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Mad Kabul Scramble Is ‘Exactly the Scenario We Feared’

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In May, Washington’s special envoy to Afghanistan appeared before lawmakers and heard their alarm about what the upcoming U.S. military withdrawal from the country would mean for the thousands of Afghans who stood against the Taliban during the 20-year war.

A senior member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Rep. Gerry Connolly (D-VA), told Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad that the situation in Afghanistan was beginning to bear an “eerie” resemblance to the end of the Vietnam War—and “just like Vietnam, we are leaving behind hundreds of thousands of Afghans who relied on us and trusted us for their security.”

Many, chiefly President Joe Biden, believed there would be time to get those Afghans—translators, security guards, drivers and fixers—to safety before the planned Sept. 11 withdrawal of U.S. forces and a possible Taliban takeover.

There was not. Barely three months after his exchange with Khalilzad, Connolly spent the weekend that Kabul fell to the Taliban fielding a deluge of requests from constituents in his northern Virginia district, desperately seeking help to get loved ones, friends, and contacts in Afghanistan out before it was too late.

Connolly told The Daily Beast that his office is currently handling nearly 60 cases involving special visas for Afghans.

“We have an obligation to those people and their families to help them get to safety,” said Connolly. “We have a very, very slender period of time in which to do that.”

He is not the only lawmaker slammed with requests. Several offices reported that in the last few days, their phones have been ringing off the hooks. Staffers are personally fielding Hail Mary requests from people—often not even their constituents—angling for any window, however narrow, to find help for someone in Afghanistan. And many lawmakers have set up special email lines specifically for handling requests for assistance.

Heartbroken and angry as they attempt to save lives at risk of retaliation for collaborating with the now-collapsed U.S.-backed government, lawmakers in both parties insist that it didn’t have to be like this.

“We didn’t need to be in this position,” said Rep. Jason Crow (D-CO), an Afghanistan veteran who, in early June, was one of 20 lawmakers who urged Biden to create a task force to protect Afghan allies.

It never happened.

“This is exactly the scenario we feared. This is what we warned against,” said Rep. Peter Meijer (R-MI), another Afghanistan veteran who urged action from Biden in June. Now, he said, “I’m not just fielding calls from constituents—I’m talking to friends who are there, who are trying to get out.”

“It’s infuriating.”

The risks to former translators, interpreters and other allies of the U.S. military in Afghanistan are extreme. Civilian casualties reached record levels in the first half of 2021, according to the

United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, and with the government's collapse are on track to reach the highest number in a single year. One in six of those casualties have been attributed to targeted assassinations of civilians seen as having collaborated with the “puppet government,” as the Taliban called the Afghan central government—demonstrating the very real danger of violent revenge at the hands of the new regime.

“The risks have been well-documented throughout the years and range from kidnapping to torture to assassination,” said Maya Hess, founder and CEO of Red T., a nonprofit that works to protect translators and interpreters in conflict zones. “We have been trying to get the U.S. government to act on these for many, many years, and I personally am very frustrated and very heartbroken—here come all these screams for help. Some of them just say ‘help, help, help, help, help.’”

The Biden administration has publicly committed to following through on past promises to Afghans who risked their lives to support the U.S. presence in Afghanistan. In June, one day before meeting with the since-ousted Afghan president Ashraf Ghani, the president told reporters that Afghan allies would be “welcome here, just like anyone else who risked their lives to help us.”

“They’re going to come—we’ve already begun the process,” Biden said at the time. “Those who helped us are not going to be left behind.”

But according to members of Congress who have worked for months to prepare for the successful evacuation of Afghan support staff, the administration’s work should have started long before this week.

“The question here is whether this will be Saigon or Dunkirk,” said Rep. Tom Malinowski (D-N.J.), a member of Crow’s “Honoring Our Promises” working group. “Are we going to leave people behind like we did in South Vietnam, or are we going to hold the beach until everyone is taken off the beach? I hope that it’s the latter.”

The Biden White House, meanwhile, began circulating talking points to Democratic allies in Congress on Monday that declared that the real reason so many SIV applicants are stuck in Afghanistan is because “many did not want to leave earlier.” In an address to the nation on Monday afternoon, Biden himself declared that “some of the Afghans did not want to leave earlier,” because they were “still hopeful” that the central government could prevail over the Taliban—a statement that advocates for translators told The Daily Beast falls apart under basic scrutiny.

“They’re saying that there are interpreters that have elected to stay?” Hess asked incredulously. “In my 10-plus years advocating on this issue, I have yet to encounter an Afghan interpreter who wants to remain in his country. It is just too dangerous. In fact, it was dangerous with the troops there. Since interpreters were the face of the coalition, they have been a priority target of insurgents from the get-go. The White House’s argument does not make any sense.”

A White House spokesperson repeatedly dodged questions from The Daily Beast about how many successful SIV applicants had decided, after a lengthy, invasive and difficult process to gain a coveted visa with a massive backlog of applicants, to remain in the country after all, instead pointing to Biden’s remarks on Monday afternoon as evidence enough.

In reality, the system for bringing in American allies from Afghanistan to protect them from reprisal has been backed up for years, due in part to Trump’s functional “Muslim ban,” which severely limited immigration from Middle Eastern countries. An estimated 18,000 Afghans who worked as interpreters, security guards, drivers and in other roles for the United States are estimated to be waiting for a final decision after having applied for a special immigrant visa, with more than 50,000 family members hoping to join them.

Of the estimated 19,000 who have already completed the process of applying for a Special Immigrant Visa, only half have been approved. Some former interpreters have been forced to remain in Afghanistan because their term of service fell short of the two-year eligibility

requirement—sometimes by mere days—as if the Taliban will give a pass to a former interpreter who collaborated with the U.S. military for a mere eighteen months.

On the Republican side, there was no shortage of attempted score-settling, however muddled the messaging was out of the gate. The GOP hawks on Capitol Hill were out in full force. The Trumpy nationalists, who had for years echoed former President Donald Trump’s calls for concluding America’s “endless wars,” were denouncing Biden’s withdrawal as a disaster, anyway.

For the former president, the Taliban takeover was yet another opportunity to troll—and to fundraise, of course.

On Monday, Trump said in a written statement, “Can anyone even imagine taking out our Military before evacuating civilians and others who have been good to our Country and who should be allowed to seek refuge?” and claimed, “Under my Administration, all civilians and equipment would have been removed.”

The claim from Trump, who continues on as leader of his party, is heavily undermined by Trump’s own policies while in office, which torpedoed refugee programs and aggressively slammed the doors shut on scores of refugees, including from Afghanistan and Iraq. “I have spoken to former President Trump several times about this subject and frankly it was not a concern of his,” said a former senior Trump administration official. “Including in discussions about [refugees coming from] Iraq and Afghanistan, he would talk about how letting them in would mean them stealing jobs from Americans.”

After Trump left office in January, advocates for greater acceptance of immigrants and refugees saw an opening with the new administration, and urged lawmakers to pressure President Biden as much as possible, fearing a coming Taliban onslaught.

Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst with the libertarian Cato Institute, says starting early this year, after Biden had been inaugurated, he and other Cato colleagues began giving “numerous Hill briefings with staff on different committees that deal with both immigration and foreign affairs in the House and the Senate—about half Republican, half Democratic staff.”

The meetings, which concluded by June, were focused on discussing logistics and granular details of immigration law, with the lawmakers and their staff anticipating an Afghanistan bloodbath and a need for rapid resettlement.

“None of them expected Afghanistan to last, they all expected the Taliban to take over,” Nowrasteh said. “All of them agreed, they called us in part because they knew this was going to be a problem [with refugees]. I wasn’t trying to convince people... We were going on assumptions in these meetings that it would take two-three months after the U.S. pulled out. Clearly, a better estimate would have been a week.”

The analyst added, “My advice was that the president can do whatever he wants here. He can let anybody in here at any time. That’s the person you need to convince to do this. Everything else is just details.”

By August, not enough convincing had been done.

On the ground in Afghanistan, where the administration has repeatedly conceded that the Taliban takeover of the country has proceeded more swiftly than they expected, the prospect of forcing SIV applicants to wait for even a few days is to potentially condemn them to death, said Aimee Ansari, executive director of Translators Without Borders.

“Translators, interpreters, and aid workers who have worked for the U.S. government or U.S. government funded projects could be at risk of retaliation from the Taliban,” Ansari told The Daily Beast. “The U.S. government and, frankly, other governments, have a moral responsibility to ensure their safety.”

In the meantime, U.S. lawmakers and non-profit advocates will continue their ad-hoc efforts to clear visa backlogs and do whatever they can to help get Afghans to safety.

Connolly, for his part, didn't blame the Biden administration for the situation—but strongly urged them to leave no doubt that evacuating those Afghans who helped the U.S., and those who are most at risk, is the top priority now for his government.

“It really is,” he said, “a race against time.”