

## Opinion: We may be leaving Afghanistan, but we shouldn't forget our allies

Opinion by **Phil Caruso**



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Last Wednesday, President Biden announced a complete withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Afghanistan by Sept. 11, 2021. He pledged to continue diplomacy, funding and humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan. What he did not say is that by most indications, the Taliban continues to seek a military victory and that the loss of U.S. military support could hasten the demise of the Afghan government.

The specter of a collapsed Afghan government raises important questions about what the United States will do to save its partners there. As the Biden administration carries out its withdrawal, it must keep its commitments by saving the many thousands of Afghan partners who have risked their lives not just for a free Afghanistan, but for Americans' own security. Our government has a moral obligation, if not to build a lasting peace in the countries we shatter, then to help our allies escape retribution when we leave.

The war in Afghanistan is, of course, first and foremost a war between Afghans. But though the United States may no longer be able to shoulder the burden of internecine conflict, our government must not forget the sacrifices made by Afghans during its own war there. Hundreds of thousands of Afghans have risked their lives directly supporting U.S. forces in positions ranging from security guards to cooks to interpreters. Approximately 17,000 Afghan former interpreters alone await adjudication of their Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applications. Congress has authorized 4,000 visas for 2021 and 10,993 previously authorized visas remain available, but with a surge of new applications likely to come after last Wednesday's announcement, the backlog cannot be cleared by the Sept. 11 withdrawal without additional resources.

America's Afghan allies face severe consequences at the hands of the Taliban. The Taliban have long insisted that those Afghans who have worked for the United States should be punished by death. They have delivered on this promise time and again. And the Taliban is hardly discerning in its vengeance. Since 2018, No One Left Behind — the only American nonprofit focused on advocacy for the SIV program — has documented more than 300 incidents in which former interpreters, civilians living in Afghan society, were targeted and killed by the Taliban for their collaboration with U.S. forces.

The world has seen this story before, and the U.S. government must remember the lessons of the past. Between the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam in 1973 and the South Vietnamese government's collapse in April 1975, the United States failed to develop and execute a plan to rescue its allies despite significant intelligence and advance warning.

Congress outright refused to live up to any moral obligation. While the United States was ultimately able to evacuate 140,000 South Vietnamese allies when the U.S.-backed government fell, hundreds of thousands were left behind. The communist North Vietnamese army imprisoned 300,000 of them for as long as 18 years, subjecting them to forced labor, starvation and torture.

More recently, the United States and its allies struggled to help its Iraqi partners escape retribution when it withdrew from Iraq in 2011. Between 2008 and 2011, unaddressed delays in the program led to the U.S. government issuing only 7,000 of the 25,000 authorized visas to eligible Iraqi interpreters. In March and April 2011 — just eight months before the last U.S. troops departed — only 16 visas were issued. With the impending withdrawal — like the one pending now in Afghanistan — Congress required the Defense, State and Homeland Security departments to draft a plan to expedite visa processing by May 2011. But those agencies failed to meet that deadline. Ultimately, though we may never know the true scale of revenge against our former interpreters, experts estimated that at least 1,000 were killed in Iraq. And those errors followed a cautionary tale of the British withdrawal from Basra, Iraq, in 2006, after which at least 21 of their interpreters were systematically hunted down and murdered.

Should the fateful day of Taliban victory ever come, the Biden administration can avoid a similarly grim fate for our Afghan allies by developing and deliberately executing a plan to evacuate them. Learning from the mistakes of Vietnam in 1975 and Iraq in 2011, the White House can work with Congress to authorize thousands of additional SIV and refugee visas. It can surge resources to those programs, including increased staffing at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, and the National Visa Center, to clear backlogs and increase the number of Afghans who can escape before a potential Taliban victory. It can negotiate with regional partners to establish safe zones for Afghan refugees to evade the reach of the Taliban. And it can ensure that air and ground transportation resources are available to conduct a large-scale evacuation should the Taliban overrun the country. Above all, in ending America's longest war, it must show to the world that when Americans make commitments abroad, we keep them.

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