹³⁴Butler, Stuart M., and Nehath Sheriff, “The Challenge of Addressing the Health Care Needs of Afghan Evacuees,” Brookings, October 14, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2021/10/14/the-challenge-of-addressing-the-healthcare-needs-of-afghan-evacuees/>

¹³⁵ Butler, Stuart M., and Nehath Sheriff, “How Poor Communication Exacerbates Health Inequities – and What to Do about It,” Brookings, February 22, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/how-poor-communication-exacerbates-health-inequities-and-what-to-do-about-it/>.

VII. Appendix

2.1 Comparison of Pathways to Enter the United States

Process Attribute	Parole of OAR/OAW Afghan Evacuees	Afghan SIV	U.S. Refugee ⁸ Admissions Program
Application Processing Time	Upon determination by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) after successfully clearing screening, vetting, and inspection	Years	Varies from less than 1 year to more than 2 years
Applicant's Location	At U.S. Port of Entry (POE)	Outside the United States	Generally, outside the individual's country of nationality
Discretionary/Adjudicative Decision and Deciding Entity	Discretionary decision made by CBP	Adjudicative decisions by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and DOS ⁹	Adjudicative decision by USCIS
Path to Lawful Permanent Resident (LPR)	No path to LPR	Grants LPR upon admission	Gives a path to LPR after 1 year in the country
Interview Requirements	None until December 2021	Requires in-person interview	Requires in-person interview
Screening and Vetting Layers in Place	<p>Lily pads: Biometric and biographic screening and vetting by [REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>Biometric checks in [REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>CBP vetted those on flight manifests using the [REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>U.S. POE: CBP inspection.</p>	<p>USCIS reviews background checks and DOS or DOD screening. USCIS conducts biographic queries in [REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>DOS reviews immigrant visa applications and interviews the applicants, as well as conducts internal checks and coordinates interagency security checks.</p> <p>U.S. POE: CBP inspection.</p>	<p>Biometric and biographic screening occurs throughout. USCIS reviews the biographic checks, conducts biometric checks [REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED] and interviews applicants for eligibility.</p> <p>U.S. POE: CBP inspection.</p>

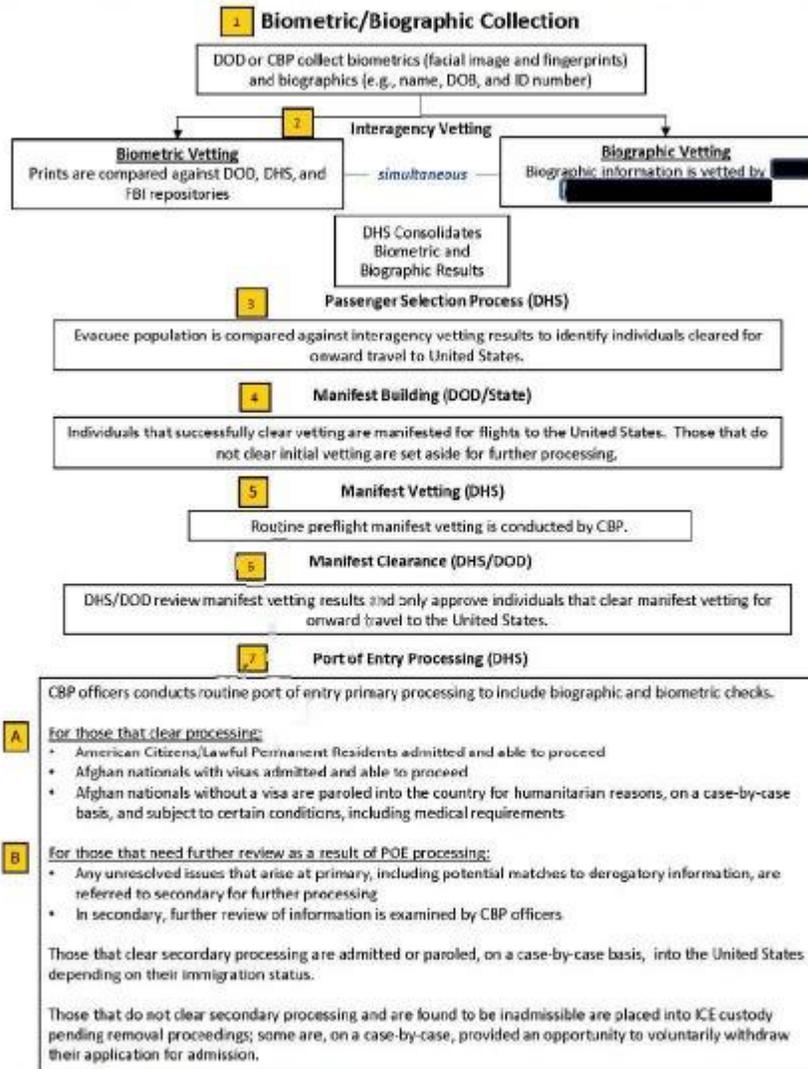
Source: DHS OIG analysis of DHS Office of Strategy, Policy, and Plans (DHS Policy), USCIS, and other publicly available documents. Printed in <https://www.oig.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/assets/2022-09/OIG-22-64-Sep22-Redacted.pdf>

2.2 OAW Interagency Screening, Vetting, and Inspection Process



LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE
OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL
 Department of Homeland Security

Figure 3. OAW Interagency Screening, Vetting, and Inspecting Process¹⁴



Source: DHS Policy official sent via e-mail

¹⁴ In addition to DOD and DOS, DHS (Transportation Security Administration) participated in Step 4, above.

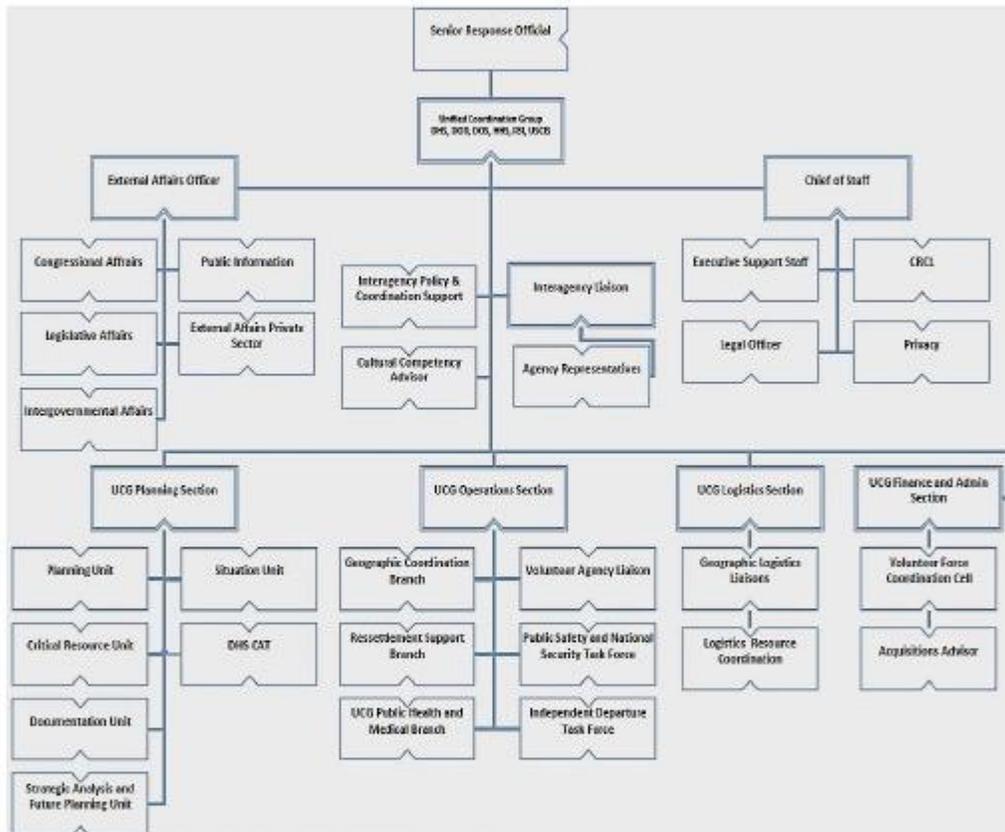
2.3 OAW UCG Organizational Chart



OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL Department of Homeland Security

Appendix C UCG Organization Chart

Note: This organization chart does not include Federal Coordinators and other safe haven officials and staff.



Source: October 15–19, 2021 UCG Management Plan

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