



Afghanistan: One Year In

President Biden’s poorly planned withdrawal from Afghanistan resulted in the deaths of 13 U.S. servicemembers and the abandonment of hundreds of American citizens behind enemy lines; dealt a substantial blow to our counterterrorism mission; significantly weakened America’s credibility on the world stage; and has resulted in an even more devastating humanitarian crisis in the country.

► **Failure to Listen**

While President Biden came into office claiming to value U.S. partnerships, his actions in the days leading up to and following his withdrawal announcement on April 14, 2021 reflected nothing of the sort. According to reports, U.S. allies – many of whom disagreed on the timing and conditions surrounding the withdrawal – felt the president didn’t “sufficiently consult” with them about the plan to leave the country by September 11, 2021. Since the withdrawal, testimony from top generals at the Pentagon reveal they too opposed the president’s withdrawal timeline – contradicting the president’s public assurances. The U.S. intelligence community’s grim assessment of the situation in the country backed up the Pentagon’s concerns. And all the while, Republicans and Democrats in Congress repeatedly urged the president not to move forward with his ill-timed withdrawal. Yet President Biden proceeded full steam ahead with the full withdrawal.

► **Taliban Takeover**

As the U.S. began winding down troop levels by closing facilities like Bagram Airbase in July 2021, limiting the scope of U.S. support, the Taliban offensive picked up speed. Throughout July, the Taliban seized large swaths of territory and border crossings. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Milley announced on July 21, 2021 the Taliban controlled half of Afghanistan’s districts and a takeover was possible. Yet, President Biden, the State Department, and others in the administration continued to claim the capability of the Afghan security forces was evidence Afghanistan wouldn’t fall – despite the pace of the Taliban offensive coupled with years of reporting and analysis demonstrating the dependence these forces had on U.S. support. Early August 2021, the first provincial capital fell to the Taliban, and shortly after, CENTCOM General McKenzie estimated Kabul could be isolated within 30 days. On August 15, 2021, nine days after seizing their first capital, the Taliban entered Kabul, effectively taking back control of the country.

► **Chaotic U.S. Withdrawal**

Despite the Biden administration’s claims that they had “planned for every contingency” in Afghanistan, the events on the ground in August 2021 clearly demonstrate otherwise. As the Taliban surrounded Kabul, thousands of additional U.S. troops were sent in to facilitate the drawdown and embassy personnel were relocated to the Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) by helicopter, reminiscent of the U.S. withdrawal of Saigon. HKIA was stormed by desperate Afghans and Americans alike, seeking to escape another brutal Taliban regime. Inconsistent messages from the State Department about evacuations were sent to U.S. citizens, lawful permanent residents (LPRs), Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants, and other at-risk Afghans, only furthering the chaos in and around HKIA. Taliban checkpoints and crowds rendered the airport extremely difficult to access, and thousands of Americans and Afghan partners were turned away or were never even able to reach the gates. And finally, the tragic ISIS-K bombing at HKIA on August 26th resulted in the deaths of 13 American servicemembers. Despite Biden’s promises that the end of the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan would not mean the end of U.S. diplomatic involvement in Afghanistan, on August 30th, the U.S. diplomatic and military presence in Afghanistan ended.



► Americans and U.S. Partners Abandoned

One of the most striking failures was the lack of plans for evacuating American citizens, LPRs, and our Afghan partners that we made a commitment to help, such as SIV recipients that worked alongside U.S. forces. As a result, and despite President Biden's commitment that we would stay until every American got out, at least almost 800 American citizens, thousands of LPRs, and tens of thousands of our SIV partners were abandoned in Afghanistan to the mercy of the Taliban with little to no plan for how we were going to assist them once the evacuation formally ended. Fortunately, private citizens stepped up to fill the gap the U.S. government had created. Outside groups, often led by veterans, worked tirelessly to get both Americans and our Afghan partners out. Private donations – often made by veterans draining their bank accounts and 401Ks – funded rescue operations to evacuate thousands of people and continue to do so today.

For weeks after the evacuation, State Department and other officials claimed repeatedly that there were about one hundred Americans left behind in Afghanistan. As of January 2022, the State Department has admitted they have assisted in evacuating almost 500 Americans from Afghanistan since the withdrawal was complete on August 30, 2021. At the same time, private groups have evacuated several hundred additional Americans.

► Dire Humanitarian Crisis

The Taliban remains designated by the United States as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) group, and as such is subject to U.S. sanctions. Members of the Haqqani Network, a U.S. designated Foreign Terrorist Organization, currently serve in senior roles in the new Taliban government while subject to U.S. sanctions. The Taliban and several of its members are also subject to U.N. sanctions. Following the Taliban takeover, the Treasury Department issued several OFAC licenses to provide clarity on sanctionable activity in Afghanistan, including for humanitarian organizations. The humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan is dire, with conditions worsening as winter progresses. An estimated 23 million people will face severe hunger in 2022.

► Growing Terror Threats

The Taliban's victory in Afghanistan will likely embolden other terrorist groups and the broader global jihad movement. The Taliban has never broken ties with al Qaeda and lacks the capability to effectively counter ISIS-K's growth, rendering Afghanistan a safe haven for terrorists yet again. General Milley estimated these groups could reconstitute in Afghanistan in as little as six months. And without a U.S. presence or partner force on the ground, U.S. visibility of and ability to act against threats has been greatly diminished. The administration promised our over-the-horizon counter terrorism capabilities would fill in that gap, but failed to secure new basing or overflight agreements with any country neighboring Afghanistan, rendering our intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) dependent on assets in the Gulf and an air corridor through Pakistan. According to CENTCOM Commander General McKenzie, the U.S. now has only "1 or 2% of the capabilities we once had to look into Afghanistan". He has also stated that whether or not the U.S. has the capability to now prevent terrorists from launching attacks from Afghanistan is "yet to be seen".