Bring the Afghans to America

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Immigration policy is one of the most contentious political issues in America today. However, some immigration policies should be non-controversial regardless of one's political persuasion. Allowing Afghans who helped the United States government, or otherwise opposed the Taliban, into the United States is a policy no-brainer.

Nearly everyone has seen the images of Afghans crowding the Kabul airport, grasping to departing planes, desperate to get out of Afghanistan. What's unseen is even worse: Taliban soldiers searching houses for Afghans who helped American forces. The collapse of the Afghan military was more rapid than almost anybody predicted, but the situation did not have to be this bad. U.S. immigration policy should have already admitted many people who could now suffer under the Taliban.

Fewer than 120,000 green cards for permanent residency in the United States have been issued to Afghans since the war on terror began nearly 20 years ago. The number of Afghan refugees admitted to the United States is even lower, at barely more than 20,000 — an average of only about 1,000 per year.

Meanwhile, 72,176 people earned a Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) for aiding the U.S. military in Afghanistan, including their family members. There are an additional approximately 80,000, at least, who qualify for an SIV but have little chance of escaping. Many of these people are nowhere near Kabul and have little to no chance of making it out on any remaining evacuation flights from Kabul Airport.

The current Afghan SIV program was created in 2009 and requires a 14-step application process. And the average processing time, after the initial steps under the applicants' control are complete, is 996 days as of January 2021. Of course, that timeline is optimistic now and assumes that former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo didn't shut down SIV processing in March 2020. If this process were more efficient, thousands of Afghans could already be safely in the United States instead of fearing for their lives as the Taliban takes control of their country.

The United States' restrictive immigration policy towards Afghans contributed to the current crisis, but we can do better going forward. When the United States government pulled out of Saigon in 1975, it evacuated an estimated 125,000 Vietnamese refugees with them. The withdrawal from Afghanistan merits a similar effort.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas received a letter on Aug. 16, signed by 46 senators, strongly urging them to "create a humanitarian parole category specifically for women leaders, activists, human rights defenders, judges, parliamentarians, journalists, and members of the Female Tactical Platoon of the Afghan Special Security Forces" that would "allow for fast, humane, and efficient relocation to the United States."

An immediate large humanitarian parole immigration program, coupled with continued evacuation flights, could help as many, or more, Afghans than our bureaucratic immigration system has helped over the last two decades. There are zero legal impediments to President Biden carrying this out immediately.

A few conservatives, including former White House advisor Stephen Miller and Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Ga.) have raised concerns about bringing so many refugees without first vetting them outside of the United States.

But in research published in the *J*ournal of Economic Behavior & Organization, we investigated the link between immigration and terrorism in 170 countries over a recent 25 year period. We specifically investigated the link between terrorism and immigrants from both Muslim majority origin countries and conflict torn countries and found no significant relationship between greater immigration and increased terrorism.

Furthermore, zero people were murdered by Afghans in terror attacks on U.S. soil from 1975–2017. During that time, three Afghan-born terrorists committed attacks or attempted attacks on U.S. soil. They were Najibullah Zazi, Zarein Ahmedzay, and Ahmad Khan Rahimi. They murdered zero people and injured about 30. From 1975–2017, the annual chance of being murdered by an Afghan terrorist in an attack on U.S. soil was zero and the chance of being injured was about one in 398,828,510 per year.

Those numbers could change if the number of Afghans admitted increases, but they would have to increase substantially to matter. Immigrants should be vetted, especially the Afghans, but we shouldn't let overblown terrorism fears delay humanitarian immigration reforms designed to help Afghans who mostly helped American forces fight Islamic extremists.

President Biden should use his immigration powers to parole for Afghans who want to flee from the Taliban's rule and help them evacuate while the government is still operating flights out of Kabul. As more Afghans flee to neighboring countries, he should help some of them come to the United States too. In the long term, we need a functional visa program to channel many more to the United States.

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