



Let the Afghan People Come

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Joe Biden doesn't have to feel bad about bringing the troops home if he lets the persecuted come here.

President Joe Biden appears ready to ignore the May 1 deadline the Trump administration negotiated for withdrawing from Afghanistan. Why would Biden, who as vice president promised a total withdrawal by 2014, want to extend America's longest war?

One thing is for sure: It isn't because staying several months past the deadline will change conditions on the ground in America's favor. The fundamentals of the war have remained unchanged since nearly the beginning. The Taliban insurgency can and will outlast the U.S. occupation and the U.S.-backed regime in Kabul is too corrupt and weak to establish itself as a sovereign.

The Biden administration's procrastination seems motivated by two fears that, unfortunately, America can do little about. First, U.S. withdrawal could trigger intensified violence and risk the collapse of the Kabul government and its replacement by the Taliban. Second, Afghan civilians may be at increased risk of human rights abuses once the U.S. leaves.

Helpfully, there is little immediate security threat to the United States from a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. The group itself has no ambitions beyond Afghanistan's borders and the notion of a terrorist safe haven is a myth resting on a misunderstanding of the operational utility of such territorial havens in carrying out international acts of violence.

The fact that we have failed to defeat the Taliban or to effectively establish a new government after almost 20 years of trying strongly suggests it is an unachievable mission and, far from a reason to stay longer, is in fact a compelling reason to leave as soon as possible.

The fate of the Afghan people is compelling too. Unfortunately, policymakers have to come to grips with the fact they don't have many policy tools to effectively manipulate the treatment of Afghans in Afghanistan. Human rights protections have improved for many Afghans during the U.S. occupation, including respect for women's rights. But even after nearly two decades of efforts on the ground, the United Nations still ranks Afghanistan 153rd out of 160 countries for gender equality. In a 2017 index, Afghanistan tied with Syria for the worst place in the world to be a woman.

If U.S. policymakers are serious about adopting policies that can protect Afghans under threat, they should welcome Afghans to American shores. The first step is to restart the refugee program that was effectively cancelled by President Donald Trump. Biden said he wants to welcome

125,000 refugees, but he hasn't taken the first step—authorizing an additional 62,500 this year—even though the presidential determination is sitting on his desk waiting for his signature. Biden could permit entry to 40,000 Afghans a year if he wanted to.

A second step would be to allow Americans to privately sponsor refugees at their own expense. Such a program could be modeled on America's experience with private sponsorship for Jews fleeing the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War and on how Canada runs its very successful system today. The Biden administration could start the pilot program and enlist veteran groups who have been at the forefront of arguing for their Afghan comrades to find refuge in America.

That leads us to the Special Immigration Visa (SIV) program for Afghans who were employed by or on behalf of the U.S. government. These folks risked their lives to help American forces and the Taliban will show them no mercy if it takes over. But the SIV is mired in bureaucracy, preventing many deserving applicants from coming here. Biden should give the SIV program a kick in the pants to immediately welcome the roughly 17,000 Afghan employees of the U.S. and their roughly 50,000 family members.

The U.S. could also help European and Asian countries settle Afghan refugees within their borders. Many Afghan refugees want to go to Europe where their family members are living and nothing is stopping the Biden administration from working with the Europeans to facilitate such a humanitarian migration.

Unfortunately, the government probably won't organize itself in time to help Afghans in these ways. The last, desperate option that the Biden administration will have to consider is paroling Afghan refugees into the United States. Under presidential authority, Biden could fly refugees directly from Afghanistan or surrounding countries to the island of Guam and process them there for entry to the U.S. They could immediately start working and building new lives for themselves.

This is what the United States did for many Kurds during the 1990s after the U.S. government asked them to rebel against Saddam Hussein's government in Iraq and then abandoned them to be slaughtered by the Iraqi government.

Biden's parole authority is the same that President Gerald Ford had when he decided to process about 111,000 Vietnamese refugees fleeing the Communist takeover of South Vietnam in 1975. At the time, a young senator named Joe Biden said, "The United States has no obligation to evacuate one, or 100,001, South Vietnamese." The success of the Vietnamese in the United States should have changed Biden's mind in the intervening decades.

Simply put, the United States has lost the war in Afghanistan. By pushing past the May 1 withdrawal date, Biden is merely delaying the inevitable. Afghanistan and its people are unlikely to be much better off by maintaining a small military presence there for a few months longer. Offering refuge to Afghans fleeing abuse would be a constructive human rights policy. Extending a lost war won't be.

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