Leaving People Behind After Twenty Years in Afghanistan

Doug Bandow

May 26, 2021

Losing a war is never pretty. Leaving behind thousands of people who risked their lives to fight with you is truly ugly. If the Biden administration's timetable for Afghanistan holds firm, American forces will be home by fall. And a multitude of Afghans will be vulnerable to retaliation if the Taliban wins the ensuing struggle, as is widely feared.

The potential tragedy – how else to describe the outcome of America's ill-fated intervention? – brings to mind the exodus from South Vietnam after that country fell to Hanoi's forces in April 1975. The final evacuations <u>were conducted via helicopter</u> from the roof of the U.S. embassy.

Soon thereafter came the much larger and more terrible flight of the <u>Boat People</u>. Thousands of refugees fled by sea: they were robbed by pirates, lost when vessels sank, forced back to Vietnam, marooned in refugee camps, and sometimes rescued. Many people desperate to reach to America ultimately did so, but many more were left behind in a united communist Vietnam to languish in reeducation camps, part of a permanently suspect, persecuted class.

Of course, a Vietnamese redux is not guaranteed. There is substantial opposition to the Taliban; indeed, Afghanistan has changed dramatically with the large American and European presence. Even the earlier Soviet-supported regime lasted more than three years after Moscow brought its troops home in 1989. Afghanistan might end up as a mix of fiefdoms divided by ethnicity, religion, urbanity, and modernity. Cities like Kabul might remain sanctuaries for educated, professional classes.

Nevertheless, America's friends fear their fate if the Taliban arrives in Kabul. Escaping landlocked Afghanistan would be hazardous. Nor does sanctuary await Afghan refugees further abroad. Recent migrants found no international welcome map, with many forcibly repatriated from Turkey and Europe.

The prospect of an Afghan collapse has been used as an argument for the US military to remain, presumably forever, or at least until the Second Coming. However, America cannot forever fight wars that have lost their purpose. Nor should Americans be expected to forever pay and die for the mistakes of their government.

However, that doesn't mean abandoning the Afghan people. Americans should accept those who want to leave.

America's reputation as a generous international refuge is largely a memory. Even before Donald Trump made fear of and antagonism toward foreigners a hallmark of his presidency, the US was shockingly stingy toward Iraqis and Afghans who had aided America in its "endless wars" of the last two decades. As Washington's participation in the Afghan war races to its end the bureaucracy continues to move extraordinarily slowly in implementing the Special Immigrant Visa program. Many Afghan interpreters have been rejected without explanation despite military affirmations of their service, bravery, and loyalty.

Afghans, along with their families, have been threatened because of their work for Americans; some have gone into hiding to escape retaliation. After serving in Afghanistan Matt Zeller of the Truman National Security Project cofounded an organization, No One Left Behind, to advocate on behalf of interpreters. He warned: "The Taliban considers them to be literally enemies of Islam," so "There's no mercy for them." The State Department denied interpreter Ayazudin Hilal a visa for him and his family. He told the Associated Press: "We are not safe. The Taliban is calling us and telling us, 'Your stepbrother is leaving the country soon, and we will kill all of you guys'."

According to No One Left Behind some 300 interpreters or family members have been killed so far while waiting, a shameful stain on the US complained Zeller and Kim Staffieri, co-founder of The Association of Wartime Allies, which similarly supports Afghans seeking to come to America: "Our enemies are hunting them down and murdering them and their families – as examples of what happens to America's friends. With US departure now set, the government must create a safe exit for our allies and to process their applications immediately and efficiently."

The starting point for Washington should be the roughly 17,000 Afghans who worked for the US in any capacity and their 50,000 family members. Some have tired of waiting and already fled, but few have found asylum abroad. For instance, the *New York Times* reported on one group currently living illegally in Istanbul:

"Across the city in a neighborhood of condemned housing, another group of Afghans sat on blankets on the floor in a tiny hallway to breakfast together for Ramadan. Trained electricians and plasterers from years working on military bases in Afghanistan, they now work as illegal

subcontractors in Turkey, often going unpaid for months. They said they all had to abandon their families and homes because of threats from the Taliban for their work with the American military or American contracting companies. 'The Taliban were getting closer to our village. That was the main reason,' said Najibullah Qarqin, 25, who worked as an electrician for four years on US bases and diplomatic compounds. 'This is why I am here, because of security'." A 44-year-old painter and plasterer declared: "If there was peace in my country, I would never take this risk."

However, rather than take a niggardly approach, limiting visas to Afghan employees, Washington should also accept other Afghans who have reason to fear a return to Taliban rule and desire to live in a liberal society. Many professionals, intellectuals, students, merchants, and others do not want to return to the past. The US does not have the same direct responsibility for them as, say, interpreters, but after two decades of war and three administrations constantly changing strategy, Washington will be leaving them in a country still ravaged by war and facing an authoritarian takeover.

Historian Robert D. Crews argued: "what the United States could and should do is accept that it has a historic, moral, and political responsibility to Afghan refugees, and not just to those who aided US operations. Unable to remake Afghans on the Hindu Kush, the United States should undertake a more realistic project with a longer track record of success: the mass resettlement of Afghan migrants here, in a land where Afghan immigrants from an earlier wave of migration have long flourished."

It is difficult to predict how many people might want to leave, but they would be an asset for America. The US could accommodate another extraordinary exodus, like from South Vietnam. My Cato colleagues John Glaser and Alex Nowrasteh suggested utilizing the general refugee program which the president revived only under pressure. Secretary of State Antony Blinken defended the administration effort, stating that "we have to be, you know, focused on what we're able to do when we're able to do it." However, this is no ordinary time.

Beyond that, write Glaser and Nowrasteh: "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 US They could immediately start working and building new lives for themselves." President Gerald Ford used the same power to bring in 110,000 Vietnamese refugees more than four decades ago. Parole does not grant a specific immigration status. Rather, it allows people to enter, gaining temporary sanctuary, and then apply under one or another programs.

Better, however, Biden should propose and Congress should enact an emergency program for Afghan refugees. The exact number should be high enough accommodate a potential large-scale exodus. These visas should remain available at least until 2022 or 2023 since some Afghans might wait to see how events develop. In the best case they could remain in their homeland. However, if the situation deteriorated, they would have an escape option.

The administration also should use Washington's extraordinary logistics capabilities to transport those who otherwise would be left behind. For instance, the International Refugee Assistance Project proposed:

"Similar to Operation Pacific Haven in 1996, which evacuated thousands of Iraqi Kurds to Guam, or airlifts at the end of the Vietnam War, the Department of Defense should immediately incorporate evacuation operations for vulnerable Afghans into the planned retrograde order. The operations should consider all options, including large-scale ground convoys with air cover into safe zones or transit areas in nearby countries, as well as large-scale airlifts. … The US government should also consider multiple relocation sites, such as US military bases in Guam or Diego Garcia, or bring Afghans directly to the United States or another safe country for further immigration processing."

Having announced such initiatives, demonstrating a generosity of spirit absent the last four years, Biden then could turn his charm on European leaders to encourage them to develop a similar system for accepting Afghans. After all, Europe, including Turkey, has been a partner with America in Afghanistan for two decades.

Still, convincing Europeans to accept Afghans likely would be a tough sell. Anti-immigrant sentiments remain strong. European nations have accepted hundreds of thousands of refugees, including many Afghans, while the US took virtually none. (As a neighbor of Syria, Turkey hosts millions of refugees, many in camps.) Recently Europeans have been returning Afghans to Kabul. Reported the *Washington Post*: "in the past two years, Western Europe has tightened borders, rejected more asylum petitions and speeded up deportations. Even as Afghan and NATO forces continue battling aggressive insurgencies in Afghanistan, European governments say, the country is not dangerous enough for most Afghans to need foreign sanctuary." Unfortunately, that was not true then and surely will not be the case after the allies depart.

However, European states have at least one reason to create an orderly process for Afghan refugees. A collapse of the Kabul government could trigger a rush for the exits. Land routes are difficult and dangerous, but Afghans made up a large share of the 2015 human tsunami which triggered Europe's migration crisis. Kemel Kirişci and Fulya Memisoglu, of the Brookings Institution and Istanbul Yildiz Technical University, respectively, warned of the possibility of "a mass exodus of refugees fleeing Afghanistan that could spark another migration crisis." Preparing for that possibility would help avoid the chaos, hardship, and antagonism of 2015.

The Afghan civil war is 40 years old. The tragedy will likely continue after America's departure. As Washington withdraws its military forces it should prepare to accept Afghans seeking to avoid a rerun of Taliban control.

With the president's preferred departure date little more than three months away, he should act now. Adam Bates of IRAP warned: "Time is running out for the US government to offer humanitarian protection to Afghans whose lives will be under threat after US withdrawal." Failing to act, he worried, risks "a humanitarian catastrophe in the region."

Accepting America's Afghan friends would be the moral and responsible course. Doing the right thing also would be the smart thing, since America would gain from Afghanistan's loss. Biden should dramatically break with his predecessor and welcome Afghan refugees to the US

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.