

**AFGHANISTAN 2001-2021:  
EVALUATING THE WITHDRAWAL AND U.S.  
POLICIES PART 1**

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**HEARING**  
BEFORE THE  
**COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS**  
**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
ONE HUNDRED SEVENTEENTH CONGRESS  
SECOND SESSION

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SEPTEMBER 13, 2021  
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## **AFGHANISTAN 2001–2021: EVALUATING THE WITHDRAWAL AND U.S. POLICIES PART 1**

**Monday, September 13, 2021**

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,  
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,  
*Washington, DC.*

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:12 p.m., in room 2172, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Gregory W. Meeks (chairman of the committee) presiding.

Chairman MEEKS. The Committee on Foreign Affairs will come to order.

Without objection, the chair is authorized to declare a recess of the committee at any point, and all members will have 5 days to submit statements, extraneous material, and questions for the record subject to the limitation of the rules. To insert something into the record, please have your staff email the previously mentioned address or contact full committee staff.

As a reminder to all members, please keep your video function on at all times, even when you are not recognized by the chair. Members are responsible for muting and unmuting themselves. Consistent with House rules, staff will only mute members, as appropriate, when they are not under recognition to eliminate background noise.

Just a second. We are now waiting—we are putting up the Secretary. Let's see.

Secretary BLINKEN. I am here, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MEEKS. Great. Thank you, Mr. Secretary.

Before I make my opening remarks, Mr. Secretary, thank you, No. 1, for being here. And this is—the importance—given this topic and the importance of this topic and this committee's constitutional responsibility of oversight, I wanted to ask you whether or not you would be willing to stay to answer all member questions.

We want all members to have the opportunity knowing that it is—this is the first time that we are having some testimony in regards to pulling out since August 31 of this year. Can you—would you have the ability to stay to answer all members' questions?

Secretary BLINKEN. Mr. Chairman, I am prepared to stay until every member has had an opportunity to ask a question, yes.

Chairman MEEKS. Thank you, Mr. Secretary. We thank you for that.

And I see that we have a quorum, and I now will recognize myself for opening remarks.

Pursuant to notice, we meet today to evaluate the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan and the series of policies from the past 20 years that led to the events of August 2021. Mr. Secretary, it is good to have you back here before our committee a third time

since you have been Secretary, and thank you, and we appreciate your recognition of the important role this legislative body plays in conducting oversight on the executive.

I want to start off today by citing some numbers. 800,000. That is the number of Americans who served with the U.S. military in Afghanistan since 2001; 2,461. That is the number of American military personnel who died in Afghanistan, including the 13 brave Americans who were killed facilitating the evacuation of 124,000 people over the course of 17 days; 66,000. The number of Afghan national security forces killed in the conflict; 47,245. That is the number of Afghan civilians killed since 2001.

Twenty. That is the number of years we have been fighting in Afghanistan.

A war that has gone on for almost 20 years is a disaster. Disentangling ourselves from the war in Afghanistan was never going to be easy. And for my friends who presume a clean solution where the withdrawal existed, I would welcome hearing what exactly a smooth withdrawal from a messy, chaotic, 20-year war looks like. In fact, I have yet to hear the clean withdrawal option because I do not believe one exists.

Now, are there things the administration could have done differently? Absolutely, yes, as always. Foremost for me is for the State Department to evaluate how it could better evacuate Americans when events unravel quickly.

I look forward to hearing from the Secretary how the State Department intends to complete its evacuation of the 100 to 200 Americans remaining in Afghanistan who want to come home as well as for evacuating those Afghans who worked alongside us during the past 20 years.

However, it is important to separate fair criticism from criticism that isn't made in good faith and divorced from the realities on the ground in Afghanistan. We have heard some criticize the decision to close Bagram which they claim would have been better suited for evacuations, as though it would have been easier to evacuate hundreds of thousands of people from an airfield 40 miles outside of Kabul.

Others criticize the decision to not keep a small counterterrorism force in the country. I ask, where was this protest when the Trump administration sidelined the Afghan government in order to cut a deal with the Taliban? Where were the protests when the Trump administration negotiated a deal with the Taliban just 1 month after the abduction of Navy veteran Mark Frerichs? And where was this protest when then President Trump and Secretary Pompeo agreed to withdraw all troops by May 21, 2020.

And let me remind everyone that Trump's deal forced the Afghan government to release 5,000 prisoners and offered international legitimacy to the Taliban. It was a deal that failed to require the Taliban to separate from al-Qaeda terrorists and did not require the Taliban to stop attacking the Afghan government. The deal altered the political order of the country.

Now, some may say Trump's agreement was conditions-based, but it was different, that it came with stronger conditions, but that is simply not true. The choice before President Biden was between

a full withdrawal and the surging of thousands of Americans to Afghanistan for an undefined time.

To argue that there was a third option, a limited troop presence where the safety of our personnel could be preserved, in my mind is a fantasy. Had we not removed American troops from Afghanistan, we would have left them in the middle of a rapidly deteriorating war zone with no assurances that they would be spared by the Taliban.

And it strikes me that many of those critical of the administration's evacuation efforts are really just angry that the President made good on his pledge to end America's involvement in the war in Afghanistan. They are masking their displeasure with criticism but fail to offer feasible alternatives. Once again, we are seeing domestic politics injected into foreign policy.

The Taliban's quick takeover of provinces, Afghan security forces laying down their arms, and President Ghani's abrupt departure from the country he led, watching 20 years of effort crumble in only a matter of days has made it all the more clear that we could no longer occupy Afghanistan and the President's decision to bring our troops home was the right one.

And for me, as I close, closing this chapter of the U.S. Afghanistan book is a difficult one. I voted to authorize the war back in 2001 after the terrorist attacks on September 11. In the 20 years since, I have seen how this conflict cost the lives of countless Americans, Afghans, and our NATO partners. And what makes this all the more difficult is this is a war that should have ended 19 years ago with a different outcome. But our hubris, our own desire to remake Afghanistan, our own willingness to negotiate got in the way of that victory. These are hard truths, but only by examining these hard truths will we be able to understand what went wrong in Afghanistan.

The task before us on this committee, one that I am committed to making, will explore the past 20 years. We will be talking to individuals from the Bush Administration, from the Obama Administration, from the Trump administration, as well as the Biden Administration,

And I now recognize Mr. McCaul for his opening statements.

Mr. McCAUL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to thank the Secretary also for agreeing to stay until every member has been heard. I believe every member has a right to ask questions on such an important topic.

Over the last several weeks, we witnessed Afghanistan rapidly fall to the Taliban and the chaotic aftermath that followed. This did not have to happen, but the President refused to listen to his own generals and the intelligence community who warned him precisely what would happen when we withdrew. This was an unmitigated disaster of epic proportions. I never thought in my lifetime that I would see an unconditional surrender to the Taliban.

For weeks, our offices were flooded with requests to help people get out of Afghanistan, requests that were coming to us because the State Department failed to provide help. And then the unimaginable happened.

On August 26, 13 American servicemen and women were brutally murdered by ISIS-K trying to help American citizens and our Afghan partners escape from the Taliban.

Two days ago, we commemorated the 20th anniversary of 9/11. And while we mourned the loss of almost 3,000 innocent people, the Taliban at the same time celebrated by raising their flag over the Presidential palace. Days before, they emblazoned their flag on the wall of our United States embassy, proclaiming the defeat of the United States of America.

Shockingly, the White House has described this Taliban regime as businesslike and professional, so let's meet a few of these professionals of the so-called new and improved Taliban. The acting Prime Minister, Mullah Hasan Akhund, one of the Taliban's founding leaders. He is also sanctioned by the United Nations and sheltered Osama bin Laden for years.

The infamous members of the Taliban five released from Guantanamo under the Obama Administration also all hold senior positions in the new government. And, finally, the worst, acting Interior Minister Haqqani. He is responsible for overseeing policing and counterterrorism. He is also wanted by the FBI. He is the head of the brutal Haqqani network with close ties to al-Qaeda and is currently sanctioned by the United States. Most of the new and improved Taliban leaders hold the same or similar positions they held prior to 9/11.

And we are now at the mercy of the Taliban's reign of terror, all while a dark veil of Sharia law covers Afghanistan. The freedoms our troops helped secure for Afghan women and girls have been stripped away in a matter of weeks. This, in my judgment, is not only disgraceful, it also dishonors the men and women who served our Nation so bravely.

Mr. Secretary, the American people do not like to lose, especially not to the terrorists, but that is exactly what has happened. This has emboldened the Taliban and our adversaries. The Taliban, a designated terrorist group, now equipped with American weapons than most countries in the world. Just a few weeks ago, thousands of terrorists, the worst of the worst, were all released from prisons as the Taliban overran the country.

The situation we find ourselves in is far worse, in my judgment, as a former Chairman of Homeland Security Committee, far worse than pre-9/11. To make matters worse, we abandoned Americans behind enemy lines. We left behind the interpreters who you, Mr. Secretary, and the President both promised to protect.

I can summarize this in one word: betrayal. The America I know keeps its promises. The most important promise in our military is no man left behind, no one left behind, but you broke this promise.

Unfortunately, it wasn't the only promise this administration broke. In April, President Biden promised, quote, we will not conduct a hasty rush to the exit, and we will do it responsibly, deliberately, and safely. But that promise was broken. And then in July, the President said, quote, there is going to be no circumstance where you see people being lifted off the roof of the United States Embassy in Afghanistan. That promise was also broken.

Our standing on the world stage has been greatly diminished. Our enemies no longer fear us, and our allies no longer trust us.

And our Afghan veterans are questioning if their sacrifice was worth it.

For those veterans who are watching this today, I have a message for you. Your service was not in vain. It is because of your heroism that we have not witnessed a large scale attack by the terrorists since 9/11 in the last 20 years. And for that, I say to all of you, thank you.

And so we are here today to better understand how this administration got it so wrong, and I hope you will directly answer our questions, Mr. Secretary, succinctly because we have quite a few.

And with that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman yields back.

I now turn to the chair of the subcommittee on ASIA, the Pacific, Central Asia, and Nonproliferation, Ami Bera, for 1 minute.

Mr. BERA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, Mr. Secretary, for coming before the subcommittee.

Obviously, this is not going to be an easy hearing. There will be a lot of questions back and forth. And we certainly, over the course of the next few months at the subcommittee and full committee level, will do some more oversight on the information and so forth that decisions were made on.

I want to focus, though, on the mission that is still at hand. You know, my district has the largest Afghan refugee population in the country. We have submitted over 10,000 names of U.S. citizens, visa holders, family members, et cetera. And, you know, that mission still remains.

I have got close to 30 school age kids that are still in Afghanistan, U.S. citizens, visa holders along with their parents. We have got to do everything we can to get those folks to safety.

And I look forward to working with you, your staff, and others to make sure we do not leave folks behind, and we get those folks out as reasonably as possible to safety, and I look forward to the testimony.

And, with that, I yield back.

Chairman MEEKS. Thank you, Chair Bera.

I now turn to the ranking member, Mr. Chabot, for 1 minute.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Secretary, this administration's bungled pullout from Afghanistan just may be the worst foreign affairs disaster in American history. You essentially surrendered that country and its people to the good graces of the Taliban, and the Taliban does not have good graces. Afghanistan is once again a haven for terrorists, and those terrorists now have our weapons and equipment to use against us.

As Mr. McCaul directly stated, our allies may well not trust us as much, and our enemies may not fear us as much. Yes, the majority of the American people wanted to leave Afghanistan but not like this. Pulling our troops out before civilians, abandoning Americans behind enemy lines, as well as thousands of Afghans who worked with us and fought with us and their families, and leaving half the population, about 20 million women and girls, to be brutalized once again by the Taliban, this is a disgrace. And I yield back.

Chairman MEEKS. Thank you. I will—thank you, Mr. Chabot.

Now I will introduce our witness. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken was sworn in as the United States Secretary of State on January 26, 2021. And as I mentioned in my opening statement, this will be the third time Secretary Blinken testified before this committee, and we are grateful for his appearance before us today.

I now recognize the witness for his testimony which I understand will be a little longer than 5 minutes, but being that he is going to be here for all of our questions, I think it is important for his statement to be heard in its entirety.

Secretary Blinken, I now recognize you.

**STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE ANTONY J. BLINKEN,  
SECRETARY, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE**

Secretary BLINKEN. Mr. Chairman, thank you very much. And, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member McCaul, thank you for today. I welcome this opportunity to discuss our policy on Afghanistan including where we are

[inaudible] And where we are going in the weeks and months ahead.

For 20 years, Congress has conducted oversight and provided funding for the mission in Afghanistan. I know from my own time as a staff member for then Senator Biden how invaluable a partner Congress is.

As I said when I was nominated, I believe strongly in Congress' traditional role as a partner in foreign policymaking. I am committed to working with you on the path forward in Afghanistan and to advance the interests of the American people.

On this 20th anniversary of 9/11, as we honor the nearly 3,000 men, women, and children who lost their lives, we are reminded why we went to Afghanistan in the first place; to bring justice to those who attacked us and to ensure that it would not happen again. We achieved those objectives long ago.

Osama bin Laden was killed in 2011, a decade ago. al-Qaeda's capabilities were degraded significantly, including its ability to plan and conduct external operations. After 20 years, 2,641 American lives lost, 20,000 injuries,

[inaudible] Dollars spent, it was time to end America's longest war.

When President Biden took office in January, he inherited an agreement that his predecessor had reached with the Taliban to remove all remaining forces from Afghanistan by May 1 of this year. As part of that agreement, the previous administration pressed the Afghan government to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners, including some top war commanders.

Meanwhile, it reduced our own force presence to 2,500 troops. In return, the Taliban agreed to stop attacking U.S. and partner forces and to refrain from threatening Afghanistan's major cities.

But the Taliban continued a relentless march on remote outposts, on checkpoints, on villages and districts, as well as the major roads connecting them. By January 2021, the Taliban was in the strongest military position it had been in since 9/11, and we had the smallest number of troops on the ground since 2001.

As a result, upon taking office, President Biden immediately faced a choice between ending the war or escalating it. Had he not

followed through on his predecessor's commitment, attacks on our forces and those of our allies would have resumed, and the Taliban's nationwide assaults on Afghanistan's major cities would have commenced.

That would have required sending substantially more U.S. forces into Afghanistan to defend themselves and prevent a Taliban takeover, taking casualties, and with, at best, the prospect of restoring a stalemate and remaining stuck in Afghanistan under fire indefinitely.

There is no evidence that staying longer would have made the Afghan security forces or the Afghan government any more resilient or self-sustaining. If 20 years and hundreds of billions of dollars in support, equipment, and training did not suffice, why would another year, another 5, another 10?

Conversely, there is nothing that our strategic competitors like China and Russia or adversaries like Iran and North Korea would have liked more than for the United States to reup a 20-year war and remain bogged down in Afghanistan for another decade.

In advance of the President's decision, I was in constant contact with our allies and partners to hear their views and factor them into our thinking. When the President announced the withdrawal, NATO immediately and unanimously embraced it.

We all sat together on the drawdown. Similarly, we were intensely focused on the safety of Americans in Afghanistan. In March, we began urging them to leave the country. In total, between March and August, we sent 19 specific messages with that warning and with offers to help, including financial assistance to pay for plane tickets.

Despite this effort, at the time the evacuation began, there were still thousands of American citizens in Afghanistan, almost all of whom we evacuated by August 31. Many were dual citizens living in Afghanistan for years, decades, generations. Deciding whether or not to leave the place they know as home was an incredibly wrenching decision.

In April, we began drawing down our embassy, ordering non-essential personnel to depart. We also used this time to significantly speed up the processing of the special immigrant visas for Afghans who had worked for us and by our side these past 20 years.

When we took office, we inherited a program with a 14-step process based on a statutory framework enacted by Congress and involving multiple government agencies and a backlog of more than 17,000 SIV applicants. There had not been a single interview in the SIV program in Kabul for 9 months going back to March 2020.

The program was basically in a stall. Within 2 weeks of taking office, we restarted the SIV interview process in Kabul. On February 4, one of the very first executive orders issued by President Biden directed us to immediately review the SIV program, to identify causes of undue delay, and to find ways to process SIV applications more quickly. This spring, I directed significant additional resources to the program, expanding the team in Washington of people processing applications from 10 to 50 and doubling the number of SIV adjudicators at our embassy in Kabul.

Even as many embassy personnel returned to the United States under ordered departure, we sent more consular officers to Kabul to process SIV applications.

As a result of these and other steps, including working with Congress, by May, we had reduced the average processing time for special immigrant visas by more than a year. Even amid a COVID surge in Embassy Kabul in June, we continued to issue visas.

And we went from issuing about 100 special immigrant visas per week in March to more than 1,000 per week in August when our evacuation and relocation efforts began.

That emergency evacuation was sparked by the collapse of the Afghan security forces and government. Throughout the year, we were constantly assessing their staying power and considering multiple scenarios. Even the most pessimistic assessments did not predict that government forces in Kabul would collapse while U.S. forces remained.

As General Milley, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has said, nothing I or anyone else saw indicated a collapse of this Army and this government in 11 days.

Nonetheless, we planned and exercised a wide range of contingencies. Because of that plan, we were able to draw down our embassy and move our remaining personnel to the effort within 48 hours. And the military, placed on standby by President Biden, was able to secure the airport and start the evacuations within 72 hours.

The evacuation itself was an extraordinary effort under the most difficult conditions imaginable by our diplomats, by our military, by our intelligence professionals. They worked around the clock to get American citizens, Afghans who helped us, citizens of our allies and partners, and at-risk Afghans on planes out of the country and off to the United States or to transit locations that our diplomats had arranged and negotiated in multiple countries.

Our consular team worked 24/7 to reach out to Americans who could still be in the country, making in those couple of weeks 55,000 phone calls, sending 33,000 emails, and they are still at it.

In the midst of this heroic effort, an ISIS-K attack killed 13 servicemembers working the gates at HKIA, wounding 20 others, and killing and wounding scores of Afghans. These American servicemembers gave their lives so that other lives could continue.

In the end, we completed one of the biggest airlifts in history with 124,000 people evacuated to safety. And on August 31 in Kabul, the military mission in Afghanistan officially ended and a new diplomatic mission began.

I want to acknowledge the more than 2 dozen countries that have helped with the relocation effort. Some served as transit hubs, some welcoming Afghan evacuees for longer periods of time. And I want to recognize the extraordinary efforts by Congress as well. To name just a few examples, Congressman Fitzpatrick worked with the State Department to reunite an Afghan family in New Jersey.

Congressman Keating worked with our folks on the ground to help a Voice of America reporter and his family get to the airport. Congresswoman Jacobs and Congressman Issa worked across party

lines to draw attention to cases of legal permanent residents and Afghans at risk.

Please know your emails, your calls made a real difference in getting people out, and we continue to use the list and information you are providing in the next phase of the mission.

Let me now just briefly outline what the State Department has done over the next—over the last couple of weeks and where we are going in the days and weeks ahead. First. We moved our diplomatic operations from Kabul to Doha where our new Afghan affairs team is hard at work. Many of our key partners have joined us there.

Second. We are continuing our relentless efforts to help any remaining Americans as well as Afghans and citizens of allied and partner countries leave Afghanistan if they so choose.

This past Thursday, a Qatar Airways charter flight with U.S. citizens and others on board departed Kabul and landed in Doha. On Friday, a second flight carrying U.S. citizens and others departed Afghanistan. These flights were the results of a coordinated effort by the United States, Qatar, and Turkey to reopen the airport and intense diplomacy to start the flights.

In addition to those flights, a half dozen American citizens and about a dozen permanent residents of the United States have also left Afghanistan via an overland route with our help.

We are in constant contact with American citizens still in Afghanistan who have told us that they wish to leave. Each has been assigned a case management team to offer specific guidance and instruction. Some declined to be on the first flights on Thursday and Friday for reasons of needing more time to make arrangements, wanting to remain with extended family for now, or medical issues that precluded traveling last week.

We will continue to help them, and we will continue to help any American who still wants to leave and Afghans to whom we have a special commitment, just as we have done in other countries where we have evacuated our embassy and hundreds or even thousands of Americans remained behind, for example, in Libya, in Syria, in Venezuela, in Yemen, in Somalia. There is no deadline for this mission.

Third. We are focused on counterterrorism. The Taliban has committed to prevent terrorist groups from using Afghanistan as a base for external operations that could threaten the United States or our allies, including al-Qaeda and ISIS-K.

We will hold them accountable for that. That does not mean we will rely on them. We will remain vigilant at monitoring threats. We will maintain robust counterterrorism capabilities in the region to neutralize those threats, if necessary, and we do that in places around the world where we do not have military forces on the ground.

Fourth. We continue our intensive diplomacy with allies and partners. We initiated a statement joined by more than half the world's countries, over 100 countries, as well as a United Nations Security Council resolution setting out the international community's expectations of a Taliban-led government.

We expect the Taliban to ensure freedom of travel, to make good on its commitments on counterterrorism, to uphold the basic rights

of the Afghan people, including women, girls, and minorities, to name a broadly representative permanent government, to force [inaudible] Reprisals. The legitimacy and support the Taliban seeks from the international community will depend on its conduct.

We have organized contact groups with key countries to ensure the international community continues to speak with one voice on Afghanistan and to leverage our combined influence. Last week, I led a ministerial meeting of 22 countries, NATO, the EU, the United Nations, to continue to align our efforts.

And fifth. We will continue to support humanitarian aid to the Afghan people consistent with sanctions that they will not flow through the government but rather, through independent organizations like NGO's and U.N. agencies. Just today, we announced the United States is providing nearly \$64 million in new humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan to meet critical needs on nutrition needs, address the protection concerns of women, children, and minorities, to help more children, including girls, go back to school. This additional funding means the United States has provided nearly \$330 million in assistance to the Afghan people this fiscal year.

In Doha and Ramstein, I toured the facilities where Afghans that we evacuated are being processed before moving on to their next destinations. Here at home, I spent some time at the Dulles Expo Center where more than 45,000 Afghans have been processed after arriving in the United States. It is remarkable, remarkable to see what our diplomats, our military, and employees from other civilian agencies across the U.S. Government have been able to achieve in a very short time. They have met an enormous human need.

They have coordinated food, water, sanitation for thousands, tens of thousands of people. They are arranging medical care, including the delivery of babies. They are reuniting families who are separated and caring for unaccompanied minors. It is an extraordinary interagency effort and a powerful testament to the skill, the compassion, and the dedication of our people.

We should all be proud of what they are doing. And as we have done throughout our history, Americans are now welcoming families from Afghanistan into our communities and helping them resettle as they start their new lives. That is something to be proud of as well.

Thanks very much for listening. And, with that, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member McCaul, I look forward to your questions. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Secretary Blinken follows:]

**Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken  
Opening Statement  
“Afghanistan 2001- 2021: Evaluating the Withdrawal and U.S. Policies – Part 1”  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Committee on Foreign Affairs  
Washington, D.C.  
Monday, September 13, 2021**

I welcome this opportunity to discuss our policy on Afghanistan – including where we are, how we got here, and where we’re going in the weeks and months ahead.

For 20 years, Congress has conducted oversight and provided funding for the mission in Afghanistan. I know from my time as a staff member for then-Senator Biden just how invaluable a partner Congress is. As I said when I was nominated, I believe strongly in Congress’s traditional role as a partner in foreign policy making and am committed to working with you on the path forward in Afghanistan and to advance the interests of the American people.

On this 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9-11, as we honor the nearly 3,000 men, women, and children who lost their lives, we are reminded why we went to Afghanistan in the first place: to bring justice to those who attacked us and ensure it would never happen again. We achieved those objectives long ago. Osama bin Laden was killed in 2011. Al Qaeda’s capabilities were degraded significantly, including its ability to plan and conduct external operations. After 20 years, 2,641 American lives lost, 20,000 injuries, and two trillion dollars spent, it was time to end America’s longest war.

When President Biden took office in January, he inherited an agreement that his predecessor had reached with the Taliban to remove all remaining U.S. troops by May 1 of this year. As part of that agreement, the previous Administration pressed the Afghan government to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners – including some top war commanders. Meanwhile, it reduced our own force presence to 2,500 troops.

In return, the Taliban agreed to stop attacking U.S. and partner forces and to refrain from threatening Afghanistan’s major cities. But the Taliban continued its relentless march on remote outposts, checkpoints, villages, and districts, as well as the major roads connecting the cities.

By January 2021, the Taliban was in its strongest military position since 9-11 – and we had the smallest number of troops on the ground since 2001.

As a result, upon taking office, President Biden immediately faced the choice between ending the war or escalating it. Had he not followed through on his predecessor’s commitment, attacks on our forces and those of our allies would have resumed and the Taliban’s nationwide assault on Afghanistan’s major cities would have commenced. That would have required sending substantially more U.S. forces into Afghanistan to defend ourselves and prevent a Taliban takeover, taking casualties – and with at best the prospect of restoring a stalemate and remaining stuck in Afghanistan, under fire, indefinitely.

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In advance of the President's decision, I was in constant contact with our Allies and partners to hear their views and factor them into our thinking. When the President announced the withdrawal, NATO immediately and unanimously embraced it. We all set to work – together – on the drawdown.

Similarly, we were intensely focused on the safety of Americans in Afghanistan. In March, we began urging them to leave the country. In total, between March and August, we sent 19 specific messages with that warning – and with offers of help, including financial assistance to pay for plane tickets.

Despite this effort, at the time the evacuation began, there were still thousands of Americans in Afghanistan, almost all of whom were evacuated by August 31. Many were dual citizens living in Afghanistan for years, decades, generations. Deciding whether or not to leave the place they know as home is a wrenching decision.

In April, we began drawing down our embassy, ordering non-essential personnel to depart.

We also used this time to significantly speed up the processing of Special Immigrant Visas for Afghans who worked for us. When we took office, we inherited a program with a 14-step process based on a statutory framework enacted by Congress and involving multiple government agencies – and a backlog of more than 17,000 SIV applicants. There had not been a single interview of an SIV applicant in Kabul in nine months, going back to March of 2020. The program was basically in a dead stall.

Within two weeks of taking office, we restarted the SIV interview process in Kabul. On February 4th, one of the first executive orders issued by President Biden directed us to immediately review the SIV program to identify causes of undue delay and find ways to process SIV applications more quickly.

This spring, I directed significant additional resources to the program, expanding the team of people in Washington processing applications from 10 to 50 and doubling the number of SIV adjudicators at our embassy in Kabul. Even as many embassy personnel returned to the United States, we sent more consular officers to Kabul to process SIV applications.

As a result of these and other steps, including working with Congress, by May we had reduced the average processing time for Special Immigrant Visas by more than a year. Even amid a COVID

surge at Embassy Kabul in June, we continued to issue visas. And we went from issuing about 100 Special Immigrant Visas per week in March to more than 1,000 per week in August – when our evacuation and relocation operation began.

That emergency evacuation was sparked by the collapse of the Afghan security forces and government. Throughout the year, we were constantly assessing their staying power and considering multiple scenarios. Even the most pessimistic assessments did not predict that government forces in Kabul would collapse while U.S. forces remained. As General Milley, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has said, “Nothing I or anyone else saw indicated a collapse of this army and this government in 11 days.”

Nonetheless, we planned and exercised a wide range of contingencies. Because of that planning, we were able to draw down our embassy and move our remaining personnel to the airport within 48 hours. And the military – placed on stand-by by the President – was able to secure the airport and start the evacuation within 72 hours.

The evacuation was an extraordinary effort – under the most difficult conditions imaginable – by our diplomats, military, and intelligence professionals. They worked around the clock to get American citizens, Afghans who helped us, citizens of our Allies and partners, and at-risk Afghans on planes, out of the country, and off to the United States or transit locations that our diplomats arranged in multiple countries. Our consular team worked 24-7 to reach out to Americans who could still be in the country, making 55,000 phone calls and sending 33,000 emails by August 31 – and they’re still at it. In the midst of this heroic effort, an ISIS-K attack killed 13 service members working the gates at HKIA, wounded 20 others, and killed and wounded scores of Afghans.

In the end, we completed one of the biggest airlifts in history, with 124,000 people evacuated to safety.

And on August 31 in Kabul, the military mission in Afghanistan officially ended, and a new diplomatic mission began.

I want to acknowledge the more than two dozen countries that have helped with the relocation effort – some serving as transit hubs, some welcoming Afghan evacuees for longer periods of time.

And I want to recognize efforts by Congress. To name a few examples: Congressman Fitzpatrick worked with the State Department to reunite an Afghan family in New Jersey. Congressman Keating worked with our folks on the ground to help a Voice of America reporter and his family get to the airport. Congresswoman Jacobs and Congressman Issa worked across party lines to draw attention to cases of Legal Permanent Residents and Afghans at risk. Please know that your emails and calls made a real difference in getting people out, and we continue to use your lists and your information in this next phase of our mission.

Let me briefly outline what the State Department has done in the past two weeks.

First, we moved our diplomatic operations from Kabul to Doha, where our new Afghan affairs team is hard at work. Many of our key partners have joined us there.

Second, we're continuing our relentless efforts to help any remaining Americans, as well as Afghans and citizens of Allied and partner nations, leave Afghanistan if they choose.

On Thursday, a Qatar Airways charter flight with U.S. citizens and others onboard departed Kabul and landed in Doha. On Friday, a second flight carrying U.S. citizens and others departed Afghanistan. These flights were the result of coordinated efforts by the United States, Qatar, and Turkey to reopen the airport, and intense diplomacy to start the flights.

In addition to those flights, 6 American citizens and 11 permanent residents of the United States have also left Afghanistan via an overland route, with our help.

We are in constant contact with American citizens still in Afghanistan who have told us they wish to leave. Each has been assigned a case management team to offer specific guidance and instructions. Some declined to be on the first flights on Thursday and Friday for reasons including needing more time to make arrangements, wanting to remain with extended family for now, or medical issues that preclude traveling now.

We will continue to help Americans – and Afghans to whom we have a special commitment – depart Afghanistan if they choose, just as we've done in other countries where we've evacuated our embassy and hundreds or even thousands of Americans remained behind – for example, in Libya, Syria, Venezuela, Yemen, and Somalia. There is no deadline to this mission.

Third, we're focused on counterterrorism.

The Taliban has committed to prevent terrorist groups from using Afghanistan as a base for external operations that could threaten the United States or our allies, including Al Qaeda and ISIS-K. We will hold them accountable to that. That does not mean we will rely on them. We will remain vigilant in monitoring threats, and we'll maintain robust counterterrorism capabilities in the region to neutralize those threats if necessary – as we do in places around the world where we do not have military forces on the ground.

Fourth, we continue our intensive diplomacy with Allies and partners.

We initiated a statement joined by more than 100 countries and a United Nations Security Council Resolution setting out the international community's expectations of a Taliban-led government. We expect the Taliban to ensure freedom of travel; make good on its counter-terrorism commitments; uphold the basic rights of the Afghan people, including women, girls, and minorities; name a broadly representative permanent government; and forswear reprisals. The legitimacy and support it seeks from the international community will depend on its conduct.

We've organized contact groups of key countries to ensure the international community continues to speak with one voice on Afghanistan and to leverage our combined influence.

Last week, I led a ministerial meeting of 22 countries, plus NATO, the EU, and the UN, to align our efforts.

And fifth, we will continue to support humanitarian aid to the Afghan people. Consistent with sanctions, this aid will not flow through the government, but rather through independent organizations like NGOs and UN agencies.

Just today, we announced that the United States is providing nearly \$64 million in new humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan, to meet critical health and nutrition needs, address the protection concerns of women, children, and minorities, to help more children – including girls – go back to school. This additional funding means the United States has provided nearly \$330 million in assistance to the Afghan people this fiscal year.

In Doha and Ramstein, I toured the facilities where Afghans that we evacuated are being processed before moving on to their next destinations. Here at home, I spent some time at the Dulles Expo Center, where more than 45,000 Afghans have been processed after arriving in the United States. It's remarkable to see what our diplomats, military, and employees from other civilian agencies across the U.S. government have been able to achieve in a very short time.

They've met an enormous human need. They're coordinating food, water, and sanitation for thousands of people. They're arranging medical care, including the delivery of several babies. They're reuniting families who were separated and caring for unaccompanied minors. It's an extraordinary interagency effort – and a powerful testament to the skill, compassion, and dedication of our people.

We can all be deeply proud of what they're doing. And as we've done throughout our history, Americans are now welcoming families from Afghanistan into our communities and helping them resettle as they start their new lives. That's something to be proud of, too.

With that, I look forward to your questions.

Chairman MEEKS. Thank you, Secretary Blinken, for your testimony.

I will now recognize members for 5 minutes. And pursuant to House rules, all time yielded is for the purposes of questioning our witness.

I will recognize members by committee seniority, alternating between Democrats and Republicans. Please note that I will be strict in enforcing the 5-minute time limitation for questions. What do I mean? I do not want members to ask questions for 5 minutes and then not leave the Secretary time to respond. So when addressing your questions, please keep in mind that the 5 minutes is for questions and answers. I will start by recognizing myself.

Mr. Secretary, you mentioned that an area of concern that I know is shared by all is the status of American citizens, green card holders, and our SIV heroes who are yet to be evacuated.

Can you tell us how many of them remain in the country—in country, and what is our plan to facilitate their evacuation now?

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. So as of the end of last week, we had about 100 American citizens in Afghanistan who had told us that they wished to leave the country. And I want to emphasize that this is a snapshot in time. It is, more accurately, a moving picture.

As you know, stepping back for a minute, to know precisely at any given moment in time exactly how many American citizens are in any country is something we cannot and do not know. Americans are not required to register when they go to a foreign country or if they reside there.

And so from the start of this effort, we have been engaged in an intense effort to identify every American citizen that we could in Afghanistan, to be in touch with them, in contact with them, and to work with them if they wanted to leave.

We have also benefited greatly from information provided by Congress to help us fill out this picture. But as of last week, there were about 100 who we were in contact with who continued to express an interest to leave. We offered seats on the planes that got out last week to about 60. Thirty came forward and used those seats.

What happens in any—at any given moment is that people are making decisions hour by hour, if not day by day, about whether to leave or not. And as I said earlier, these are incredibly wrenching decisions because, for the most part, this is a community of people who have been living, residing in Afghanistan for all their lives.

Afghanistan is their home. They have extended families. And it is very, very hard for them, understandably, to make that decision. But that is the group that we are working with.

Now, what also happens is people will identify themselves, including since the end of the evacuation, as American citizens in Afghanistan who wish to leave, so they get added to the picture. We get information from you, from NGO's, from other groups, veterans' groups, about people purporting to be Americans in Afghanistan. We immediately seek to contact them, to engage with them, to find out if, in fact, they are in Afghanistan, and if, in fact, they want to leave.

So this is a picture that will continue to change over time, but that is the rough population that we are working with right now.

Chairman MEEKS. Thank you. Let me ask the next question. I know that the Trump administration's deal with the Taliban meant that there were 2,500 troops remaining with less than 5 months to complete the withdrawal. At any time did the Biden Administration consider whether to renegotiate the deal with the Taliban?

Secretary BLINKEN. The Taliban made abundantly clear in many public statements, private statements to us, to others around the world that it was going to hold us to the deadline that the previous administration negotiated in terms of withdrawing the remaining American forces. It made very clear that if we move past that deadline, it would resume the attacks that it had stopped on our forces and on our allies and partners as well as to commence the onslaught on the cities that we have seen in recent months.

And so that was exactly choice that President Biden faced, whether to go forward with the agreement and the commitments that his predecessor had made in terms of withdrawing all forces by May 1 or return to war with the Taliban and escalate, not end the war.

Now, Mr. Chairman, as you know, what the President did do was to take some risk in extending past May 1 the time we would use to actually withdraw our forces so that we could do it in the safest most orderly way possible, and so we extended that—

Chairman MEEKS. One more question.

Mr. BROWN [continuing]. Deadline until September.

Chairman MEEKS. So, also, we know there was a point recently in the government hard liners and the new Taliban group, Taliban's commitment to share power with other Afghan political and social groups excludes women and minorities.

How does this—does the appointment of this new government factor into the administration's strategy to engage with the Taliban or assumptions that the Taliban may have changed?

Secretary BLINKEN. So the interim government named by the Taliban falls very short of the mark that was set by the international community for inclusivity, that is, to have a government that was broadly representative of the Afghan people, not just the Taliban and its constituency, to include women which this interim government does not. And as has been noted, it includes many key members who have very challenging track records.

We have been very clear that when it comes to engaging with that government or any government to be named on a more permanent basis, we are going to do so on the basis of whether or not it advances our interests, and those interests are very clear.

They are the expectations that we have set and the international community has set for the ongoing treatment of travel for a government that makes good on the Taliban's commitments to combat terrorism, not allow Afghanistan to be used as a haven for launching attacks directed against other countries, to support the basic rights of the Afghan people, including women and minorities, and to allow humanitarian assistance to get to people who so desperately need it.

That will be the basis upon which we engage any Taliban-led government, whether it is the central government or one they may name in the days and weeks ahead.

Chairman MEEKS. I now yield for questions to Ranking Member McCaul.

Mr. MCCAUL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Secretary, in the weeks before the fall of Kabul, the surrender to the Taliban, I was on the phone with very high-ranking officials at State, DoD, White House, trying to save lives. We had Americans that couldn't get out. We had interpreters that couldn't get through the perimeter of the Taliban. They are left behind. They will be executed. They do have a bull's eye on their back.

We had four buses of Afghan girls, orphans, at the American University School of Music that sat there for 17 hours when I was finally told the State Department would not lift the gate to let them in to safety even though they had an aircraft waiting. Will you guarantee to this committee—now we are at the mercy of the Taliban, though.

Can you guarantee to this committee that we will get them out?

Secretary BLINKEN. First, Ranking Member McCaul, thank you for every effort that you made, as well as other members of this committee made, to help people in need, to try to help them get out. Those are deeply appreciated, and going forward, we continue to look to you.

Now, I have men and women in my Department, the State Department, who raised their hands from around the world and ran into the building. They went from posts around the world into that airport to help people get out. They were serving at the gates right alongside our brothers and sisters in uniform, including the 13 who gave their lives, literally trying to pull people in as necessary or to walk them in, to talk them in, to do everything they possibly could to bring American citizens, to bring Afghans at risk, to bring the nationals of our partners and others into the airport, taking extraordinary—

Mr. MCCAUL. I am reclaiming my time at it is limited.

Secretary BLINKEN. It is important, sir, for you to recognize what was—

Mr. MCCAUL. We also thank the service—and we also thank the service of people like—that worked in Operation Pineapple and Dunkirk. I would ask that the State Department work with them. Those are heroes as well as the State Department officials you are talking about.

My last question, very important. Bagram went down, the embassy went down, and we went dark. We have no eyes and ears on the ground. We have lost intelligence capability in the region, and that includes Russia, China, and Iran, as you know.

This is a national security threat as China moves in. For all I know, they may take over Bagram Air Base. But this over the horizon capability I believe is exaggerated. It is not a viable option. It is too far away. Do you negotiate with countries like Uzbekistan or Tajikistan to put an ISR capability there?

And my last question. Is it true that President Putin threatened the President of the United States, saying he could not build intelligence capabilities in the region?

Secretary BLINKEN. This is an important question and one that in its detail and substance I think we need to take up in another setting for reasons that I know that you very much appreciate.

Let me just say this very broadly, and you know this very well, given your focus and expertise on these issues. The terrorist threat has metastasized dramatically over the last 20 years, and it is most acute in places like Yemen, like Libya, like Iraq, like Syria, like Somalia. And, of course, we have much greater and different capabilities than we had 20 years ago in terms of dealing with that threat.

And in many countries around the world, we deal with it effectively with no U.S. boots on the ground. We lost some capacity for sure in not having those boots on the ground in Afghanistan, but we have ways, and we are very actively working on that to make up for that, to mitigate for that, to make sure that we have eyes on the problem, to see if it reemerges in Afghanistan, and to do something about it.

But what I would propose is that we have this conversation in another setting—

Mr. MCCAUL. I would like to work with you because if we cannot see what's happening on the ground, we cannot see the threat, we cannot be respond to it, the threat is only going to grow. It is going to get worse, not better, and we have to have that capability.

You know, let me ask you one last question. We had these planes grounded at Mazar-e-Sharif, and the Taliban seems to be holding these planes up. Are you currently negotiating with the Taliban with respect to these Americans that are trying to get out on these planes?

And, also, are you negotiating with the Taliban on the issue of legitimizing them as a real government?

Secretary BLINKEN. Not only us, but virtually the entire international community, including the United Nations Security Council resolution, has made clear what we expect and will insist on from the Taliban if they want to seek any legitimacy or any support, and that includes—it starts with freedom of travel.

So we have been intensely engaged with Turkey and Qatar to get the airport in Kabul up and running again which is now the case, and we started to get flights out last week with American citizens on board.

And with regard to Mazar-e-Sharif, you are correct. There have been charter flights there that have been there for some time that have not been allowed to leave. We want to see those flights leave. We need to see a process put in place to allow those flights to start to move, and we are working on that every day.

Mr. MCCAUL. Thank you. I yield back.

Chairman MEEKS. Thank you.

Mr. Secretary, we requested such a classified briefing not too long ago, and we welcome your assurance to schedule this briefing sometime in the immediate future.

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes. Absolutely.

Chairman MEEKS. I now recognize representative Brad Sherman from California for 5 minutes.

Mr. SHERMAN. Secretary Blinken, thank you for reminding us that Americans were not required to register if they were in Af-

ghanistan, and I hope my colleagues will support my legislation to require Americans to register if they go to a war zone.

The ranking member says that he never thought he would see an unconditional surrender of the United States to the Taliban. He saw it in 2020 when President Donald Trump announced that we would be out by May 1 of 2021, forced the release of 5,000 of the Taliban's best fighters, and most importantly, created a circumstance where there was not even a credible possibility that we would engage in force to support the Afghan government.

There are those who say we should get out all of our Afghan allies and all those who face oppression or death from the Taliban. I would point out that the Afghan Army, together with all of its veterans over 20 years, together with all their families, you are talking about millions of people. And while the Taliban may be harsh to the girls who are music students, who are orphans, imagine how harsh they will be to a girl whose father was in the Afghan Army trying to kill the Taliban.

When the administration took over, the American people made it clear we had to get out in 2021. The Afghan government, some thought, had some chance to fight to a stalemate. But by spring, those closest to us, those most in the know were demanding visas to get out, to flee as quickly as possible. They weren't asking for guns to build trenches around Kabul to fight the Taliban.

They were asking for visas. They were demanding visas. They were making videos about how they were going to be killed. When they started to flee, that started a stampede, and there is simply no way the administration could have an orderly or successful stampede.

And it seems absurd, at least in retrospect, to think that the average Afghan grunt would fight in the trenches while seeing those who are best connected desperate to flee in a matter of days.

Secretary Blinken, when you came into office on January 20, we were committed to pulling everyone out of Afghanistan within 3 months, by May 1. Did the Trump administration leave on your desk a pile of notebooks as to exactly how to carry out that plan? Did we have a list of which Afghans we were going to evacuate? Did we have a plan to get Americans from all over Afghanistan to Kabul and out in an orderly way? How meticulous was the planning for the Trump administration declared May 1 withdrawal?

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you, Congressman. We inherited a deadline. We did not inherit a plan.

Mr. SHERMAN. So no plan at all. It is amazing that it wasn't much, much worse. It was controversial when we gave up five Taliban for Bergdahl, not the most meritorious of American fighting men, but the Trump administration gave 5,000 of the Taliban's top fighters back to the Taliban. What did we get for that other than empty promises that were broken?

Secretary BLINKEN. Congressman, the deal that the previous administration struck involved, as you rightly said, committing to remove all U.S. forces from Afghanistan by May 1 of this year. And, in addition, as that deal was being negotiated and put into effect, pressing the Afghan government to release these 5,000 prisoners, many of whom went back to the battlefield, and at the same time, in return, getting from the Taliban two commitments. One, not to

attack our forces or allied and partner forces during the time of the agreement, from the time it was reached until May 1 when we were supposed to pull out all of our forces as well as not to go at the major cities and to take steps to ensure that Afghanistan would not be used by al-Qaeda or any other

[inaudible]

Mr. SHERMAN. Mr. Secretary, I need to get one more question. You are criticized for not getting our weapons out. Our weapons were given to the Afghan military. They were all over the country. Was there a way to disarm the Afghan government without being seen by the world as betraying the Afghan government? And was there a way without casualties to go all over Afghanistan and grab the trucks and the tanks, et cetera?

Secretary BLINKEN. Simply put, no. Of course, a lot of excess equipment was handed over to the Afghan security and defense forces, partners that we had worked with for 20 years, supported, financed, and equipped for 20 years to take on some of that equipment.

And, of course, when those forces collapsed in the space of about 11 days, some of that equipment wound up in the hands of the successor forces, the Taliban. Our folks worked very hard to disable or dismantle equipment that we still controlled before we left Afghanistan.

And what we see now is much of the equipment that was left behind, including in the hands of the Afghan forces that then fell to the Taliban, much of it, based on what I understand from my colleagues at DoD, is inoperable or soon will become inoperable because it has to be maintained.

It is not of any great strategic value in terms of threatening us or threatening any of Afghanistan's neighbors, but it does give the Taliban, as we have seen in pictures, all of us, uniforms and guns and some other equipment that is now in their hands.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman's time has expired.

I now recognize Representative Chris Smith of New Jersey who is the ranking member of the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Global Human Rights, for 5 minutes.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Secretary, you testified that you had encouraged Americans to leave the country, but you know, simultaneously with that was statements being made, including by President Biden, that Afghans' military capability was 300,000 men strong and that they had the best training imaginable.

So at best, I would say they were misled. And you do not mention withdrawal conditions that were placed by President Trump on any exodus from Afghanistan.

But I do have a couple of questions I would like to ask. Did you concur and support President Biden's July 23 phone call telling President Ghani to be untruthful about the Taliban's success? According to Reuters, which reviewed both the transcript and the audio, President Biden said, quote, and there is a need—whether it be true or not, there is a need to project a different picture. Was that an ad lib by President Biden, or was that lie scripted into the phone call? And if it was scripted, by who?

Second. Have any Americans been arrested, beaten, abducted, or killed by the Taliban or ISIS-K since we left, and do we have the capacity or the capability to know that?

Third. Were there any gaps or weaknesses in the vetting process of Afghan evacuees, especially in light of the fact that reliable information on some, perhaps many who got parole, wasn't available to conduct a meaningful background check? Are you concerned that the Taliban may have embedded its members as evacuees?

I visited our base at Fort Dix recently with some other Members of Congress and our Governor and asked a number of questions, but I was very concerned about the vetting or lack thereof and the fact that parolees, about 70 percent strong at our base, at least, are going to go up to about 13,000, they could leave if they would like. They are free to leave. It is not clear whether or not they could return, but they are free to leave.

And, finally, one of the profoundly negative consequences outside of Afghanistan has been China and Taiwan. The State-controlled Chinese Communist Party media, including CCP run Global Times, and I read it every day, are saturating the Taiwanese with messages to give up and surrender to Beijing because the United States will, just as it did in Afghanistan, abandon them too. That is what the Global Times is saying. But if you could start off with the first question, I would appreciate it. And go to—

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you very much, Congressman. Let me see if I can address all those questions.

First. With regard to the phone call you cited, I am obviously not going to comment on leaked—purportedly leaked transcripts of phone calls. Here is what I can tell you. What the President said in that conversation with then President Ghani is exactly what he was saying in public, and it is this: That the issue was not the capacity at that point of the Afghan government and the Afghan security forces to hold the country and to hold Kabul. It was their will and whether they had a plan to do so, and we were concerned that they were not demonstrating that will or that plan.

He pressed President Ghani on the need to consolidate his forces [inaudible] From military advice from our military leaders to make sure that he could defend the places that needed defending and not overstretch those forces, and he needed to bring people together, the different factions, to show a united front. That was what—that is what he said—

Mr. SMITH. I have only got a few minutes.

Secretary BLINKEN. I will answer the rest of the questions if I can.

Mr. SMITH. Was it a real—I mean, is the transcript untrue?

Secretary BLINKEN. Again, I am not commenting on any purportedly leaked transcripts. I am telling you what, based on my knowledge of the conversation the President said, and what he said is exactly what he said in public.

Second. With regard to American citizens remaining behind. The ones we are in contact with, we have 500 people on a task force and teams dedicated to them to be in regular contact with them, and I have not heard from those people that concern raised.

I cannot say whether there are any American citizens who we are not in contact with or do not know of who may have been mistreated in some fashion in Afghanistan.

Third. With regard to the background checks, and this is very important, and you are right to focus on it. You know, as you know, before Afghans evacuated from Afghanistan reached the United States, they go to a transit country, and that is where the initial checks are done.

We have surged Customs and Border Patrol. We have surged our intelligence and law enforcement capacity to do those initial checks. And then when they get to the United States, first at a military base, those checks are continued, using all of law enforcement intelligence, security agencies, to do that so that we can make sure that we are not letting anyone into the country who could pose a threat or a risk.

It is exactly that balance that is so important as well in the SIV program. We all want to bring Afghans at risk in the United States. We also have an obligation, that you rightly point out, to the security of our fellow citizens.

Finally, on China and Taiwan. As I said earlier, whatever protestations they may be making in newspapers or in their propaganda, there is nothing that China would have liked more than for us to have reupped the war in Afghanistan and to remain bogged down for another 5, 10, or 20 years.

That would have been profoundly against our strategic interests and profoundly in China's strategic interests. Thank you.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman's time has expired.

I now recognize Representative Albio Sires of New Jersey who is the chair of the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security Migration, and International Economic Policy for 5 minutes.

Mr. SIRES. Thank you, Mr. Secretary, for being with us for the third time.

And I want also to say thank you to the work done that the State Department has done in getting people, including 11 members of one family that were all united and are here now in this country. So I—my hat is tipped off to those people who worked so hard.

The question that I have is the Taliban seems to be having a complete hold in the country while I understand there are other groups in Afghanistan. How fragile or how strong or firm is the Taliban's hold on this country?

And do you see that breaking apart as everybody wants their piece down the line because it seems that this country is made up of pieces—of people that control certain pieces of the country.

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you. It is a very good question and an important one. And it is very hard to predict with any certainty.

The country is in so many ways, as you have pointed out, fractured among different groups, different ethnic groups—north, south, east, and west—different outside actors that may be supporting one group or another. And so for the Taliban to fully consolidate control, I think that remains an open question. It is also why, ironically, it would be profoundly in the Taliban's interest to actually put forward a genuinely inclusive and representative government.

Because to the extent it does not, to the extent that everyone other than the Taliban is left out, that is only likely to—at some period in time, whether it is tomorrow, next week, next year, or thereafter, cause those who are left out to try to assert, one way or another, their rights and needs. So all of that, I think, is an open question at this point.

One last thing I would mention. The country itself is in desperate straits. The U.N. estimates that fully half the population is in need to humanitarian assistance. We have severe malnutrition, health problems, COVID-19, droughts, et cetera, and so there too the Taliban has a big problem on its hands. And, of course, it is generating very, very little revenue in order to deal with that, all of which, I might add, gives the international community very significant leverage and influence going forward.

Mr. SIRES. I also read where they are running out of food in the next few months?

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes, that is correct. We have seen, you know, a terrible drought, growing nutrition problems. It is one of the reasons that we think it is so important to make sure that, regardless of anything else, we and other countries find ways to continue humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan.

We have committed additional funds to do that. There is a pledging conference called by the United Nations that is ongoing, and we can and will do that consistent with the sanctions, consistent with our laws, by directing assistance through NGO's, through the United Nations' agencies, not through the government.

We need to do everything we can to make sure the people of Afghanistan do not suffer any more than is already the case.

Mr. SIRES. I would like to see, if we are going to help Afghanistan with food and aid, that we extract certain commitments from them before we just give them food.

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you.

Mr. SIRES. And the last thing I want—and the last thing I want to say—

Secretary BLINKEN. Please.

Mr. SIRES [continuing]. I want to commend the country of Colombia. I think they have taken thousands of Afghanists and they are vetting them before they get here. Is that accurate?

Secretary BLINKEN. There are a number of countries around the world that have made those commitments that are either serving as transit countries or serving as resettlement countries, taking in Afghans as refugees, and we deeply appreciate the countries that have stood up and agreed to do that.

Mr. SIRES. Thank you. I do not have any more questions, Chairman.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman yields back.

I now recognize Representative Joe Wilson of South Carolina, who is the ranking member of the Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and Global Counterterrorism, for 5 minutes.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you very much, Chairman Greg Meeks. And I am glad to join with our dear colleague, Albio Sires, in thanking our great ally of Colombia, of helping the Afghan refugees.

Sir, in my service on the Foreign Affairs Committee, the Global Terrorism Subcommittee, the Armed Services Committee, the

NATO Parliamentary Assembly, and the Helsinki Commission, I have always been impressed by American Foreign Service diplomats worldwide. Their dedication to service is inspiring. That is why I am shocked at your actions superseding military advice, leading to the surrender in Afghanistan to be a safe haven for murderous terrorists.

Biden and Harris have also opened the southern border, stopping the wall of President Donald Trump. This allows identified terrorists of the terror watch list to enter American neighborhoods as lone wolf suicide bombers to murder as many Americans as possible. In American history, American families have never been at a greater risk of attack at home than today, as the global war on terrorism is not over, it has been moved from abroad to Americans homes.

As the grateful father of an Afghanistan veteran, I especially see your actions as indefensible. With 12 visits by me across Afghanistan to thank the South Carolina Army National Guard troops, the 218th Brigade, commanded by General Bob Livingston, I know firsthand they appreciated serving with their Afghan brothers.

I saw the United States Agency for International Development success in building schools, agricultural projects, hospitals, and bridges and roads.

My beliefs have been actually expressed by the New York Post Editorial Board on September 1, and that is, quote, "6 lies Joe Biden told about Afghanistan." How can any American believe anything Biden says after he has lied so blatantly?

Lie: If there are American citizens left, we are going to stay until we get them out.

Truth: Biden himself admits Americans remain stranded in Afghanistan.

Lie: We are making the same commitment, Biden said, to Afghanistsans who assisted America.

Truth: A senior State Department official confessed to NBC News that the majority of Afghans did not make it out of Kabul.

Lie: The United States stands by its commitment that we have made to vulnerable Afghans, such as women leaders and journalists.

Truth: Team Biden did not even ensure American-employed journalists made it to safety.

Lie: Asked by a reporter, do you see any parallels between what happened in Vietnam? None whatsoever. Zero.

Truth: Not even a month later, pictures came from Kabul of a helicopter flying over the American Embassy.

Lie: Biden vowed to continue to provide Afghan army with air support.

Truth: In the wake of Biden's withdrawal decision, he pulled the air support, intelligence, and contractors. The Afghan militaries couldn't operate.

Lie: July 8, Biden added that the likelihood there is going to be a Taliban overrunning everything is highly unlikely.

Truth: In fact, Biden knew the Taliban were overtaking the Afghan Government and asked President Ghani to lie about it. Whether it is true or not.

Sadly, the advance military equipment left to the terrorists—and I end the quote of that article—sadly, the advance military equipment left to the terrorists is comparable to all of the military equipment that we have provided to Israel since 1948.

The countries who have suffered most from Islamic extremist terrorist attacks—India, Israel, and America—are in danger. They chant death to Israel, death to America.

We must never forget the May 8 bombing in Kabul, where Islamic extremist terrorists slaughtered over 80 innocent young girls. You should have changed course then because of this gruesome revealing fact. The murderers of that attack now will have a safe haven to attack American families at home.

Your bizarre abandoning of Bagram Airfield led directly to 13 Marines murdered in Kabul. You should resign.

I yield back.

Chairman MEEKS. Mr. Secretary, we only had 43 seconds left of the 5 minutes. So your response, I know you will not be able to answer many of the questions that was put forward by Representative Wilson, but if you choose, you have 43 seconds of which to respond for whichever questions were asked to you.

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Let me simply thank the member for his support for the men and women of the State Department. I appreciated that part of his statement. Thank you.

Chairman MEEKS. I now recognize Representative Gerry Connolly of Virginia, who is the president of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, for 5 minutes.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Mr. Chairman, thank you.

I guess I would say to my friend from South Carolina, if I were the Member of Congress who committed one of the most grievous acts in the state of the Union Address when the President of the United States, Mr. Obama, was our guest, to shout out, “You lie,” I might take more care about enumerating other alleged lies in a hearing with the Secretary of State.

Mr. Secretary, what we are listening to on the other side of the aisle, sadly, is sort of a salad mix of selective facts and a lot of amnesia in the salad dressing.

The history of instability in Afghanistan did not begin on August 14 of this year, did it?

Secretary BLINKEN. It did not.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Am I correct in remembering that, in fact, you could trace direct routes to 1977, 1978, when there was a communist coup and the President of Afghanistan was assassinated in the Presidential palace. Is that correct?

Secretary BLINKEN. It is.

Mr. CONNOLLY. And 1 year later, the Soviet Union, because of that instability, decided to invade Afghanistan. Is that correct?

Secretary BLINKEN. It is.

Mr. CONNOLLY. And 10 years later, the Soviets left Afghanistan because they had mounting and maybe really unsustainable military casualties and felt that they were engaged in a process that could not be won. Is that correct?

Secretary BLINKEN. It is.

Mr. CONNOLLY. And, meanwhile, because the United States decided once that happened, it would disengage primarily from Afghanistan, groups like the Taliban had 12 years in which to create political power. Is that correct?

Secretary BLINKEN. It is.

Mr. CONNOLLY. And in 2001, we reentered Afghanistan in response to the tragedy we just remembered—20-year remembrance this week—and we rolled up the Taliban by making alliances with various militia groups in the north and moved south until they lost control of the country in that year, in 2001. Is that correct?

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes, it is.

Mr. CONNOLLY. And the purpose of our involvement was to defeat al-Qaeda because the Taliban were harboring this virulent terrorist group that had attacked America. Is that correct?

Secretary BLINKEN. That is correct.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Would it be fair to say that we achieved that objective?

Secretary BLINKEN. It would.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Would it be it fair to say that, in fact, 10 years later, the leader of that group, who masterminded the attacks of 9/11, was, in fact, killed by a United States specially trained military unit?

Secretary BLINKEN. That is correct.

Mr. CONNOLLY. So what happened ultimately on August 14 has lots of history. I know it is convenient to pretend that did not happen. And I know that we want to give ourselves sort of the pleasure of attacking a political leader of the other party, and so let me engage in that too.

I am going to assert that the events of August 14 had their direct antecedent with a bad decision by President Trump and Secretary Pompeo, in 2018, to elevate and legitimize the Taliban in Doha, Qatar, by agreeing to have face-to-face negotiations.

That tragedy was compounded exponentially by an unbelievable decision to exclude the Government of Afghanistan, ostensibly we were defending, from those very negotiations. Is that an accurate statement, Mr. Secretary?

Secretary BLINKEN. Certainly that is what we inherited.

Mr. CONNOLLY. But the Afghan Government was, in fact, excluded from the negotiating table in Doha by the Trump administration. Is that not correct?

Secretary BLINKEN. It is essentially correct, yes.

Mr. CONNOLLY. And when those 5,000 people were released from prison, since the ranking member is so concerned, and correctly so, about two Haqqani members in the current cabinet of Taliban, were there any known terrorists or declared terrorists by the United States among those 5,000 people released with the consent and negotiated agreement of the Trump administration?

Secretary BLINKEN. Almost certainly, yes.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Ah, I guess our concern about terrorists is pretty selective and limited to partisanship.

I yield back.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman yields back his time.

I now recognize Representative Steve Chabot of Ohio, who is the ranking member of the Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, Central Asia, and Nonproliferation, for 5 minutes.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

On August 16, Mr. Secretary, President Biden said that the administration had considered every contingency and was executing the evacuation according to your plan.

Was it part of your plan to rely on the Taliban to ensure the safety of Americans trying to flee the country? Because that is what happened.

Secretary BLINKEN. We, through the course of the spring and summer, did indeed, as the President said, look at every contingency for dealing with our drawdown. And as part of that—

Mr. CHABOT. And we relied upon the Taliban to be our security. In essence, we ended up getting 13 of our military personnel and over 150 Afghan civilians killed by relying upon the Taliban. They did not provide very good security. We never should have relied upon them.

But let me move on—

Secretary BLINKEN. We were not relying upon the Taliban. As you know what happened, was the Afghan security forces and the government collapsed within the space of 11 days. We then executed the plans that we had in place to safely draw down our embassy, move it to the airport. The military came in, took over the airport, and started getting evacuation flights out within 72 hours. Those were the plans that were in place.

Mr. CHABOT. We certainly relied upon it at the airport. It did not work out so well.

Mr. Secretary, President Biden has laid the blame for the evacuation debacle in Afghanistan on others rather than on itself, where it really belongs. He blamed President Trump, as we have discussed already to some degree here, basically claiming that he was just following Trump's policy.

But he has not hesitated to disregard every other major Trump policy: our southern border, the Keystone Pipeline, the Paris climate accord, the Iran deal, Mexico City policy, and on and on.

Yet this was the one Trump policy that he had to follow. Do you understand why this is pretty hard to fathom for a lot of people?

Secretary BLINKEN. I think what is perhaps, Congressman, hard to fathom or people just do not understand, is that the agreement reached by the previous administration required all U.S. Forces to be out of Afghanistan by May 1. In return, the Taliban stopped attacking our forces, our partners, and it did not commence an onslaught of the Afghanistan cities.

Had the President not followed through on the commitments that his predecessor made, those attacks would have resumed, we would have re-upped the war in Afghanistan after 20 years, for another 5, 10, or 20 years. We would have had to send more forces back in.

And I recognize that a lot of people do not understand that, do not know the agreement that was reached, and the choice that President Biden faced for May 1.

Mr. CHABOT. Well, let me ask you this. When he wasn't blaming Trump, he was blaming the Afghan military forces for allegedly not being willing to fight.

But whereas we hadn't suffered a single U.S. military death in a year and a half—and that is a wonderful thing—the Afghan military forces had lost about 3,000 of their military personnel during that same time.

So wasn't the President being a little unfair to those 3,000 Afghans who lost their lives fighting the Taliban during that period of time?

Secretary BLINKEN. Congressman, many Afghan soldiers fought with incredible bravery and gave their lives, you are right. But as an institution, after 20 years of investment by the United States, by the international community, hundreds of billions of dollars, equipment, support, training, as an institution, it collapsed in 11 days.

Mr. CHABOT. Mr. Secretary, we went into Afghanistan in the first place because the Taliban had harbored al-Qaeda, correct, and they attacked us on September 11.

Now, 20 years later, we have the Taliban back in charge there, and they have billions and billions of dollars worth of our equipment and our weaponry, and once again, they are a haven for terrorists. How is this not a debacle of monumental proportions?

Secretary BLINKEN. Congressman, as we were discussing a little bit earlier, al-Qaeda, the group that attacked us on 9/11, long ago was vastly degraded to the point where it is currently not capable, in the assessment of our intelligence agencies, of conducting an externally directed attack against us or against others.

The Taliban should remember as well what happened the last time it did, as you rightly said, harbor al-Qaeda, and it engaged in an outwardly directed attack against us. It knows the consequences of continuing to do that, and it has made commitments not to allow that to happen.

But, of course, we are not relying on those commitments. As we discussed a little bit earlier, we are putting in place what we do in countries around the world where we do not have boots on the ground, which is an over-the-horizon capacity to detect the reemergence, should it happen, of any threat, including from al-Qaeda, and the means to do something about it.

Mr. CHABOT. This pullout was—

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman's time has expired.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman's time has expired.

I now recognize Representative Ted Deutch of Florida, who is the chair of the Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and Global Counterterrorism, for 5 minutes.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Secretary, I appreciate you being here today. And we do need to look back—this is a really important hearing—but we also need to look forward.

The reality is, we have a Taliban government, we have terrorist groups already surging, potential threats to U.S. interests remain. It is true that we are not the world's policeman, but we know that a strengthened ISIS-K or al-Qaeda pose a threat, not only to the

U.S. homeland, but to Americans abroad, our interests abroad in the region.

The Middle East and North Africa in particular were fundamentally changed in the aftermath of 9/11, with the rise of al-Qaeda and ISIS affiliates. We clearly cannot trust the Taliban to keep terrorists at bay.

So, Mr. Secretary, you traveled to Doha to conduct diplomatic talks with partners and allies on our continued counterterrorism role. What do you assess to be the operational capacities of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan? And how is the administration planning to hold the Taliban to its commitment to ensure that al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups are unable to use Afghan soil to plan terrorist attacks on or threaten the security of the U.S. and our allies?

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you very much. A few things on this. First, as we were discussing a little bit earlier, as you know from your focus on this, the terrorist threat has metastasized significantly from 9/11, and it is much more acute now in terms of potential threats to the homeland and threats beyond the countries in question, from Somalia, from Yemen, from Libya, Iraq, Syria, a number of other countries in Africa as well.

And so we have to be able to make sure that we are focused everywhere that is a possibility and resourced appropriately. And we are. And in a number of those places, as you know very well, we do not have boots on the ground, but we find ways to deal with that threat, including with over-the-horizon capabilities.

In the case of Afghanistan, a couple of things. The current assessment of the intelligence community is that long ago al-Qaeda was so significantly degraded, that it is not in a position to conduct externally faced—externally directed attacks. But we will remain hypervigilant about any reemergence of that threat, and we will be working closely with partners and other countries to be in a position to do that.

I think the chairman referenced earlier that we hope and expect in the near future to be able to do some classified briefings on this because there are a number of things that it would not be appropriate to discuss in this setting.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Secretary. And we appreciate your commitment to ensuring that those classified briefings occur.

Secretary Blinken, the war in Afghanistan was the first mission in the history of NATO arising out of the invitation of article 5, and over 50 NATO members and partner countries sent troops. Thirty-six, it has been reported, had troops there at the time of the draw-down.

They invested political capital—our allies invested political capital and funds and certainly troops, and often those troops gave their lives as well.

The criticism that we have heard from some of our allies is that there was not adequate consultation and coordination with our NATO allies. We heard the Secretary General of NATO say just this week that there was others doubting that. I would like you to speak to that.

But finally this. We had an administration, Mr. Secretary, that wanted to go it alone, a President who failed to appreciate and

often criticized the importance of NATO allies, while embracing Xi and Putin.

If you could also, in your final time with me, speak to, at a time when democratic values are being threatened and at risk in so many places around the world, if you could also speak to the importance of that transatlantic relationship and how to reassure those allies of ours who have raised concerns about how we went about pulling out of Afghanistan and about failing to coordinate with them as we did.

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you. Couple of things. First, you are so right to point to our allies and partners who stood with us on 9/11 and in all the days and time thereafter. And you are exactly right that article 5 of NATO, an attack on one is an attack on all, in essence, was invoked for the very first time in its history in our defense by our allies and partners, something that I will never forget and I suspect no one on this video conference today will ever forget.

And we determined that when it came to Afghanistan, we went in together and we would go out together. And that is exactly what we did. We engaged—I engaged, for the Secretary of Defense, in intense consultations with our NATO partners well before the President made his decision, going to Brussels for a special session of the North Atlantic Council and listening intently to every single partner, relaying what we heard directly to President Biden, to factor that into our thinking and into our planning.

I have spent more time in Brussels, either in person or virtually, than in any other place since I have been on this job, working very closely with these allies and partners. On the day that the President's decision was announced, I was back in Brussels, again with the Secretary of Defense, and NATO immediately and unanimously endorsed that decision.

Now, in the discussions and conversations that we had throughout this time, including individual conversations, people brought various perspectives to the table, but each recognized that given the deadline that existed, that is, that our forces had to depart Afghanistan by May 1, pursuant to the agreement negotiated by the previous administration, that the alternative, should we choose to stay, was for the Taliban to resume attacks, not just on us, but on our NATO partners and allies, as well as to engage in this country-wide offensive that we have seen to retake the major cities, in effect, to re-up the war. And all unanimously endorsed the proposition that we would leave together, and that is exactly what we worked on doing and what we have been doing.

I know from talking to many allies and partners the tremendous solidarity we saw at the Kabul Airport, working to help each other, to make sure that we could get out our fellow nationals, Afghans who had helped each of us, and our embassy personnel.

I heard a lot of gratitude from allies and partners about the work that our folks did in making sure that we could deliver on that commitment to them.

So, from my perspective at least, there was tremendous and genuine consultation with allies and partners throughout this process. And going forward, right now, we are deeply engaged with them, at NATO and in other organizations, on working together on the

way forward, to collectively hold the Taliban to the commitments that it has made to the international community.

Chairman MEEKS. Thank you. The gentleman's time is expired. I now recognize Representative Scott Perry of Pennsylvania for 5 minutes.

Mr. PERRY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Blinken, assuming it is not classified, can you tell us where you are today?

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes. I am at the State Department.

Mr. PERRY. Oh, couldn't be bothered to come down here and see Congress. All right. That is great.

Secretary BLINKEN. My understanding—excuse me, sir. My understanding is that the House is not in session, and that is why the session has been convened—

Mr. PERRY. I am right here, Secretary, so—

Secretary BLINKEN. If the chairman would like to correct me, I will stand corrected.

Mr. PERRY. Reclaiming my time. Did State at any point in the evacuation process block American citizens from leaving Afghanistan?

Secretary BLINKEN. No, we did not.

Mr. PERRY. None? Your testimony before Congress is that State did not block any American citizens leaving?

Secretary BLINKEN. To the contrary, my officers, men and women, ran into the building from around the world to help Americans get out, and—

Mr. PERRY. You can do it with Mr. Connolly, you can do it with me. Yes or no? I just want to clarify, you did not block anybody?

Secretary BLINKEN. No. They were there to help Americans get out, not to block—

Mr. PERRY. How many Afghans not meeting the qualifications of SIV have been brought to the United States, prior to—how many Afghan citizens came to the United States that had not met the qualifications for a special immigrant visa?

Secretary BLINKEN. We are in the process of going through—

Mr. PERRY. How many? How many? How many did you bring? You were just at Dulles. How many did you bring?

Secretary BLINKEN. We have—we will have, by the end of the month, we will have brought a total of approximately 60,000 to the United States.

Mr. PERRY. That have met the SIV process.

Secretary BLINKEN. Some of those will be—some of those will have been through the SIV process. All of them, regardless of SIV status, will have gone through rigorous security checks, first at the transit points outside of the United States and then the United States.

Mr. PERRY. [Inaudible] Before we brought these people to the United States of America.

Mr. Secretary, are Afghan refugees required to be vaccinated for COVID before coming to the United States of America?

Secretary BLINKEN. They are vaccinated in the United States before they are—before they are resettled into the United States.

Mr. PERRY. There are none of these Afghan citizens that are allowed to leave these resettlement communities—Fort Dix, Dulles,

et cetera—that are allowed to leave at any time they want. None of them are leaving unless they are vaccinated for COVID. Is that your testimony?

Secretary BLINKEN. They are tested for COVID and vaccinated for COVID.

Mr. PERRY. Vaccinated before they leave?

Secretary BLINKEN. That is my understanding.

Mr. PERRY. All right. Thank you, Mr. Secretary.

Is it the policy of the United States of America to take hard-earned tax dollars and pay terrorist organizations?

Secretary BLINKEN. It is not.

Mr. PERRY. It is not. So your testimony earlier was, is that we are sending taxpayer dollars to Afghanistan right now for humanitarian relief. Who are we sending that to?

Secretary BLINKEN. To NGO's and to United Nations' agencies who are using that assistance. Not to the Afghan Government.

Mr. PERRY. Not to the Afghan—the Taliban government. How are you accounting for that? How are you making sure that the Afghan—the Taliban government is not receiving that?

Secretary BLINKEN. As we do around the world in places of conflict where we provide humanitarian assistance, working through United Nations, working through NGO's, with long-tested methods to make sure that the assistance provided goes to the people who need it, not to the government in question.

Mr. PERRY. All right. Let me ask you this. Is it your understanding that over the past 20 years, United States taxpayers have paid Pakistan, who has then used that money to support the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, ISIS-K, Khorasan group, et cetera, for the past 20 years? Is that not true?

Secretary BLINKEN. There is a long history that we should all look at together about the involvement of Pakistan in the last 20 years.

Mr. PERRY. I would say that we should no longer pay Pakistan and we should pay India.

Let me ask you this. I just have a couple more questions for you, a little off topic here, but I think it is interesting.

How long was your recent interview with the FBI, and was it a deposition?

Secretary BLINKEN. I am sorry. I do not know to what you are referring.

Mr. PERRY. Are you saying that you have not had a recent interview with the FBI since becoming Secretary of State?

Secretary BLINKEN. I am not sure what you are referring to, and I am happy to take that up with you offline.

Mr. PERRY. Did the State Department turn over documents to the FBI related to Hunter Biden, Burisma, and/or the Blue State Strategies Corporation?

Secretary BLINKEN. You will have to ask the—

Mr. PERRY. You have no knowledge of this. You have had no—are you saying you have not had an interview with—

Secretary BLINKEN. It would not be appropriate for me to comment in a public forum on any legal proceedings that the Department or I may or may not have been involved in.

Mr. PERRY. I am not asking you to comment on the legal proceedings. I am just asking if you have been interviewed by the FBI since becoming Secretary of State.

Secretary BLINKEN. Again, I am not going to comment one way or another on any legal proceedings or not that may or may not have happened.

Chairman MEEKS. Let me remind the gentleman that the topic of this hearing is Afghanistan. That is what we are—

Mr. PERRY. I appreciate it, Mr. Chairman, but the Secretary generally refuses to answer questions about Afghanistan, so I just figured we would talk about something he should be intimately familiar with.

Have you sought to alter any of your testimony from last year's Senate investigation regarding this topic, Mr. Secretary?

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman's time has expired.

And let me also for the record make clear that this is a hybrid hearing. Just as members had an option to come or to be other places, the Secretary also. It is a hybrid hearing because we are not in session.

Mr. ISSA. Mr. Chairman, point of inquiry, if I could?

Chairman MEEKS. Who seeks recognition?

Mr. ISSA. This is Congressman Issa. Just for my edification, was it expressed to the Secretary that he had a choice of either one, or was he invited to come here, or was he alerted to remain there?

And I only ask because I think we all agree that if he could have been here in person, it would have been better, but if it was an option or for whatever reason—because I want to make sure that it is clear that the Secretary may have done no wrong, even though many of us would prefer him to be here.

Chairman MEEKS. The Secretary has done no wrong. It was an option, and I made it as an option as I have done with every member.

Mr. ISSA. Okay. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MEEKS. I now recognize Representative Karen Bass of California, who is the chair of the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Global Human Rights, for 5 minutes.

Ms. BASS. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

And thank you, Secretary Blinken, for attending this hearing and for your patience with putting up with the theatrics of my colleagues on the other side of the aisle. I want to thank you, again, for spending the time and agreeing to take everyone's questions for 5 minutes.

The departure from Afghanistan has provided really unprecedented insight into our foreign policy, in addition to demonstrating the bravery, dedication, and professionalism of our military, diplomats, and Afghan partners. It has also shown how a 20-year effort and billions of dollars have really raised questions about what the return of investment is that we desired in terms of sustaining peace and stability in Afghanistan.

The assumption of power by the Taliban has secondary and tertiary effects on the most vulnerable segments of the population, especially women and children, and we are concerned that it will reverse any gains that were realized in the last two decades.

So my first question, yes or no, Mr. Secretary, did the agreement from the last administration include any protections for girls and women?

Secretary BLINKEN. Not to my knowledge.

Ms. BASS. So many people are concerned about the status of women and girls in Afghanistan under the Taliban. The restrictions on education, movement, health, physical safety, under their regime paints a grim picture.

I would like to know how the administration will work with partners to support Afghan women's rights and the rights of ethnic and religious minorities in Afghanistan. Go ahead.

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you, Congresswoman. One of the truly great achievements of the last 20 years was the progress made by women and girls in particular in Afghanistan. And one of the things that we should be proud of is the support—the leading support that we gave to that when it comes to access to education, to healthcare, to the work force, entrepreneurship. Those gains were significant, and we were the leading contributor.

I was in Kabul in April. I sat with a number of women who had benefited from our assistance, including women who had gone on to become leaders in their parliament, in the media, NGO's, et cetera, and, of course, heard their profound concerns about the future.

Just recently when I was in Doha and at Ramstein talking to people who had been evacuated from Afghanistan, I spoke to a lot of women and girls and heard their deep concerns about the future, as well as people who were still in Afghanistan.

And so we have an ongoing commitment to use every tool at our disposal through our diplomacy, through our economic assistance, humanitarian assistance, programmatic assistance, to do whatever we can to continue, in coordination with many other countries, to support women and girls and minorities in Afghanistan. The assistance that we announced today will go in that direction. The assistance we will provide going forward will do that.

And with regard to women and girls in particular, given the incredible fragility of the situation that they are now in, I will be naming a senior official here at the State Department to focus entirely on the ongoing effort, both from the U.S. Government and in coordination with other countries, to support them.

Ms. BASS. Well, thank you very much. And so will the administration expand the license to operate humanitarian programs in Afghanistan? And how will that take place? And which partners do you see us continuing to work with?

Secretary BLINKEN. In short, yes, that is exactly what we are looking at. And you rightly point out, we have already issued a license to make sure that humanitarian assistance could go forward. We are looking at whether that needs to be expanded, consistent, of course, with our sanctions and consistent with our national security, to allow appropriate assistance to get to those who need it.

Ms. BASS. Who approves that license? Who are we making that request to?

Secretary BLINKEN. The Treasury Department is responsible for the licenses, but we do this in coordination or consultation with us

and other agencies in the government, as well as, of course, the White House.

Ms. BASS. And which partners on the ground are we continuing to work with?

Secretary BLINKEN. We have—and we can get you the list. We have a number of NGO's that remain active in Afghanistan, as well as—

Ms. BASS. Are these SGOs (ph) or NGO's?

Secretary BLINKEN. Some are—there are, I believe, a couple of U.S. NGO's that are still active, international NGO's, and U.N. agencies. I met with the head of the U.N.'s Humanitarian Assistance Program just a few days ago when I was in Doha, and we spent a lot of time talking about how this assistance could continue to go forward and what some of the mechanisms were that could be put in place to make sure that it was getting to the right people and being used effectively.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentlelady's time has expired.

I now recognize Representative Darrell Issa from California for 5 minutes.

Mr. ISSA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Secretary, before we get into the tougher part of this, I want to thank you for the effort that has gone on by the men and women of both the State Department and the Department of Defense, and a lot of independent actions that occurred to try to help get people out in the aftermath of the withdrawal.

I would not be doing my job, though, if I did not ask some tough questions. One of them is up here on this board, and it is pretty straightforward. A response I received from the State Department said to my staff when we asked about continued work to get people out, it said, make contingency plans to leave when it is safe to do so that do not rely on U.S. Government assistance.

How do we square the fact that in an official response that I waited weeks for, that we do not have any assurance for assistance but that when people get out, typically they are lauded by the State Department as success stories. That includes an 80-year-old couple that was announced to have gotten out when, in fact, we saw no real assistance by the State Department, had to find out it was a nongovernment flight and get these two American citizens onto that flight, and we still have a number of others.

So, in a nutshell, how do I explain, do not rely on the United States? Do we or do we not rely on the United States of America for blue passport holder American citizens who want to get out?

Secretary BLINKEN. The answer to that is, yes, absolutely. And could you tell me, because I am sorry, I cannot see it clearly from here, you know, when and to whom that statement was made?

Mr. ISSA. We will give it to your staff so that you get it without it being fully disclosed—

Secretary BLINKEN. And, Congressman, I would really welcome following up with you, with your team, with your staff to make sure that we are following up on that particular request.

I have got here—because I really want to express deep appreciation to Members of Congress, this committee—I have here a very lengthy document of all of the inquiries that we have received just from HFAC, from members of HFAC, on people who have come to

you seeking assistance, all of which has been factored into our data bases, our information, our efforts. But if someone is not getting the response they need, please come back to us and let me know, and we would be very happy to work with you on that.

Thank you.

Mr. ISSA. We will do that. Thank you, Mr. Secretary.

Now, if I can quickly go through a few dates and a few statements. On July 8, President Biden was asked if he listened to the intelligence assessment that the Afghan Government was likely to collapse. He answered, that is not true. They are not—they did not reach that conclusion. In other words, the IC hadn't reached that conclusion.

I believe that we will find that as of July 8, the President misspoke.

The President also said the likelihood there is going to be the Taliban overrunning everything and owning the whole country is highly unlikely. Two days later, on July 10, the Taliban was reported to have 85 percent of the country.

Then on August 12, The Wall Street Journal reported that on July 13, you received an urgent dissent memo from 23 U.S. Embassy personnel in Kabul warning that the advances of the Taliban and the rapid collapse of Afghanistan. Your spokesman said you read every memo sent to you from the Dissent Channel. So if you do, then you knew that, in fact, a major portion of people in the embassy believed that they were going to quickly overrun.

On August 18, President Biden said, the intelligence community did not say, back in June or July, that, in fact, this was going to collapse like it did. But the embassy told you, or at least a great many, in July, that it would.

The question really is, how do we regain confidence in the State Department and its spokespeople, yourself included, and the President, if, in fact, we cannot square what we receive, Members of Congress, both publicly and privately, that indicate some of those statements that I just read, including ones by the President, are not supported by the facts?

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you. As you know from tracking this as well, throughout the year, assessments were made of the resilience of the Afghan Government, the Afghan security forces, and the possibility of the Taliban taking over the country.

And this was typically done in a series of different scenarios: worst, mid case, best case scenarios. In the worst case scenarios throughout the spring, I think it is fair to say that the general assessment was that the government and security forces would be able to hold on to the country well into next year, 2022.

At some point in July, there was an assessment that it was more likely than not that that timeframe was down to the end of the year. Then, of course, as things fully unraveled in August, that changed.

To my knowledge, Congressman, no one predicted the unraveling before our forces and embassy left Afghanistan on August 31.

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Milley, has said, nothing I or anyone else saw indicated a collapse of the government and the security forces in 11 days.

The Director of National Intelligence has said, in the days leading up to the Taliban takeover, intelligence agencies did not say collapse was imminent.

This unfolded more quickly than we anticipated, including in the intelligence community. And there are a number of other conclusory statements of that kind that I can share with you.

With regard to the so-called Dissent Channel cable, it is something I am immensely proud of, it is a tradition that we have. And you are right, I read every such cable, I respond to it, I factor it into my own thinking and actions. And that cable did not predict the collapse of the government or security forces before our departure. It was very focused, and rightly focused, on the work we were doing to try to get Afghans at risk out of the country and pressing to speed up that effort.

As it happens, a number of the things that were suggested in that very important cable were things that we were in the process of doing. The very next day—I think the cable came in on the 13th of July—the 14th, we launched Operation Allies Refuge, which, of course, had been in training for some time, as well as the 24/7 task force to help those in the SIV program get out and even to relocate them, which is not part of the program.

So that was a very important cable. I am grateful for it, and grateful that we have a process at the State Department where people can clearly express their views and differences on policy or recommendations on policy. That is hugely important.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman's time has expired.

I now recognize Representative Bill Keating of Massachusetts, who is the chair of the Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber, for 5 minutes.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you, Mr. Secretary, for your service, and as head of the Department of State for our country. I want to thank all of your people for the work they have done. They stood side by side with our military, risking their lives in helping people evacuate in the most dangerous situation. So my sincere appreciation to everyone—

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you.

Mr. KEATING [continuing]. At State who was part of that.

I am also glad that you reinforced, as my conversations have, the renewed commitment, the strength that is there with our transatlantic allies going forward on our mission, not just in the region, but also worldwide through our counterterrorism efforts.

I must say this, though. This is a period of reassessment, I think, as we go forward, where we have some lessons learned, where we go embarking on a new mission, where we are trying to do the best in that area and so many fronts. But there is one relationship that really has always troubled me a great deal, certainly over the last couple of decades, and that is our relationship with Pakistan. You know, from its—Pakistan has played an active and, by so many accounts, a negative role in Afghan affairs for decades, not just recently but for decades.

From the very beginning, its inception, they helped in actually branding the name Taliban. And by 2005, when the Taliban was reconstituting in east and south Afghanistan and, importantly,

across the border in Pakistan, and as Pakistan's ISI, their Inter-Services Intelligence agency, had such strong ties and cooperation with the Haqqani Network, responsible for so many things, including the deaths of some of our soldiers.

And even recently when the Taliban took over, in the last month, Pakistan's Prime Minister Khan claimed that Afghanistan had, quote/unquote, broken the shackles of slavery.

So we used to always hear diplomatically that we have a complicated relationship with Afghanistan—I mean with Pakistan. I would say it is often duplicitous.

So as we go forward in the region, as we go forward dealing with our counterterrorism missions, how do we reassess that relationship? How have we learned from their actions? And when we go forward, what do we do? What are some of the big issues that we should have, stakes in the ground that we should have in dealing with Pakistan and the way they have acted over these decades?

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you, Congressman. And I think you are very right to point at the role that Pakistan has played throughout the past 20 years and even before. And it is one that has involved hedging its bets constantly about the future of Afghanistan. It is one that is involved harboring members of the Taliban, including the Haqqanis. It is one that has also involved, at different points, cooperation with us on counterterrorism.

And so there are a number of things that have come into play. It has a multiplicity of interests, some that are in clear conflict with ours when it comes to Afghanistan. It is focused, of course, as well on India and the role that India is playing in Afghanistan. It looks at it through that prism as well.

All of these things, I think, have influenced what it has done on many occasions detrimental to our interests; on other occasions, in support of those interests.

And so going forward, what we are looking at, what we have to look at is an insistence that every country, to include Pakistan, make good on the expectations that the international community has of what is required of a Taliban-led government, if it is to receive any legitimacy of any kind or any support going forward, to include ensuring freedom of travel, to include making good on its commitments on not allowing Afghanistan to be used as a haven for outward-directed terrorism, to include upholding the basic rights of the Afghan people, including women and girls and minorities, to include allowing humanitarian assistance in, to include having a more representative government.

And so Pakistan needs to line up with the rest of the—with the broad majority of the international community in working toward those ends and in upholding those expectations.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you, Mr. Secretary. I would like to—

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman's time has expired.

Mr. KEATING [continuing]. Another time and thank for your work with the U.S. Agency for Global Media. We will continue to work on that front and many others.

I yield back.

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman's time has expired.

I now recognize Representative Adam Kinzinger of Illinois for 5 minutes.

Mr. KINZINGER. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Secretary, thank you for being here and spending this time. It is very important.

You know, watching some of this debate, I think it is important to remind people, yes, the Trump administration failed in the setup, and I think the Biden Administration absolutely failed in the execution of this.

I also want to make it clear, Mr. Secretary, we support the members of the State Department and their heroic action in the evacuation. I think the broader point is, they never should have been put in a place where they had to act heroically.

We found ourselves—many times we talk about Bagram and leaving that, and I think that it is important to point out, but there was also moments where the U.S. military, with the 6,000 people that we sent in, could have defended Kabul proper. It was clear that the Taliban were not intending to move into Kabul as early as they did. But we put them in a position where they had to act heroically, and we shouldn't ask that of our State Department employees, even though we appreciate that they did.

I also think it is important to point out, you know, that there is a lot of blame of the Afghan military. And I certainly, as a military man myself, wish that the Afghan military would have helped. But keep in mind, prior to that, there were assessments coming out that it was only a matter of time, maybe it is 6 months, maybe it is a year, till the whole place collapsed.

You know, we had pulled—we had built a military in our own image that relied on air power, that relied on logistics, and then we pulled our logistic and air power support from the Afghan military. And as they received night letters from the Taliban saying, we are going to kill your family because the United States is vacating, they are leaving you, it is—to me, as much as I would have loved for them to have stayed and taken a stand heroically, I do not know many even of our allies' militaries that, frankly, could have stood in those conditions in that kind of an onslaught.

Let me ask you, though, Mr. Secretary, you know, you talk a little about the Taliban legitimacy, and we are going to see how they act. I want to ask you a question because I am not sure where that changed. At the beginning of all of this, we were talking about building a worldwide coalition to not recognize the Taliban, and all of a sudden this is on the table.

Is the Taliban the legitimate government of Afghanistan; and if not, would you consider what the Taliban have done in Afghanistan to be a coup d'etat?

Secretary BLINKEN. First, let me just start by thanking you for your strong words in support of the men and women of the State Department. I very much appreciate them and appreciate you saying them.

Second, with regard to the Taliban and your question, it is the de facto government of Afghanistan. Those are just the facts and—

Mr. KINZINGER. I do not mean to interrupt, but I need to. Has there been any discussion of an Afghan government in exile with

the Vice-President? Even if the President had left, is there any discussion of that? Because this, to me, appears to be an armed military coup against the legitimate elected government of Afghanistan.

Secretary BLINKEN. Congressman, I will certainly look to see what the lawyers say. From where I sit, this is the product alas of one side getting the upper hand in a civil war.

Mr. KINZINGER. Let me ask a couple of questions here on something too about that. So if we look at the list of new key players in the regime, we have the current Prime Minister, who was deputy during the 9/11 attacks, the current Deputy Prime Minister, who served as No. 2 defense official during the 9/11 attacks. The current Foreign Minister, who is your counterpart, was the Minister of Culture and Information during the 9/11 attacks. And we have designated terrorists in key positions, like those that are responsible for preventing Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven in terror once again.

So we look at that list and we see those individuals who not only defended al-Qaeda but have committed crimes against women and vulnerable populations, and I think anybody would look at that and say this is the same regime that failed to hand over Osama bin Laden 20 years ago.

But let me just ask you, have these individuals committed to denouncing al-Qaeda, to denouncing the Haqqani Network, and ensuring that they will execute any attacks against them should they try to organize in their territory?

Secretary BLINKEN. Well, in the agreement that was secured by the previous administration, the Taliban, now represented by these individuals, made commitments not to allow Afghanistan to be used as a launching ground for externally directed terrorism, whether by al-Qaeda or by anyone else.

The big question now—and you are right to point to it—is whether they will make good on that commitment. But, of course, we cannot and will not rely on them to do that even as we insist that they do.

Mr. KINZINGER. Let me ask you too—thank you, and I am sorry to cut you off.

Secretary BLINKEN. No, please, go ahead.

Mr. KINZINGER. Just a couple of quick points. No. 1, we would need—we absolutely have to be executing any attack against al-Qaeda that we can, where we see them form.

And secondarily, because I am running out of time, let me stress to you the importance of State Department working hand-in-hand in a public and private way with these NGO's, made up of former veterans, that are doing stuff that unfortunately the government can no longer do, and let me encourage you to give them top cover and work with them to provide the assets necessary to get these people out.

Thank you, Mr. Chair and Mr. Secretary. I yield back.

Secretary BLINKEN. Let me just say, I really appreciate you saying that and putting the spotlight on that, because veterans groups are doing remarkable work. We are in close contact with them. I met with about 75 veterans organizations and groups virtually about a week ago. We followed up with a number of other meet-

ings, and we deeply appreciate the work that many veterans on this committee, as well as organizations are doing, and we are looking to work even more closely together on that. Thank you.

Mr. KINZINGER. Good news.

Chairman MEEKS. I now recognize Representative David Cicilline of Rhode Island for 5 minutes.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you, Mr. Secretary. You know, you explained that you inherited an agreement with a deadline but no plan, a backlog of 17,000 special immigrant visas, and a responsibility to evacuate safely both Americans and those who helped us in this effort.

As a candidate, President Biden promised to end the war in Afghanistan, and he kept his word. I agree with him it was the right thing to do.

And while today's hearing is focused on the U.S. withdrawal, I think it would be a mistake to lose sight of the misjudgments and lessons learned over the long arc of the past 20 years. And I hope Congress will have an opportunity to do its own self-reflection.

But I want to begin, Mr. Secretary, my question about the evacuation. You were cutoff when you were trying to explain the vetting process, and I wonder if you could quickly finish that answer about what the State Department did with respect to vetting people that were being evacuated out of Afghanistan.

Secretary BLINKEN. Sure. And two things. And by the way, I very much agree with you, and I heard the chairman say at the outset that this committee, among other things, will be focusing on the 20-year history of our engagement in Afghanistan. And I think there are lots of lessons to be learned across the board, through every administration, including our own.

With regard to the vetting, two things I would point out here. First, you know, we spent a lot of time talking about the special immigrant visa program and our commitment, and the commitment, I know, of so many members of this committee, to the Afghans who worked with us, who sit side by side with us, and the work that we did these first months of the administration to take a program that was in pretty much a dead stall and to put it into third, fourth—

Mr. CICILLINE. Okay. I do not want to be impolite, but if you could just quickly say what you did, because I know how thorough it was, I just—

Secretary BLINKEN. Sure. Thank you. Simply put, when it comes to vetting people coming out of Afghanistan, they go to transit countries. We negotiated agreements with more than a dozen countries to transit Afghans at those countries, and we do security screenings there.

We have sent Customs and Border Patrol agents to all of those countries. We have the law enforcement, intelligence, and security agencies all there doing vetting, biometrics, biographic information.

Then they come to the United States. But before they are resettled anywhere, they are also at one of our military bases, and any vetting continues there.

And under authorities that we have asked Congress for, including the ability for people who are resettled in a year's time to apply

for a green card, the vetting and background authorities will continue so that if anything comes up, we can continue to do that.

Mr. CICILLINE. Great. Thank you. As you know, Mr. Secretary, the LGBTQI community in Afghanistan is extremely vulnerable to punitive actions from the Taliban. It is important, in my view, that we take steps to ensure that those who would be subjected to violence or worse because of their sexual orientation or gender identity are safe.

The Council for Global Equality, the human rights campaign, and LGBTQI+ refugee support groups released a ten-point plan to protect Afghan LGBTQI refugees. My question is have you seen this plan? And if so, is the administration prepared to implement it, and is it consistent with the Presidential memorandum of early 2021 that speaks of the responsibility to help Afghan refugees that make it to neighboring States as outlined in that memorandum.

Secretary BLINKEN. Well, thank you for rightly putting the spotlight on concerns about the LGBTQI+ community in Afghanistan and the particular threat they may find themselves under. This is something that we are focused on. I have not personally seen the report that you referred to. I am going to ask to see it. I am pretty sure that my team has, but I will take a look at that myself, and I thank you for sending it to us.

Mr. CICILLINE. Great. And I look forward to following up with you on that.

And, finally, Mr. Secretary, the Brown University Cost of War Project has compiled a sobering list of figures as it relates to post 9/11 conflicts including Afghanistan, trillions of dollars spent, over 900,000 lives lost in Afghanistan, 2,641 Americans, and 38 million people displaced around the world. And, Mr. Secretary, the war in Afghanistan went on, as you know, for 20 years, leading to extraordinary costs in terms of dollars spent, lives lost, and political capital expended.

Taking stock of these costs, my question is, what do you think are the most important lessons after 20 years in Afghanistan and 20 years of post 9/11 conflict that we should learn?

Secretary BLINKEN. I think all of us have to come together to do just that, to try to look at the lessons and then reflect those lessons in what we do together going forward. To my mind, at least, one of the lessons is while we are very effective at dealing with terrorist threats to our country and eliminating them, which we did very successfully in Afghanistan, the idea of using military force to try to remake a society is something that is beyond our means and beyond our capacity, and we need to think really hard about whether we want to engage in these enterprises going forward.

You are right to point to the costs. Let me just say very quickly that I think that Brown study concluded that on the basis of about \$2 trillion being spent on Afghanistan over the last 20 years when you include indirect costs, that averages out to \$300 million a day for 20 years. And I know people will say, well, that wasn't the case the last year or so.

But had we not ended the war and brought our people home, we would have had to have reupped it to deal with the renewed attacks by the Taliban, to deal with the onslaught nationwide. And those costs would have gone right back up again, and we have to

ask ourselves very hard questions about whether that is the right way to spend our money.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you.

Chairman MEEKS. Thank you. The gentleman's time has expired.

I now recognize Representative Lee Zeldin of New York for 5 minutes.

Mr. ZELDIN. Mr. Secretary, one of my colleagues claimed earlier in this hearing that the last administration's agreement with the Taliban was unconditional. That was false. In fact, you, sir, actually started to outline some of those conditions, and you were stopped. To recap, Mr. Secretary, the last administration's agreement with the Taliban was conditions-based, correct?

Secretary BLINKEN. The conditions that you referred to included a commitment not to allow Afghanistan to harbor outwardly directed terrorists. Let me just be clear, though, in response to your question.

Mr. ZELDIN. The question is, it was a conditions-based agreement, correct?

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes, except that those conditions were so loose, particularly with regard to commitments it made—

Mr. ZELDIN. You can criticize it all you want, Mr. Secretary. I just want you to answer the question.

Next, are you aware that President Biden says in the transcript of his George Stephanopoulos interview that he would have withdrawn from Afghanistan regardless of that prior agreement?

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes, that is right, but not necessarily in the time, place, and manner that we did which was imposed on us by that agreement.

Mr. ZELDIN. On July 8, as Congressman Issa referred to earlier in this hearing, President Biden said, quote, the likelihood that there is going to be the Taliban overrunning everything and owning the whole country is highly unlikely. That is a very different prediction than what the U.S. intelligence community actually was saying.

Mr. Secretary, where did the President get the highly unlikely intelligence estimate from?

Secretary BLINKEN. As the intelligence community has actually said, including in the days leading up to the Taliban takeover, they were not and no one was predicting the rapid collapse of the government and the security forces. Throughout the year—throughout the year, the intelligence community looked at a range of scenarios, worst case to best case, about the durability, resiliency of the government security forces—

Mr. ZELDIN. Reclaiming my time. The question is, where did the President get highly unlikely from?

Secretary BLINKEN. Again, based on what the intelligence community was saying and the military. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs has said that no one anticipated that the government or the security forces would collapse in 11 days.

Mr. ZELDIN. Mr. Secretary, it would be good, though, if you were giving answers that were consistent with the answers that we were getting behind a closed door briefing that we had with you and others.

What is the number of Americans who are in Afghanistan as of the last update you received?

Secretary BLINKEN. Congressman, going back to this weekend, we had about 100 American citizens in contact with us who were—who seek to leave Afghanistan. Those are the Americans we are working with.

Mr. ZELDIN. Do you have an exact number?

Secretary BLINKEN. I cannot give you an exact number. We were talking about this a little bit earlier. It is really a snapshot at any given moment because what happens is—

Mr. ZELDIN. That is why I asked you as of the last update you received.

Secretary BLINKEN. As of the last update, it was about—about 100.

Mr. ZELDIN. Okay. How many green card holders?

Secretary BLINKEN. Green card holders is something that we do not track directly, so what we have done is we have solicited people, if they are green card holders, to let us know. I think the best estimates are that there are several thousand green card holders in Afghanistan.

Mr. ZELDIN. How many SIV applicants?

Secretary BLINKEN. SIV applicants? Those are numbers that we are working on right now. As people come out of Afghanistan, some of them in the United States already, others at these transit points, we are collecting all of that information.

The overwhelming majority of Afghans who have come out are Afghans who are at risk in one way or another. Some of them will be SIVs, applicants. Others will be people who are eligible for refugee visas. Still others will be at risk in some fashion. We are putting all those numbers together, and we should have that in the next couple of weeks.

Mr. ZELDIN. Yes. I mean, this was fatally flawed, poorly executed. We had the lost of U.S. servicemembers as a result. We should not have been operating off of an arbitrary July 31 deadline.

Instead, what we should have done was tell the Taliban that we are going to leave Afghanistan when we are done bringing last every American home, not operating off of some arbitrary date. We shouldn't have collapsed Bagram when we did. We shouldn't have been relying on the Taliban to provide security at the airport. We shouldn't have been allowing billions of dollars worth of U.S. weapons and equipment to get turned over to Afghanistan.

You, the administration, should not have been lying and misleading the American public like the White House press secretary is standing out there to the press and to the American public and saying that Americans aren't stranded even though we all know that they are.

And I am concerned that this administration with incompetency is exposing a vulnerability that other countries like we see North Korea now testing long-range missiles. We see Iran enhancing uranium enrichment.

What happens when China and Russia and Hamas and Hezbollah and al-Qaeda and the Taliban—they continue to press forward because we have an administration that does not know how to confront an adversary, understanding that they do not re-

spect weakness. They only respect strength. And it is so greatly unfortunate, the consequences, and I believe that you, sir, should resign. That would be leadership.

I yield back.

Secretary BLINKEN. To the contrary, Congressman, I believe that there is nothing that our strategic competitors like China or Russia or our adversaries like Iran, like North Korea would have liked more than for President Biden to have reupped the war in Afghanistan for another 5, 10, or 20 years, to be bogged down in that conflict, nothing they would have liked more.

And we are now able as a result of the decision the President made that none of his predecessors made to end the war after 20 years, to ensure that a third generation of Americans did not have to go off and fight and die in Afghanistan while bringing 125,000 people out. We are now in a much better position to confront the challenges and threats that we actually face in 2021.

Mr. ZELDIN. This is the Democratic National Committee's—

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman's time has expired.

I now recognize Representative Ami Bera of California, the chair of the Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, Central Asia, and Non-proliferation for 5 minutes.

Mr. BERA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And, Mr. Secretary, once again, I want to reiterate our thanks as a committee for your appearing before us, answering all the questions and giving every member a chance. That is nothing something your predecessor did very easily.

Look. I agree with President Biden's decision to withdraw. I think most of the American public agrees with that decision. I have sat in many hearings, sat in many classified and open briefings as we were looking at various scenarios of what that withdrawal looks like, what the capabilities of the Afghan government were. And, you know, unfortunately, the worst case scenario played out. And the images that we saw coming out of Afghanistan were painful, frankly, in the last few weeks of August.

And I do think the men and women in the military and State Department in difficult circumstances stepped up. I do think the logistics of that airlift and getting the numbers of American citizens, visa holders, SIVs, vulnerable Afghans out in such a short period of time was remarkable.

I think we all mourn the loss of life of Afghan civilians but also the 13 men and women serving our country and leading the mission. And there will be time to go through and do the oversight and get a sense of where did our estimates go wrong, where were the flaws.

But at this moment in time, knowing that we still have American citizens there, knowing that we still have vulnerable Afghans and so forth, I really do want our focus to be getting those folks to safety, the visa holders, the SIVs, and others.

I will not ask you to guarantee a commitment that you will get everyone out. Nobody can make that promise. But what I will ask is working with my office, working with the various congressional offices, the men and women of the State Department, that we will use every resource that we can in a difficult situation, in a challenging security situation on the ground to do the best job possible

to get every American citizen, visa holder, SIV, and vulnerable Afghan out to safety. Can I get that promise that we will do that?

Secretary BLINKEN. Absolutely. You have that commitment, and I welcome working with every member of this committee to do just that.

Mr. BERA. Great. Thank you. And your staff, and again, the men and women within the State Department and elsewhere, again, in trying circumstances have been very readily available to work with us. You know, again, we have submitted over 10,000 names of folks just given the size of our population in the community.

Second, and we haven't talked about this, is, as I mentioned earlier, we have the largest Afghan refugee population in the country, and we are proud of that, you know. We have welcomed these men and women. We have got great resettlement agencies that are working with folks, but we have also got real challenges just because of the rapidity of folks leaving country and arriving after being vetted in the United States.

Many of these folks now are coming as humanitarian parolees under a visa status that does not necessarily have the resources that are available. I know we will be working on a budget supplement to help provide the resources to get medical resources, get visa resources, and ramp up your staffing of the State Department to process these refugees.

I would hope that the men and women on this committee, Democrat, Republican, as well as everyone in the House and Senate overwhelmingly support the supplemental requests that will be coming hopefully within the next few weeks to provide those resources.

It is the one thing when I talk to our veterans community, and, you know, many that have served in Afghanistan and are, you know, wondering about that service, the one thing we can to make them whole is to welcome these folks that, you know, served them, worked with them side by side and often saved their lives and really do everything we can to get those folks to safety. Those that are coming to the United States, to help them reassemble our lives.

So, you know, Mr. Secretary, I would imagine that supplemental is coming. We have already heard some top line numbers the President has asked for. Are there specifics that, you know, from your vantage point that the men and women who work for you that you see on that horizon?

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes. Thank you so much for flagging that. Let me just say very quickly yes. We are going to be looking for support from all of you on this and particularly a few things for Afghans who are paroled into the United States to receive the same benefits that refugees do so that they have some ongoing support, the ability to work in the United States, HHS benefits that they wouldn't otherwise get.

We would also like them to be able to apply for a green card after 1 year of being in the United States. And there is some significant funds that will be requested to support both the efforts that we have already made at the different transit points where we have incurred significant expenses as well as to continue to relocate people, to bring them to transit points into the United States, process them, et cetera.

So that is coming, and in fact, we need to get this done quickly in the CR, I think, so we have just a few weeks to do it, and I really welcome your support and everyone's support for that. Thank you.

Chairman MEEKS. I now recognize Representative Ann Wagner of Missouri who is the Vice Ranking Member of the full committee for 5 minutes.

Mrs. WAGNER. Secretary Blinken, I represent the people of Missouri's Second congressional District, and today I am also here on behalf of the family of Lance Corporal Jared Schmitz of our region. Let me tell you about this heroic and selfless young man.

Lance Corporal Schmitz from Wentzville, Missouri, was 20 years old when he lost his life at the terrorist attack at the airport in Kabul just days before Joe Biden's arbitrary deadline of August 31. He was passionate about his military service. He was totally committed to making a difference as a U.S. Marine and had gotten his parents' permission to enlist at just 17 years old.

I do not believe that this hearing will allow us to truly understand why he and his fellow military servicemen and women were killed on August 26 of 2021. His family, their families, and all Americans deserve answers, sir.

I am outraged to hear this administration claim its retreat from Afghanistan, its surrender was a success. How could anyone say that 13 precious young men and women lost their lives is a success? I am not asking for my own peace of mind. I am asking on behalf of the families that are burying their sons and their daughters this week, and they deserve accountability, and they deserve transparency, and they deserve answers.

The Biden Administration outsourced the security of our military stationed at the Kabul airport to the Taliban. It was a total betrayal. He put the lives of our men and women in the hands of a brutal terrorist organization after you claimed that the Taliban would never even be in charge of the country. Then he said they would never be in charge of Kabul. He said we would never leave Americans and allies behind. It was lie after lie.

President Biden wanted out at any cost, and that cost sir, was 13 American lives and \$85 billion in equipment, our Bagram Air Base, our United States embassy, our credibility with the allies and the Afghans who stood and fought with us, and our national security and safety of our homeland. Make no mistake, Mr. Secretary. The Biden Administration's egregiously inept withdrawal has left America and the world a much less safe place 20 years after September 11.

Secretary Blinken, will you honor these families and give the American people the answers they deserve in the wake of this ongoing disaster? Who will be held accountable?

In your opening statement, you said the Taliban. You said several times the Taliban made it clear that we had to withdraw. The Taliban made it clear, or they would escalate. Now, we hear in testimony President Putin was dictating our counterintelligence. And you tell us NATO made us do it. Trump made us do it.

The Taliban made it clear. Do you take any responsibility, Secretary Blinken, for this disastrous withdrawal, or do you still want to call it a success?

Secretary BLINKEN. Congresswoman, I am responsible for the decisions that I make. I am responsible for the actions of the State Department. I am responsible for looking at any lessons to be taken from those decisions and those actions. I am also responsible for being accountable for those decisions and actions.

Mrs. WAGNER. I asked you a simple question.

Secretary BLINKEN. If you will let me answer, please.

Mrs. WAGNER. Reclaiming my time.

Secretary BLINKEN. The way that I am accountable is doing exactly what I am doing today which is to you and through you to the American people hold myself accountable for those decisions and we made the right decision in ending America's longest war.

We made the right decision in not sending a third generation of Americans to fight and die in Afghanistan. We did the right thing by our citizens and working feverishly to get every one of them out. We did the right thing by 125,000 Afghans to bring them to safety.

And now we are working to do the right thing to hold the Taliban to the expectations of the international community to ensure people can continue to travel freely, to ensure that the rights of Afghans are upheld, to ensure that they make good on commitments they have made on counterterrorism. That is what we are doing.

Mrs. WAGNER. I hope you plan—

Mr. MALINOWSKI [presiding]. The gentlewoman's time has expired.

I now recognize Representative Castro of Texas for 5 minutes.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you, Chairman, and thank you, Secretary, for your testimony today. Thank you for your work and the work of the many very devoted employees at the State Department.

And I want to talk to you for a second about a way that Congress can be helpful in that work. Secretary Blinken, the 9/11 Commission's report held that only 56 percent of the Bush Administration's senior National Security positions were filled at the beginning of September 2001, impeding its ability to respond to crises.

Today, only 26 percent of the State Department's Senate confirmed positions are filled. This isn't because President Biden has not presented nominees. It is because a single Senator has thrown a tantrum and blocked these nominees from getting a vote and prevented national security positions from being filled. So I am going to ask you a few yes or no questions regarding very important staffing at the State Department.

Do we have a Senate confirmed Assistant Secretary of State for Conflict and Stabilization Operations who would inform U.S. policy in war zones like Afghanistan?

Secretary BLINKEN. We do not.

Mr. CASTRO. Do we have a Senate confirmed Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs who would cover Afghanistan?

Secretary BLINKEN. We do not.

Mr. CASTRO. Do we have a Senate confirmed Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs who would guide U.S. policy toward China, a country deeply involved in south Asia?

Secretary BLINKEN. We do not.

Mr. CASTRO. For African affairs.

Secretary BLINKEN. We do not.

Mr. CASTRO. European and Eurasian affairs.

Secretary BLINKEN. We do not.

Mr. CASTRO. Western hemisphere affairs.

Secretary BLINKEN. We do not.

Mr. CASTRO. International organization affairs, international narcotics and law enforcement affairs, and educational and cultural affairs.

Secretary BLINKEN. We do not.

Mr. CASTRO. For each of these positions, President Biden has nominated a candidate. The candidate has testified in front of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, been vetted and recommended by that committee for a vote, only to be delayed by a hold by Senator Ted Cruz of my home state of Texas. This has delayed many other positions as well and is denying you the team you need to advance our Nation's interests abroad and protect our own national security.

Despite this, the State Department rose to the occasion. Over 120,000 people were successfully evacuated from Afghanistan in a short period of time in one of the biggest humanitarian operations the United States has ever seen. But the work continues and having seen—having Senate confirmed people in these positions will be critical as we marshal our allies for what comes next in Afghanistan.

And I want to ask you, Mr. Secretary, as you have done this very hard work, and your people at the department are stretched thin because the Senate has not confirmed these nominees, what would you say to Senator Cruz who is singlehandedly blocking key national security appointments and jeopardizing our national security?

Secretary BLINKEN. Look. I would just simply ask the Senator and ask the Senate to move forward in confirming our nominees, virtually all of whom went through the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and were sent to the floor, and that is where they now lie.

And to your point, we need all these people. We need them to do the business of the United States. We need them to advance the interests of the United States, especially at this critical time, so I hope very much that we can work through this very, very quickly, and I would hope that the Senate can get our nominees confirmed.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you, Mr. Secretary. I am going to ask another question on Pakistan, and you may have to take it, some of it for the record, but I want to get to the question real quick.

Secretary BLINKEN. Sure.

Mr. CASTRO. I want to followup on Rep Keating's line of questioning about Pakistan. As you just noted, over the years, Pakistan has harbored Taliban leaders and provided other forms of support to the group. As my colleague noted, Pakistan's leader cheered the Taliban taking over Afghanistan. You began discussing what we will be looking at with Pakistan moving forward.

And on that note, Pakistan is currently a major non NATO ally of the United States, giving it a number of benefits, including privileged access to U.S. arms sales.

And so based on their past actions, our conversation today, all of it, I want to ask you. Given its long-time support for the Taliban, is it time for the United States to reassess its relationship with Pakistan and reassess its status as a major non NATO ally?

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you. For the reasons you have cited, as well as others, this is one of the things that we are going to be looking at in the days and weeks ahead, the role that Pakistan has played over the last 20 years, but also the role that we would want to see it play in the coming years and what it will take for it to do that.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you.

I yield back, chairman.

Mr. MEEKS [presiding]. The gentleman's time has expired. I now recognize Mr. Brian Mast of Florida for 5 minutes.

Mr. MAST. Mr. Secretary, as the transcript, the leaked transcript, as you referred to it says, did President Biden work with the coward, exiled president of Afghanistan to manipulate the intelligence about the Taliban?

Secretary BLINKEN. What the President said to president—then President Ghani in private is exactly what he said in public, that the issue was not whether Afghanistan had the capacity to withstand the Taliban. It is whether it had the will and the plan to do so. He urged him to have that plan—

Mr. MAST. Is the transcript wrong? It is incorrect?

Secretary BLINKEN [continuing]. And to bring people together in unity.

Mr. MAST. Are you saying it is false, it is a lie, it is incorrect? He did not work to tamp down the intelligence on the Taliban.

Secretary BLINKEN. Absolutely not.

Mr. MAST. So the transcript is incorrect. That is your testimony today.

Secretary BLINKEN. The intelligence that we had, we have already discussed at some length about what the assessments were of the Taliban and its capacity to take over the country.

Mr. MAST. I think that everybody looking for an explanation about what happened and how everybody got it so wrong, how your administration got it so wrong needs to look at that as the most likely explanation, asking the President to manipulate the intelligence of what was actually going on with the Taliban. And I am going to tell you. The 13 families that deserve most to really hear the honest answers on that, it is these families.

Marine Lance Corporal Kareem Nakoui. His family deserves to truly know that. Marine Corporal Daegan Page. His family truly deserves to know if that is why they are missing their son because intelligence was manipulated. Marine Lance Corporal Rylee McColum, 20, wife expecting their first child, sister said he was going to be the best dad ever. They deserve to know if that is what happened, and that is why everything went so wrong. Marine Sergeant Nicole Gee, 23 years old. You can see her there holding a young child. Her family deserves to know if that is why everything went so wrong because that intelligence was manipulated.

Marine Lance Corporal David Espinoza, just 20 years old, family deserves to know if that is why everything went so wrong is because the intelligence was manipulated. Marine Corporal

Humberto Sanchez, just 22 years old, mother said my kid was a hero. That is what was said. That is what his mother said. Deserves to know if that is why everything went so wrong because the intelligence got manipulated.

Marine Lance Corporal Jared Schmitz, just 20 years old. His family deserves to know if that is why everything went so wrong. Marine Corporal Hunter Lopez, just 22, son of two sheriffs, planned to follow in their footsteps. Their family deserves to know if that is why everything went so wrong is because you all worked to manipulate the intelligence of what was going on on the ground there.

Marine Corps Staff Sergeant Darin Hoover. His family said, I love you, son. Check in on us. We will try to make you proud. They deserve to know if that is what happened, if that is how everything went so wrong in Afghanistan. Marine Corps Sergeant Johanny Rosario-Pichardo. Her family deserves to know if that is why everything went so wrong because you all worked to manipulate the intelligence of what was going on with the Taliban.

Marine Lance Corporal Dylan Merola, just 20. The family said he always had a smile on his face, was the kindest person. They deserve to know if that is why everything went so wrong because you all manipulated intelligence. Army Staff Sergeant Ryan Knauss. The ultimate honor he could give was to give back to his country. He would not be sorry. He would not regret it. That is what his family said. They deserve to know if you manipulated intelligence, if President Biden manipulated intelligence, and that is what led to everything going so wrong.

Navy Corpsman Maxton Soviak, just 22. His family deserves to know if that is why everything went so wrong. We deserve hearings on what is going on with that leaked transcript. We deserve to know why there are others that remain in Afghanistan. Mark Frerichs, Navy veteran, disappeared in Coast Province January 30 of 2020. We deserve to know what is going on with his release.

These are things that have to be answered for. I do not believe whatsoever what you are saying about the administration not working to manipulate that intelligence.

To me, that is the most logical, the most logical explanation of how so many in the intelligence community got this so wrong about what was going to happen in Afghanistan. Why would it seem somehow logical for President Biden to leave the, quote, most advanced military weaponry, why some would not speak out against that. If they were getting the false intelligence because it was coming from the top down, to manipulate it, in my opinion, that is absolutely aid and comfort to the enemy.

I absolutely wonder if you were complicit in this as well. I find it hard to believe that President Biden would do that without you being aware of this, and these are things that we deserve to know, better answers, have better hearings on this. I do not believe a word that you are saying on this.

Secretary BLINKEN. Simply put—

Mr. MAST. I do not wish to hear from you. I am—

Secretary BLINKEN. Simply put, Congressman, what you have said is dead wrong.

Mr. MAST. Reclaiming my time. I do not wish to hear—from you. You tell lies every time you are in front of the cameras——

Secretary BLINKEN. There was no manipulation of intelligence, period. You have all been regularly apprised of the intelligence assessments all the way through over these many months—this is not true.

Mr. MAST. I am not looking to hear——

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman's time has expired.

Mr. MAST. And so has the Secretary's.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman's time has expired.

Mr. MAST. And so has the Secretary's.

Chairman MEEKS. The Secretary can answer the question.

Mr. MAST. I did not ask him a question.

Chairman MEEKS. You did ask a question.

Mr. MAST. I do not want to hear from the Secretary.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman's time has expired.

Mr. MAST. He lies every time he steps in front of the camera. That is what he does——

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman's time has expired. Mr. Secretary—the gentleman's time has expired.

Mr. MAST [continuing]. Least believable thing I have ever heard.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman's time has expired.

Mr. MAST. People need to use common sense in this area.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman's time has expired. We are here to hear from the secretary.

Mr. MAST. Not to Hear lies.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman's time has expired.

Mr. Secretary, if you wish, you may answer the question.

Mr. MAST. We do not need to hear lies.

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Just to respond briefly, what the Congressman said is simply wrong, period.

Second. I think virtually every member of this committee has had access to or been apprised of the intelligence assessments throughout the year. And you know what they were; you know what they are. And we will continue to provide those assessments and those briefings in the weeks and months ahead.

You have heard the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff say that he has not seen anything that indicated to him or to anyone else that the Afghan government and military would collapse in 11 days. The Director of National Intelligence has said that even in the days leading up to the Taliban takeover, intelligence agencies did not say collapse was imminent.

This unfolded more quickly than we anticipated including in the intelligence community, and I could go on. So what has been said and alleged is simply not true.

Mr. MAST. And that would be——

Chairman MEEKS. I now recognize the gentlewoman from Nevada.

Mr. MAST. President Biden specifically——

Chairman MEEKS. The Representative from Nevada is now recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. MAST. It makes sense. That is why it all adds up.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman's time has expired——

Mr. MAST. Mr. Chairman, he definitely proved the point.

Chairman MEEKS [continuing]. The gentleman will cease immediately.

Mr. MAST. He definitely proved the point. Thank you.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman will cease immediately.

Mr. MAST. Well, he proved the point. Thank you for letting him prove it. I appreciate that.

Chairman MEEKS. I now recognize the gentlelady from Nevada, Ms.—Representative Dina Titus, for 5 minutes.

Ms. TITUS. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and Mr. Secretary for being here. I would like to go back to a point made by Mr. Connolly on the Doha agreement.

I wonder if you would discuss for us what impact you think that agreement may have had on the morale of the Afghan defense forces and on the unity of the Afghan government.

Secretary BLINKEN. Well, that agreement committed the United States to leave Afghanistan by may 1 of this year, and so that certainly factored into the thinking and concerns of the Afghan government and of the Afghan security forces. The extent of that impact, hard to know for sure, but certainly that had to factor into their thinking as well as into their concerns.

Ms. TITUS. I believe so, and it let to that perhaps quicker than realized collapse that occurred that we did not anticipate.

I have got just a couple of other questions. We have been hearing about domestic and foreign journalists being abused by the Taliban and also some of the NGO or healthcare workers or just nongovernment humanitarian workers.

I wonder if there is anything going on, any talks between the U.S. and any of our international partners of how to defend them, to be assured that they are able to continue their work once we are gone.

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes. Very much so. Two things. One, we have been working very hard to make sure that basic humanitarian assistance can still get into Afghanistan, working with and through NGO's, working with and through the United Nations agencies, and also putting in place mechanisms to make sure that that assistance is used in the way we intend it to be used, that is, to the benefit of the Afghan people, the recipients, not the Taliban-led government.

Second. We have been working full time around the world to bring country after country on board with the expectations that we are setting of the conduct of a Taliban-led government to include upholding the basic rights of the Afghan people, to include women and minorities, and we have put in place a U.N. Security Council resolution setting those expectations.

More than 100 countries around the world led by our efforts to sign onto that, and to the extent that the Taliban is looking for any kind of legitimacy or any kind of support from the international community, that will not be forthcoming in any fashion if it is not making good on those basic expectations and on commitments it itself has made.

So going forward, its conduct will define its relationship with the rest of the world.

Ms. TITUS. Thank you. They seek to be legitimate, I know, but in the meantime, one of the challenges they are facing, of course,

is the economy, and that is not new. That existed under the Ghani government. But we see Pakistan and China rapidly positioning themselves to kind of take advantage of this destabilized economy.

I wonder how that is going to impact the U.S. and U.S.-international relations, especially in light of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund freezing distributions of funds to Afghanistan. Could you maybe talk about that?

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes. You are certainly right to point to that, and the fact of the matter is, though, that there is a Security Council resolution that should also bind Russia and China in their conduct going forward.

The international community over the last years was providing every year about 75 percent of the Afghan government's budget. Needless to say, that has been frozen.

Virtually all of Afghanistan's foreign reserves are here in the United States. They are frozen. International financial institutions are not going forward with their own assistance or the ability for Afghanistan to engage in international financial transactions.

And so all of that is on the ledger when it comes to what we can do to have the Taliban meet the expectations that have been set by the international community when it comes to how it conducts itself.

Ms. TITUS. Well, thank you, Mr. Secretary.

I yield back.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentlelady yields back.

I now recognize Representative Brian Fitzpatrick of Pennsylvania who is the ranking member of the Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, and the Environment and Cyber for 5 minutes.

Mr. FITZPATRICK. Mr. Secretary, just to get to the core of what your philosophy is on national and international security, sir, do you believe in the maxim and the precept of the stronger that we exert ourselves overseas, the safer we are here in America, i.e., peace through strength?

Secretary BLINKEN. I believe first the stronger we are at home, the stronger we are going to be overseas, and that requires unity. It requires coming together. It requires making investments in ourselves. And I hope we can see those forward together.

Second. To your point around the world, it requires absolutely having the strongest military and defense in the world, but it also requires using all the tools at our disposal to include our diplomacy, to include our economic tools, to include political tools, cultural tools. All of that is in the mix, and all of that defines our strength in the world.

Mr. FITZPATRICK. Mr. Secretary, do you believe that what the world witnessed over the past several weeks in Afghanistan was American strength?

Secretary BLINKEN. I believe that what the world witnessed was the President ending a war that had gone on for 20 years, making sure—

Mr. FITZPATRICK. But did they witness American strength in the past few weeks.

Secretary BLINKEN. They witnessed an extraordinary effort that no other country could or would have made under the most extreme conditions in bringing 125,000 people out to safety, in mak-

ing sure that we stood by our allies and partners and helping them to get out as well. And things we have heard from allies and partners around the world is no other country could or would have done what we did.

Mr. FITZPATRICK. Mr. Secretary, I recently left Ukraine just a few days ago. I returned, and my next step—

Chairman MEEKS. Just hold off 1 second. We are having technical problems. I do not see the Secretary that is on. We should be able to see him visually. And I want to make sure you get all of the time to ask the questions that you are putting forward and his response.

Secretary BLINKEN. Mr. Chairman, can you hear me?

Chairman MEEKS. We hear you, Mr. Secretary, but we do not see you.

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes. It looks like the image is frozen here, so let's see if we can—

Chairman MEEKS. Yes. Let's see if we can fix that. The technical staff is working on that. I want to make sure Mr. Fitzgerald gets the—all of the time. Mr. Fitzpatrick. Mr. Fitzpatrick.

Secretary BLINKEN. How is that, Mr. Chairman?

Chairman MEEKS. Okay. I do not have a visual of the Secretary. Now—Okay.

Mr. FITZPATRICK. I reclaim my time, sir.

Chairman MEEKS. Yes. Let's give Mr. Fitzpatrick—how much time when I stopped him?

VOICE. 4 minutes and 10 seconds.

Chairman MEEKS. No, when I stopped—continue the questions that you had asked. When I stopped, 4 minutes? Okay. We can resume.

Mr. FITZPATRICK. Mr. Secretary, I just returned from Ukraine 2 days ago. My next stop would be Taiwan. Sir, these people are scared to death. They are scared to death.

So can we get you on the record today, sir, to tell this committee, this Congress, and our Nation that we will unequivocally and unapologetically do whatever it takes, whatever it takes to have the backs of our friends in Ukraine and our friends in Taiwan?

Our friends in Ukraine in the event of Russia aggression, our friends in Taiwan in the event of Chinese aggression.

Secretary BLINKEN. Absolutely. We stand by our commitments to both countries.

Mr. FITZPATRICK. And we will do whatever it takes to defend them.

Secretary BLINKEN. We will stand by our commitments. We will stand by our commitments to Taiwan under the Taiwan Relations Act. We will stand by the commitments we have to Ukraine, including, by the way, commitments that the President and President Zelensky discussed and put out just about a week, maybe 2 weeks ago, during—

Mr. FITZPATRICK. Sir, I can tell you. I just left there. They are scared to death, and they question the commitment of this country. So I will take you at your word that we will do whatever it takes to defend Taiwan and Ukraine.

Next question. Not talking about the arms and munitions; I am talking about the heavy equipment, the tanks, the Humvees, the

Blackhawk helicopters, the aircraft. Sir, all of this is GPS tracked. We can identify this, where it is at. Why did we not destroy it or do not we destroy it now?

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you. So let me say this: I know my colleagues from the Defense Department, the Joint Chiefs, et cetera, will have an opportunity to speak to you, to speak to Congress in the weeks ahead. They are the experts on this.

Since 2004, roughly, something like \$80 billion in defense articles was provided to Afghanistan, so that goes back over the last roughly 16 years.

Mr. FITZPATRICK. Sir, I am only asking about the GPS tracking. We know the location of this equipment that we have now seen fall into the hands of terrorists. Are we going to destroy it or not?

Secretary BLINKEN. So much of this—much of this equipment is either inoperable or will soon be inoperable because it cannot be maintained. As I've seen it, based on what I have heard from my colleagues, there is nothing of strategic value that would threaten us or threaten Afghanistan's neighbors. Having said that, I am not the expert on this, and I would really defer to my colleagues at the Pentagon.

Mr. FITZPATRICK. Mr. Secretary, do you believe that America should ever in any way capitulate to terrorists?

Secretary BLINKEN. Absolutely not.

Mr. FITZPATRICK. Do you believe, sir, that allowing the Taliban to run perimeter HKIA with American troops on the inside of that perimeter relying on the Taliban to keep ISIS out and American citizens, passport holders on the outside the perimeter relying on the Taliban to get in, that that is capitulating to terrorists?

Secretary BLINKEN. The reality is that the government and Afghan national security forces collapsed. The reality is that the Taliban took over Kabul as well as much of the country. That was the reality we were dealing with. And the judgment of all of us, starting with our military commanders, including the people on the ground, was that our job was to work to get as many people out as possible, American citizens, Afghans at risk.

And because the Taliban controlled the city, that required some coordination with them to get people through and to the airport.

Mr. FITZPATRICK. Sir, to an 18-year-old Afghani girl who may be watching this hearing today, who was born after 9/11, who knows nothing of what it is like to live under Taliban rule, who had hopes and dreams, who is in school, who wanted to be a female journalist, to help women and young girls rise up in Afghanistan, who now feels betrayed by the actions of this administration, what is your message to her?

Secretary BLINKEN. I spoke to a number of young Afghan women including 18, 19, 21-year-olds just about a week ago in Doha. Actually in Ramstein, Germany—

Mr. FITZPATRICK. Do you believe their lives—

Secretary BLINKEN [continuing]. Where many were relocated. And we talked about their futures. We talked about the futures of Afghan women and girls who were living in Afghanistan.

Mr. FITZPATRICK. Under the Taliban.

Secretary BLINKEN. And we talked about the ongoing commitment that the United States has and countries around the world

have to do everything we can to support those women and girls going forward.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman's time has expired.

I now recognize representative Ted Lieu of California for 5 minutes.

Mr. LIEU. Thank you, Chairman Meeks, and thank you, Secretary Blinken, for your public service.

When I served on active duty in the United States Air Force, I participated in Operation Pacific Haven where we airlifted thousands and thousands of Kurds out of northern Iraq because Saddam Hussein was going to go in and kill them. We worked with the State Department, other U.S. agencies, and it was a very difficult mission.

So I want to commend you and the State Department and all the U.S. personnel who executed an evacuation of over 120,000 people under immense danger. That was a remarkable feat that all of you did, and I also want to honor the 13 Marines that gave their lives and service to our country.

What I would like to ask you about is the document that started all of this, the February 29 document, 2020. That document was negotiated by the Trump administration with the Taliban, correct?

Secretary BLINKEN. That is correct.

Mr. LIEU. The Trump administration signed that document, correct?

Secretary BLINKEN. That is correct.

Mr. LIEU. And under that document, it had a very specific date for withdrawal of all U.S. forces. Isn't that right?

Secretary BLINKEN. That is correct.

Mr. LIEU. I am going to read you what the document says because I think my Republican colleagues need to hear this and the American people.

On the very first page of the February 29, 2020, agreement that the Trump administration signed with the Taliban, it states, the United States is committed to withdraw from Afghanistan all military forces of the United States, its allies and coalition partners, including all non diplomatic civilian personnel, private security contractors, trainers and advisors, and supporting services personnel within 14 months following announcement of this agreement.

That is a very specific timeline, isn't it?

Secretary BLINKEN. It is.

Mr. LIEU. In fact, it gets even more specific. It says that in the first 135 days, the United States, its allies, and the coalition will withdraw all their forces from five military bases.

Did Donald Trump do that?

Secretary BLINKEN. He did.

Mr. LIEU. In fact, when you read this document, let's just be clear. This is a surrender document. Donald Trump surrendered to the Taliban, and he said we are leaving Afghanistan. We are not coming back, and we are not going to fight you any more.

Now, our Republican colleagues want to say that somehow it is conditions based, and did you notice that earlier, they did not want you to talk about the conditions because the main condition is that

the Taliban was going to stop attacking U.S. forces. Isn't that correct.

Secretary BLINKEN. That is correct.

Mr. LIEU. Do you know how many U.S. forces died in the first year of the Trump presidency in 2017, Secretary Blinken? Approximately 14. Do you know how many died in 2018, the second year of the Trump presidency, how many U.S. forces died in Afghanistan? Approximately 14. In 2019, the third year of the Trump presidency, do you know many U.S. forces died in Afghanistan? Approximately 21. And the Republican colleagues say hey, for a whole year and a half, U.S. forces did not die. That is because the Taliban stopped attacking U.S. forces because of this agreement. Isn't that right?

Secretary BLINKEN. That is correct.

Mr. LIEU. And if the Biden Administration has somehow said, hey, just kidding, we are not leaving Afghanistan. We are going to renege on this agreement, the Taliban would have started attacking U.S. forces again. Isn't that correct?

Secretary BLINKEN. That is correct.

Mr. LIEU. And, in fact, Donald Trump withdrew over 15,000 U.S. troops at the height in Afghanistan during his presidency down to 2,500 by the time President Biden inherited office. Isn't that right?

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes, that is about right. I think he had about 13,500 when the administration started down to 2,500 when the administration ended.

Mr. LIEU. So Donald Trump executed not only the surrender agreement but also 70 to 80 percent of the surrender of the withdrawal, and he left you all with merely 2,500 U.S. troops. And the Taliban was still meeting their condition of not attacking U.S. forces. Isn't that right?

Secretary BLINKEN. That is correct.

Mr. LIEU. They literally put in a box that you had to withdraw all U.S. forces, or else they essentially would start attacking our forces again. Isn't that right?

Secretary BLINKEN. Attacking our forces and engaging in an offensive against Afghanistan cities which they had refrained from.

Mr. LIEU. And the reason we know intelligence wasn't manipulated is because the Trump administration, in fact, would not have agreed to a specific date certain of the withdrawal of all U.S. forces if they knew the Afghan government would collapse in 11 days after that. Isn't that right?

Secretary BLINKEN. That is certainly—it stands to reason.

Mr. LIEU. In fact, it was a bipartisan, you can call it not understanding what is happening in Afghanistan, but it was happening over 20 years, isn't that right? That we were gets rosy assessments on a bipartisan basis that turned out not to be all that accurate.

Secretary BLINKEN. I believe that is correct, and certainly I saw that from my previous service in government.

Mr. LIEU. Right. So let's just be clear here. It was Donald Trump who signed and negotiated the surrender agreement that, by the way, released 5,000 Taliban prisoners. Isn't that right?

Secretary BLINKEN. It did release 5,000 prisoners, yes.

Mr. LIEU. But Donald Trump, the administration signed this agreement, negotiated it, executed it, and then President Biden completed the withdrawal. That is what happened.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman's time has expired. The gentleman's time has expired.

I now recognize Representative Tim Burchett of Tennessee for 5 minutes.

Mr. BURCHETT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. This is a picture of Staff Sergeant Ryan Knauss in my local paper, the Knoxville Focus. I want to read you something that his mama said this weekend at the funeral. He was a God loving man. He died helping people. He died doing what he loved to do.

My constituent, Staff Sergeant Ryan Knauss, he was one of the 13 souls lost while allowing over 100,000 people to escape the Taliban. Sadly, the death of Sergeant Knauss and his fellow heroes I feel like was entirely preventable. If your department and this administration had a plan and had not been caught flat footed in Afghanistan, there would have been no need to surge 6,000 additional soldiers into the country to secure that airport.

You have repeatedly stated that every contingency was planned for, but clearly, the rapid collapse of the Afghan government was something that you had not planned for. Their blood is on your hands and this administration, sir. I call on you to resign.

And I yield the remainder of my time to Mark Green.

Secretary BLINKEN. Congressman—may I respond, Mr. Chairman. May I respond, Mr. Chairman?

Mr. GREEN. Mr. Chairman, he yielded to me. Can I go ahead?

Mr. BURCHETT. I yielded to Mark Green, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. GREEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman did yield his time back.

I now recognize Representative Susan Wild of Pennsylvania.

Mr. BURCHETT. No. I yielded—

Mr. GREEN. He yielded to me, Mr. Chairman. He yielded his time to me.

Chairman MEEKS. Yes. You may proceed.

Mr. GREEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Secretary, yes or no, and I do mean yes or no. Is the Taliban a terrorist organization?

Secretary BLINKEN. The Taliban has been designated as a terrorist organization. That is correct.

Mr. GREEN. And are you aware that the news reports last week show that the Taliban has already set up a school to teach suicide bombers? Are you aware of that reporting?

Secretary BLINKEN. I have not seen that report, but I would be welcoming—if you would like it share it, please do.

Mr. GREEN. I will absolutely do that. Thank you very much. You guys keep talking about, insinuating that you are going to make an agreement with the Taliban. If they are a terrorist organization, if they have people in their leadership that are on the FBI's terrorist watch list, if they have leadership that is known to be terrorists, and you here have said they are a terrorist organization, what makes it right to even negotiate with these people?

Secretary BLINKEN. Anything we do, Congressman, will be for purposes of advancing the interests of the national security of the

United States. And those interests, among other things, involve ensuring that people can continue to travel freely out of Afghanistan, including any remaining American citizens who want to leave—

Mr. GREEN. And on that note, if I could—

Secretary BLINKEN [continuing]. Counterterrorism commitment, engage the government, we will do so in a way that is fully consistent with our laws.

Mr. GREEN. Mr. Secretary, I am reclaiming my time. On that note, you have said, and we have said, and your Department has said, and the DoD has said to people who are sitting over there, now that we are all gone, they should destroy their documents because the Taliban are searching them and killing them with those documents.

Now, you say you have got a plan to get those people out of there, but they cannot get on an airplane without documents. You have nobody over there to print them documents. How are they going to get out of there? What is your plan if they have no documents? Your people told them to destroy the documents.

DoD said destroy the documents. We have told them—because we are talking to hundreds of them on the phone, U.S. citizens, SIVs. What is the plan?

Secretary BLINKEN. We did not tell people to destroy documents, although I understood—I understand that some people did for understandable reasons in many cases.

Mr. GREEN. We can

[inaudible] Bodies. I mean, I can show you the videos that friends of mine, former interpreters that I know are videoing and sending to me, I can send those to you. They are destroying those documents because they do not want to wind up on a dirt road bleeding to death.

So what is the plan to get those individuals who have no documents now out of that country.

Secretary BLINKEN. The plan is this: First, the Taliban-led government has made commitments to recognize documents to exit the country to include U.S. passports, to include green cards, to include visas. For those who have those documents, we are working with other partners, including Qatar and Turkey—

Mr. GREEN. I mean for the people who do not have documents, Mr. Secretary, that we have—you just said it was understandable that they would destroy those documents. So what are we doing for the people who do not have documents?

Secretary BLINKEN. And we are—we are putting in place exactly that, a mechanism to make sure that we can get people the documents they need in order to leave the country. And I am happy to take that up in a different—in a different setting to go into more detail, but the bottom line is that is exactly what we are doing.

Mr. GREEN. You are insinuating they might be classified. Okay. Fine. We can do that.

Considering that the agreement between the Taliban and Afghan governments that the President keeps talking about, everybody keeps talking about this, you know, agreement between the Taliban and the Afghan governments, and they are just following it, we are following the agreement. It looks like my time is about

to expire. I will see you in a few minutes when it is my turn. Thank you, Mr. Secretary.

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you.

Chairman MEEKS. I now recognize Representative Susan Wild of Pennsylvania for 5 minutes.

Ms. WILD. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Secretary Blinken, we just received word in my office this past weekend that one of my constituents here in Pennsylvania 7, an American citizen, has been successfully evacuated from Afghanistan and is now safely in Qatar. She is a wife and mother, and I want to thank you and the State Department officials who worked so hard with my team to ensure the successful outcome, and I hope for—

Secretary BLINKEN. Glad to hear that.

Ms. WILD. I hope for many more.

Mr. Secretary, like all of my colleagues here, I have been working with my team to assist vulnerable Afghan allies who work shoulder to shoulder with servicemembers from our communities. And I have to say that over the course of the evacuation, it was beyond heartbreaking to see that in the vast majority of cases, the Afghan allies we were trying to assist were simply not getting out or receiving any useful information even with Members of Congress getting involved.

Although I will also say parenthetically there may have been situations where Members of Congress were not particularly helpful or were getting in the way, and I apologize for that on behalf of this body. But at the same time, I want to recognize the extraordinary efforts behind what was the largest airlift in American history. It is a testament to our servicemembers, first and foremost, as well as the administration.

What I want to ask you is what concrete steps is the State Department taking now to accelerate processing time for SIV, P-2, and other applications for vulnerable Afghan allies? And what steps is the department taking to improve communication with offices here in Congress when it comes to time-sensitive cases involving our Afghan allies?

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you. First, let me just again thank you personally but also thank so many members of this committee who have been working with us on SIVs and other Afghans at risk, getting information to us, working to followup. We are deeply, deeply grateful for that, and we want to make sure that we continue to do that and work on these cases.

As, you know, we have discussed before, in the first instance, of course, we inherited a program that was in a deep freeze. We got it back up into second and third gear and well before the collapse of the government. We went from issuing about a hundred visas a week to a thousand. And we were working with Congress to try to streamline and make more efficient this program.

As you know, there are 14 steps involving half a dozen agencies that are required by law or by the different implementing rules that came into place as a result of that law.

However, having said all of that, going forward, a few things. We have about 20,000 people in the SIV pipeline. That has basically been the number for a long time. It has accumulated over many

years, and it has stayed more or less in that area because more people, even today, continue to start the application process.

But as you know, the most critical moment in the application process is what is called chief of mission approval. That is the point at which people are found to be, in fact, eligible for the program, they meet the requirements. And of all the people applying to the program, 40 percent do not make it through chief of mission approval because it turns out that they do not qualify. Now, some of that is because they do not have the necessary documentation required, again, by law, to demonstrate their eligibility.

Much of that is because of the many people applying for SIVs, the majority, well over the majority, worked for DoD contractors primarily. These are not the interpreters and translators. These are folks who worked for contractors or subcontractors. Getting a letter demonstrating that they provided faithful service can be very, very difficult especially if the contractor or the sub went out of business.

We need to find a way to deal with that and also to work with all the other agencies to make sure they have the appropriate records.

But let me just quickly fast-forward to your question. We have about 4,000 or so people who are at the chief of mission approval stage right now, and we are going to work to get them through that in the coming weeks. And then we have another roughly 4,000 who already have chief of mission approval. There is still a number of other steps mandated by law that go into this, including interviews, fingerprinting, et cetera. We are looking to see with you how we can expedite all of that, while keeping security foremost in our minds, move people to third countries to finish whatever processing is necessary and then bring them to the United States.

But we need to come to you, I think, to work on ways that we can make this program even more efficient and more streamlined beyond even what we were able to do over the last 9 months.

Ms. WILD. Thank you so much.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentlelady's time has expired.

I now recognize Representative Mark Green of Tennessee, who is the ranking member of the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security, Migration, and International Economic Policy, for 5 minutes.

Mr. GREEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And, Secretary Blinken, your credibility, I think, would be a lot greater if you would at least own something. Something. X, Y, Z. Something. Yet you follow the lead of your President and you blame everybody else. It is not your problem, it is Trump, it is somebody else.

You would have credibility—let me give you an example. HKIA, you had no plan, or a horrible plan, to get people into the gate, just get them through the gate. My colleagues and I had hundreds of people on the phone that were U.S. citizens sitting at the gates and they couldn't get in. That is a failure on you, either to plan or—you had a horrible plan, but those U.S. citizens couldn't get through the gate. Just own it. Get some credibility. Own it.

You keep telling us that the DoD and President Biden had no idea that the Taliban would be so successful, the collapse of the Afghan forces. And then you want us to believe you when you say the Russians and the Chinese aren't empowered by this. That kills your credibility by saying, hey, we failed to predict that this would happen. Nobody had an idea that they would collapse like that. And then you say, oh, but I assure you, the Russians and the Chinese aren't empowered by this, and we are supposed to believe you.

I have already talked about the documents.

The United Kingdom. I am sure you are familiar—it went viral—a member of Parliament in the United Kingdom on the floor of the House of Commons, Tom Tugendhat, basically called the withdrawal—President Biden's withdrawal shameful, and said that the U.K., our greatest ally, should reconsider how dependent they are on the United States.

Yet you sit here today and tell us that NATO was completely fine with everything, you all coordinated everything with NATO, and it was all good. That is what you have communicated to me at least—or here today. And yet a member of Parliament is saying it was a shameful withdrawal on the floor of the House of Commons, our greatest ally.

The headline of *The Economist* a few weeks ago, I do not know if you saw it, but it said, "Biden's debacle." I am not so sure NATO will agree with you that they were all in on this together.

Now, I will say this, it is against the law, the United States law, to give material aid to a terrorist organization. You said earlier when I asked you before if the Taliban was a terrorist organization, you said yes. \$85 billion, I would consider that material aid to a terrorist organization, Mr. Secretary.

And yet, here we are, oh, well, but wait, you admitted we had no idea that the Taliban would be so successful. We had no idea that, you know, the Afghans would fail like this. Well, that is your fault. That is your administration's fault. I guess maybe it is the intel community's fault. That is what you are really saying. Hey, CIA, and all you other guys, you failed to give us good intel here, we had no idea this was going to happen.

But we are supposed to trust you when you tell us other things about the Chinese and the Russians.

Considering rumors of ISIS' support for the—I am sorry—ISI's support for the Taliban, have you guys reached out to India as a possible staging area for the Over the Horizon Forces? And I am talking northwest India as a potential. Because we all know Qatar—or Doha, the other places, are just a little bit too far, Kuwait, all that.

What about northwest India, and have you reached out? Have you thought about that?

Secretary BLINKEN. Let me just say generally, Congressman, we are deeply engaged with India across the board. With regard, though, to any specifics about Over the Horizon capabilities and the plans that we have put in place and will continue to put in place, I would rather take that up in a different setting, and I think the chairman referenced that at the start of the hearing.

Mr. GREEN. I think that is very fair, and I appreciate you saying that. And I am glad to at least know that there is an opportunity

to talk about that, because I think that, from my standpoint, is an opportunity we should seize.

I would like to go back to the documents and give you a few seconds to talk about that, because I do want to hear your plan for those individuals, if you can today. And if you cannot, then fine, we will talk about it behind closed doors. But I am very concerned about people who destroyed documents. Can you elaborate at all on that?

Secretary BLINKEN. And I really appreciate that. And I just want to assure you, but I would rather have this conversation in a different setting, that we are putting in place plans to make sure that people can get documents that they need and documents that the Taliban says it will recognize to allow them to leave the country. I would be happy to pursue that conversation.

Mr. GREEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman's time has expired.

I now recognize Representative Dean Phillips of Minnesota for 5 minutes.

Mr. PHILLIPS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Secretary, I am one of 20,000 Gold Star Children from the Vietnam war and now joined by 5,000 more Gold Star Children from both Iraq and Afghanistan. And I just want to acknowledge all of my brothers and sisters who have had to watch the events of the last month that so sadly look so strangely familiar as it relates to the fall of Saigon, of course, 50 years ago.

And I also want to honor the service of many of my colleagues, many of whom serve on this very committee, including my friend Brian Mast, who just about gave his entire life to our country, and I honor all of you. I want to start with that.

And let me assure you, it has been difficult, heartbreaking, and disappointing to watch the last number of years, and, of course, the last month, but I also have to say I am terribly disappointed in my colleagues, some of them, on this committee today.

I think it is embarrassing, I think it is counterproductive, and I think it is shameful, frankly, because I do not hold Republicans accountable for my father's death, even though he died in a Republican administration. I hold John Kennedy, I hold Lyndon Johnson, I hold Richard Nixon, I hold Congress accountable as well and many other individuals. And I just ask that the spirit of this committee return to our core job.

With that, Mr. Secretary, you have spoken about lessons learned for both our country, not terribly specifically. I would welcome you to cover that again. What specifically did we learn? What should we have learned collectively and also personally? What have you learned? What might you do differently as you look back over the last number of months in preparation for this exit?

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you very much. Thank you for what you said, and thank you for the question.

I think we all have to take stock of the last 9 months—and the last 20 years—because to reach the point that we have reached today, it is an accumulation of decisions, strategies, plans over 20 years, as well as over the last 9 months, and all of that has to factor in.

Look, my biggest takeaway is that when it comes to using force, we are very good and very effective at doing that to deal with the terrorist threat to this country, as we have demonstrated time and again and as we demonstrated after 9/11. And we need to make sure that we always have the capacity to be the most effective country on Earth when it comes to that.

At the same time, I think one of the hard lessons, at least to me, of Afghanistan is, even the best intentions—and these were really good intentions—to try to remake a society, remake a country in an image that looks a little bit more like what we believe is right, may be beyond our capacity. And inserting ourselves into the middle of a civil war and staying there, with no prospect of actually creating a decisive effect, also is something we need to think really, really hard about.

I think we got to a point in Afghanistan not when it comes to counterterrorism, where, thanks to the extraordinary courage, bravery, and success of generations now of men and women in uniform, as well as the diplomats and intelligence officials who worked with them, they did a remarkable job in dealing with the people who attacked us on 9/11.

But when it came to this much more expansive effort to defeat the Taliban and to remake Afghanistan, that was a different story. And I think we got to the point where, arguably, we knew how not to lose, but we were not capable, in that frame, of winning. And the reason was—

Secretary BLINKEN. Mr. Secretary, I have got about a minute left. I just want to reclaim a little bit of time. I am sorry.

Secretary BLINKEN. Please, go ahead. Thank you.

Mr. PHILLIPS. I also want to salute our staffers, staffers in Democratic offices, Republican offices, many of them very early career staffers who have done yeomen's work to help people evacuate from Afghanistan. I want to celebrate them.

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes.

Mr. PHILLIPS. But what I have heard from many, Mr. Secretary, is that the coordination of this effort was very challenging.

Very quickly, what grade would you give the United States of America for its whole-of-government planning and execution of the withdrawal plan, what grade?

Secretary BLINKEN. I cannot give it a grade, but here is what I can say. I think that you are right. We, you know, in this extraordinary situation, had to do a tremendous amount of work to get to a better place, especially when it comes to coordination. And there is a lot of work yet to be done, learning from what we did and what we did not do, going forward to put us in a better place.

And so I think—I think, from my perspective at least, it definitely improved, but it did not start from a great place, largely because of the exigency of the situation that we were in.

But here is the question that I think—I hope we can work on together. Knowing that, how do we put ourselves in a better position going forward so that we can get that kind of coordination, cooperation, stood up much more quickly.

Mr. PHILLIPS. I appreciate your candor.

And I yield back. Thank you, sir.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman's time has expired.

I now recognize Representative Andy Barr of Kentucky for 5 minutes.

Mr. BARR. Mr. Secretary, let me return to the dissent cable. You said you read the July 13 dissent cable prepared by the career diplomats at the Kabul Embassy. You said you were very proud of that. Is that, again, correct?

Secretary BLINKEN. That is correct, yes.

Mr. BARR. And that warning came over 1 month before the fall of Kabul, right?

Secretary BLINKEN. The cable was, I believe—

Mr. BARR. July 13.

Secretary BLINKEN [continuing]. On July 13, yes.

Mr. BARR. July 13. So over a month. And the cable warned that the Afghan Government was at risk of collapse. And your response was, quote, the thoughts of the drafters reflected much of the thinking of the Department, unquote.

And you still maintain that to be the case?

Secretary BLINKEN. The cable did not predict that the government or security forces would collapse before we departed—

Mr. BARR. But the cable did say the Afghan Government was at risk of collapse, and you said that the thoughts of the drafters reflected much of the thinking of the Department.

By the way, at the exact same time, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research in the Department was briefing this committee that the Taliban was moving quickly toward a takeover of the country. You presumably had access to that same intelligence from I&R, which corroborated the dissent cable and was alarming to many members of this committee.

Do you dispute that?

Secretary BLINKEN. As we have had an opportunity to discuss throughout these many months, there were ongoing intelligence assessments about the durability and resilience of the Afghan Government—

Mr. BARR. Well, look, I mean, let's just be honest, Mr. Secretary. These were alarming cables. They were warnings. They were warnings to you. You say they reflected the majority position of the Department.

Did you share this intelligence with the President of the United States?

Secretary BLINKEN. Two things on the cable, Congressman. First, the main focus of the cable was on taking steps to expedite the efforts we were making to bring out the SIV applicants and others from Afghanistan—

Mr. BARR. [Inaudible] The collapse was imminent. Did you share that intelligence with the President?

Secretary BLINKEN. It did not say that the collapse was imminent. It expressed—

Mr. BARR. Well, why did you accelerate the process?

Secretary BLINKEN. Because it expressed real concerns about two things.

Mr. BARR. Because we got it too. We saw it too. We knew this was totally avoidable.

Did you share that intelligence with the President? Did you advise him for a shift in strategy as a result of this intelligence?

Secretary BLINKEN. Again, this is not—first of all, it is not intelligence. It is information analysis assessment that is very important—

Mr. BARR. Okay.

Secretary BLINKEN [continuing]. Coming from our embassy.

Mr. BARR. I know it is intelligence. And the cable was analysis. Did you share it with the President?

Secretary BLINKEN. The Dissent Channel, which is an important—very important tradition in the State Department, under its regulations, is shared only with the senior leadership of—

Mr. BARR. You are not answering the question. You are not answering the question. But I want to know if you had a shift in policy; and if not, why not.

I want to know if the President contemplated shifting any part of this strategy when it was very apparent that this strategy of unconditional retreat was failing. And it was failing over a month before the fall of Kabul.

Let me move on to Bagram, real quick. In April, I warned you not to abandon Bagram. Little did I know the Biden Administration would abandon it even before evacuating all Americans, our allies, and advance military equipment, leaving the world's most dangerous airport, HKIA, as the exclusive point of extraction.

Who made the decision to abandon Bagram at that time?

Secretary BLINKEN. Congressman, as you know, the military was engaged in a drawdown from Afghanistan, and part of that drawdown was moving out of different positions, to include Bagram Airbase, which was given to the Afghan security and defense forces.

Mr. BARR. You are telling me that the military—the military—advised evacuating Bagram before you extracted all Americans and the equipment, or was that a State Department decision?

Secretary BLINKEN. We certainly did not make a decision about Bagram. The military is charged with doing the planning and the work in any drawdown, and they make decisions—they make decisions based on force protection and the security of our men and women in uniform

[inaudible].

Mr. BARR. Okay. You say that there is nothing the Chinese would have wanted us more than to stay in Afghanistan. Is it your testimony that the Chinese wanted the United States to remain in the only airbase in the country with a physical border with China? You think that that is the Chinese position, that they wanted us to keep Bagram?

Secretary BLINKEN. I think the Chinese would have liked to have seen us remain in a re-upped war in which—

Mr. BARR. Oh, so—

Secretary BLINKEN [continuing]. Under attack in which we were putting more and more forces into Afghanistan and which were—

Mr. BARR. You think the Chinese are celebrating us—you think the Chinese are celebrating us abandoning an airbase, the largest airbase on their border? Come on.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman's time has expired.

Mr. BARR. Just be honest. Just be honest.

I yield back.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman's time has expired.

I now recognize Representative Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, who is the vice chair of the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Global Human Rights, for 5 minutes.

Ms. OMAR. Thank you, Chairman.

Mr. Secretary, I know it is harder to end a war than start one in this town, so I thank you and the President for ending our longest war.

Over the weekend, both The New York Times and Washington Post reported the August 29 drone strike that supposedly prevented a car bomb attack at the airport in Kabul, instead killed Zemari Ahmadi, an aid worker, and his family.

The strike happened when there was a lot of eyes on Kabul, but it is not unusual for U.S. drone strikes to kill civilians. It is not unusual for the U.S. Government to claim it killed terrorists instead.

And this is coming on the heels of reporting that DoD failed to spend a single dollar of the redress payments that Congress has provided for civilian casualties.

As Congress considers the continuing utility of the 2001 AUMF, how can you possibly ensure us that our drone strikes and Over the Horizon capabilities will actually reach their targets?

Secretary BLINKEN. First, when it comes to moving forward, I hope that we can, again, take this up in a different setting and different session.

I know with regard to the drone strike that you are referring to, that is being looked at very, very, very carefully by others in the administration so that we understand exactly what happened or what did not happen.

And no country on Earth, no government takes more effort, takes more precautions to try to ensure that anyone other than the intended terrorist target is struck using a drone or by any other means. But certainly we know that in the past, civilians have been hurt and have been killed in these strikes. And we have to make sure that we have in place every possible measure to allow us to continue to use the tool to defend and protect ourselves while avoiding anyone on the civilian side from being hit.

And we also need to look, as you have rightly said, at the authorizations going back to 2001 and 2002. We strongly support that. Those need to be updated to reflect present realities, not reality as it was in 2001 or 2002.

Ms. OMAR. And, Mr. Secretary, from the State Department's point of view, what is the impact of the unaccountable—uncountable and accountable civilian harm on our counterterrorism goals?

Secretary BLINKEN. It certainly runs counter to those goals, whenever there are civilian casualties, whenever there are unintended injuries or deaths. It does not advance what we are trying to do. And so that is besides the moral obligation we have to do everything we possibly can to make sure that civilians are not harmed or killed.

It is also true that in terms of the mission itself, we want to make sure that that does not happen, because if people lose faith and confidence in it, if they—and particularly in the countries in question, if people see it as a tool to do harm to innocent civilians

as opposed to terrorists who are a threat to everyone, that will undermine support for what we are doing.

Ms. OMAR. And in your role and previous roles in other administrations, how much of an analysis is being done to look at whether our counterterrorism efforts are actually being counter to the work that we are trying to do in ending terrorism around the world?

Secretary BLINKEN. I would call it very, very significant. Certainly in the Obama Administration we spent a tremendous amount of time looking at, reviewing, and modifying all of these procedures, all of the safeguards, all of the criteria that went along with using these tools. And we have been in the midst of conducting just such a review in this administration, to make sure, to the best of our ability, that when we take a strike, we get the intended person and no one else.

Ms. OMAR. Thank you, and I yield back.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentlelady's time has expired.

I now recognize Representative Greg Steube of Florida, who is the ranking member of the Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and Global Counterterrorism, for 5 minutes.

Mr. STEUBE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Blinken, even in your opening statement, you cannot be honest with the American people. You stated, and I quote, that by January 2021, the Taliban was in its strongest military position since 9/11.

I am pretty sure their strongest military position has been during your entire administration, not prior to it.

In fact, their strongest military position since the towers were hit in 2001 was this past September 11th, the 20th anniversary, all of which happened on your watch, not your predecessor's.

In fact, on April 27 of this year, days before the original deadline negotiated by the Trump administration, that you and the Biden Administration violated, the Taliban controlled 77 districts in Afghanistan, the Afghan Government controlled 129, and there were 194 contested districts.

By August 15, while you and Biden were on vacation, the Taliban had taken and controlled 304 districts, and the government only controlled 37.

From May to August of this year, while you, the Department of Defense, and the President did absolutely nothing, the Taliban gained 227 districts in Afghanistan in just 4 months.

You cannot claim ignorance to what was going on there, and you cannot blame the Trump administration for your failure.

I served in Iraq and I am well aware of our capabilities. Your administration and the White House was seeing in real time what was happening in Afghanistan, and you did absolutely nothing to stop it.

In fact, you did what you could to conceal the facts. Biden, himself, tried to get President Ghani to lie about what was happening on the ground. Biden told Ghani that, quote, the perception around the world and in parts of Afghanistan I believe, is that things aren't going well in terms of the fight against the Taliban, and there is a need, whether it is true or not, there is a need to project a different picture.

That was on July 23, before all of you went on vacation. So you knew exactly what was going on there and did nothing to start moving our people out or our SIVs out until it was too late and the Taliban controlled the entire nation.

You earlier stated under questioning today, and I quote, we inherited a deadline, not a plan. Yet you did not even follow the deadline that you cascade as something you couldn't do anything about. This whole blaming the Trump administration for everything that has happened in Afghanistan is a disgrace.

You are the Secretary of State, and Biden has been the Commander in Chief since January. Not Trump. You and the administration saw what was happening in Afghanistan, and you had the ability to deal with it. Not Trump. You were responsible for the assets on the ground, and you were responsible for getting our people out.

So I know how you, Biden, and other Democrats want nothing more than to blame Trump for all of the problems that you have created, but the responsibility for all of this lies squarely on your shoulders and in the lap of President Biden.

Then after Kabul fell, your leadership completely and utterly failed, not only our citizens on the ground, but our allies that we have worked with for 20 years.

First your direction was shelter in place. Then it was, make your way to the airport, but we cannot guarantee your safety on the way there. Then it was, shelter in place. Then it was, come to the gates. Then it was, leave the gates.

While all of this was happening, you are handing our list of citizens and Afghan SIVs to the Taliban, a globally recognized terrorist organization because you were unwilling to go in and get the citizens and SIVs stuck behind enemy lines out.

And as we sit here today, we still have citizens and SIVs stuck in Taliban hands, despite Biden promising to stay and get them all out. And thanks to you, our enemy knows exactly who they are and how to find them.

And you describe this, and I quote, as an extraordinary effort. I would certainly not describe the deaths of 13 U.S. servicemembers, the deaths of hundreds of Afghans, and the fact that we still have citizens and SIVs stuck behind enemy lines while the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and ISIS-K go door to door hunting them down, as an extraordinary effort.

And if all that wasn't bad enough, you spit in the eye of every single servicemember who served on the war on terror for the last 20 years, by even considering recognizing the Taliban who we have fought against for 20 years, as a legitimate government, and not only recognize them but do absolutely nothing while the Taliban takes control of \$90 billion worth of military aircraft, Humvees, weapons, night vision goggles, uniforms, ammunitions, and Blackhawks.

And after we have rolled over and handed all that to them, you announce today, with great fanfare and great pride, that you are providing \$64 million in humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan.

You cannot even get our people out of the country, but we and the American people are to believe that \$64 million of our tax dol-

lars that is to be sent to Afghanistan will not fall in the hands of the Taliban or other terrorist organizations who you were relying upon to get our people out of the airport.

Your legacy will be the Taliban flying our Blackhawk over Kabul while someone, maybe a U.S. citizen, hangs from a rope by his neck. And while this is happening, you are saying that you are working diplomatically with the Taliban to get our people out.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman's time has expired.

I now recognize Representative Colin Allred of Texas for 5 minutes.

Mr. ALLRED. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I respect my colleague who was just speaking's service. I think much of what he said was not accurate.

Mr. Secretary, would you like to respond to—I will give you any time you would like to have to respond to him.

Secretary BLINKEN. It would take too long. And I very much respect his service as well. I respect the service of everyone on this committee, Republican, Democrat, whether they agree with what we did or vehemently disagree with it.

Regardless of any of that, I deeply respect the service. I deeply respect the loss of those extraordinary men and women, the 13 Marines and others who lost their lives so that others could live their's in the terrorist attack by ISIS-K. And I also deeply respect the loss of the 2,641 servicemembers who gave their lives in Afghanistan over the last 20 years.

And I would simply say—and I apologize for taking your time—but I would simply say that I believe the most important legacy we can leave is to have ended America's longest war, to make sure that a third generation of Americans does not have to go fight and die in Afghanistan, as well as having brought 125,000 people to safety under the most extraordinary circumstances, made good by our commitments to work to get every American out and to continue to do that with the few that remain in Afghanistan, as well as to deal with the ongoing challenges that it poses. So I believe that will be the legacy that we are talking about.

I apologize, Congressman, for taking your time. Thank you.

Mr. ALLRED. No, thank you, Mr. Secretary. I mean, it is extremely difficult to end a 20-year conflict, and I think we are seeing that and, of course, you know, tempers are running high, and I know it has been a long day.

But I want to thank you and the State Department personnel for helping my office evacuate the Afzali family from Kabul to be reunited with his brother who actually lives here in my district.

Mr. Afzali worked with our embassy, and not only did he evacuate his wife and two kids, he got four unaccompanied children, whose mother was already in New York, out of Kabul as well. And so I want to thank your team for that success story.

And as a member of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, as well as this committee, I want to speak to the many veterans of the Afghan war and their families who live in my district. And just to quote, President George W. Bush, who is actually my constituent, this weekend said that the causes you pursued at the call of duty is the noblest America has to offer. You have shielded your fellow citizens from danger. You have defended the beliefs of your country

and advanced the rights of the downtrodden. You have been the face of hope and mercy in dark places. You have been a force for good in the world. End quote.

And I want to thank all those who have served as well.

You know, Mr. Secretary, in the time I have remaining, I want to say, 2-1/2 years ago, your predecessor, Secretary Pompeo, appeared before this committee. And I know it is not very satisfying to look to the past and sometimes maybe even think that you are pointing fingers, but at that time, I questioned him about the conditions of our withdrawal from Afghanistan that he was negotiating in real time with the Taliban.

I asked Secretary Pompeo why he had abandoned previous U.S. policy regarding negotiations with the Taliban, such as insisting that they agree to respect the Afghan Constitution, including its protections for women and minorities, and of course as my other colleagues have said, most egregiously, excluding the Afghan Government from those negotiations almost entirely, undermining that very government in its own country.

At the time, Secretary Pompeo was fairly dismissive, I think it is fair to say, of my concerns.

But, Mr. Secretary, I want to draw your attention to the screen here showing an excerpt of the Trump administration's deal. It notes that the deal did not require the Taliban to disavow al-Qaeda and did not include a commitment to not attack Afghan security forces, which has also been discussed today.

And I want to ask you, Mr. Secretary, based on your experience, what aspects of the deal that you inherited would you have handled differently based on past U.S. policy and the best diplomatic tools that at our disposal?

Secretary BLINKEN. Well, look, hindsight is always 20/20, whether it is for us, whether it is for the previous administration, or the ones before.

But I would say that to the extent there was conditionality in that agreement imposed on the Taliban, ideally, it should have gone further. Yes, very good to make sure that our forces were not being attacked during the pendency of the agreement until we withdrew all of our forces, but there was very little in that agreement that really compelled the Taliban to negotiate and get to an agreement with the Afghan Government about the future of Afghanistan, a future in which these basic rights and principles were upheld. That wasn't there, and I think that is unfortunate.

Similarly, we can talk about the forces that we withdrew, you know, in the last few months, but in reducing, to the extent that we did, the leverage that we had by going from roughly 13,500 forces down to 2,500 forces by the end of the last administration, that made it very, very challenging to leverage the Taliban to even make good on what little there was in the agreement to begin with, never mind doing more.

So, again, in fairness, you know, all of this is 20/20, and I hope we engage in that 20/20 hindsight, not just for the last 9 months, but for the last 20 years, because there is a lot that we need to look at.

Mr. ALLRED. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.  
Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman's time is expired.

I now recognize Representative Dan Meuser of Pennsylvania for 5 minutes.

Mr. MEUSER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Secretary, you are a long-standing, experienced American diplomat. Your service is to be commended to our country. Past hearings, you have been fair and informative.

I, however, must State that I am very disappointed in your written testimony, your opening comments, and answers today, which really seem to me, sir, as a series of rationalizations.

You are, in fact, blaming everyone but yourselves and the Taliban, which is interesting, for this disaster, and yet you seem to continue to be victimized by wishful thinking.

Blaming the Trump administration, frankly, is equivalent to me planning a fishing trip months in advance, the day comes to leave, a hurricane comes in, you go anyway, and blame me for things going badly.

The fact is, these epic mistakes and the ignoring of intel has left a country—OK, these are the facts, this is the reality of today—under a brutal terrorist regime, and the world is a more dangerous place. Massacres, murders continue.

I just informed a newspaper of a horrific scene I heard of this morning, somebody being pulled out, an interpreter, murdered, in front of their children, the children taken. Okay? This are results of these incredible mistakes.

Thirteen Americans tragically—tragically killed. 124,000 Afghanistans desperately fleeing for their lives, some falling off of airplanes as they leave, as they desperately try to get out.

We have billions in American military equipment and pallets of cash, I understand, left behind in Taliban hands. Yet, sir, you sit and tell us that you did the right thing. Okay. That, frankly, makes us—kind of scares the hell out of us as to what decisions might be made next.

So I will start with my first question. Are there any conditions where we provide pallets of cash to the Taliban?

Secretary BLINKEN. None that I am aware of.

Mr. MEUSER. All right. Thank you.

Intel said Taliban would likely overrun Afghanistan and all the cities, as it did. Of course, you mentioned General Milley a number of times, stating how, no, there was no intel stating 11 days.

What was the likely scenario that you all, your department and the Biden Administration, believed was going to occur after our retreat?

Secretary BLINKEN. So, Congressman, throughout the spring and into the summer, if you look back at the intelligence assessments and collective assessments that were made—and typically you would have a worst case scenario, a best case scenario, some scenarios in between—it went from in the winter and spring to worst case scenario, the Taliban takes over the country in 18 months to 2 years after our withdrawal, to in July, the end of the year, the end of this calendar year.

And even right up to the very end, as I have said before, to my knowledge at least, no one was predicting the collapse of the government and the security forces in 11 days. So, yes, it got nar-

rower, the worst case scenarios, but it went from 18 months to 2 years, to the end of this year.

Mr. MEUSER. Okay. That is getting it very wrong, regardless of the information available.

Will the Biden Administration secure our southern border now that we have this serious additional crisis and terrorists on the loose worldwide?

Secretary BLINKEN. We have been working assiduously to secure that border from day one. And we have also, as we talked about a little bit earlier, with regard to Afghans coming in to the United States, as you know, there are very significant, rigorous vetting procedures in place with Customs and Border Patrol, NCTC, FBI, CIA, et cetera, that are done initially in these transit countries before anyone comes to the United States and then continue on military bases here, which is usually the first point of landing after Dulles Airport for people coming from Afghanistan.

Mr. MEUSER. Thank you, Secretary.

Just last, do you believe, and the Biden Administration believe, terrorists respond to strength and the willingness to use it?

Secretary BLINKEN. Terrorists respond to effective counterterrorism, absolutely.

Mr. MEUSER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman yields back.

I now recognize Representative Andy Levin of Michigan, who is the vice chair of the Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, Central Asia, and Nonproliferation, for 5 minutes.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you, Mr. Secretary, for helping the President end our longest ever war, which was the right thing to do; for your Department's efforts to airlift out so many tens of thousands of Americans and Afghans when the Afghan Government and Armed Forces fell so precipitously; and for your patience and steadfastness here today.

Obviously, you have heard a lot about our concerns today regarding Afghans seeking refuge in the United States and elsewhere, and I want to start there. What commitments has the administration secured from third countries to host Afghans for a sufficient duration to allow the administration to process their SIV P1 and P2 visas or humanitarian parole requests? Where are we at with that.

Secretary BLINKEN. So we have secured a number of agreements that would allow us to, as Afghans come out of the country, and these would be SIV applicants, these would be potential refugees, with several countries where they could go to those countries. We could engage in the processing, especially with regard to SIVs, as you know, with a 14-step process, very hard to complete that. There are parts that we could not possibly complete remotely in Afghanistan. So we do need to get them to third countries where we can complete that. And we have—

Mr. LEVIN. Do we have enough? I mean, is the capacity enough, basically, I guess that is the question. Or do we need more?

Secretary BLINKEN. I am sorry?

Mr. LEVIN. Is the capacity enough or do we need more, I guess—

Secretary BLINKEN. I think the current capacity is enough, but that is something we are going to look very carefully at. And, of course, much depends on the ongoing ability of people to leave Afghanistan and to get to these countries.

Mr. LEVIN. Okay. All right. Well, let's stay on the topic of Afghans who need protection right now. U.S. officials stated our commitment to Afghans at risk, such as civil society workers, human rights defenders, women's rights activists, journalists, and others, and that that commitment did not end with the withdrawal of U.S. personnel. Deciding where to draw these lines is super difficult.

Who else specifically is the Biden Administration defining as at risk, and how does the State Department intend to support them?

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes, you are right, it is very challenging. In the summer, we put in place, besides the SIV program, we put in place the so-called P2 category for people—for Afghans who did not meet the requirements of the SIV program but who would nonetheless work, for example, for NGO's, for American news organizations, other institutions but not directly for the U.S. Government so that they could qualify for the SIV.

Of course, the general refugee program is available to people. So if they can get out of Afghanistan, which is obviously—which is what we are working on, they can go to a third country and apply for refugee status.

But we are particularly focused on Afghans at risk, and the ones most at risk are people who, by what they have done or what they have said or who they are, could be at real threat from the new government.

Mr. LEVIN. All right. Finally, let me return to the question of the drone strike, the U.S. drone strike in Kabul on August 29, which reportedly killed at least 10 civilians, including 7 kids. Just going from media reports.

What I want to ask is, what role is the State Department playing in helping to investigate any civilian harm caused in this strike? Does the State Department have a role in this or is it purely military or intelligence officials?

Secretary BLINKEN. Well, without going into too much detail here, in the first instance, military intelligence is focused on reviewing everything that we did. They do that as a matter of course, and of course they are doing that in this instance. To the extent that we have any information that comes to us that is relevant to this, of course, we would feed it into that review process.

Mr. LEVIN. All right. Well, I hope we can take this up when we have a classified discussion because, you know, it is just—it happens a lot and we have to do everything we can to stop it.

With that, Mr. Chairman, thank you so much, and I yield back.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman yields back.

I now recognize Representative Claudia Tenney of New York, who is the vice ranking member for the Subcommittee on International Development, International Organizations, and Global Corporate Social Impact, for 5 minutes.

Ms. TENNEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I just want to get right to it.

My son served in the Marine Corps for 8 years. I spent the weekend with marines and Gold Star families. There is nothing worse than having someone show up at your door to tell you that your son or daughter was killed in action. I know you know that.

I just want to say to some of our colleagues on this call who do not understand the anger and the anguish that many feel, you know, referring to this as histrionics and—by this side. I feel the pain of these people. I spent the weekend with them. I have been with my Gold Star families for many, many years, and I know you understand that.

But my question to you is—and I want to reference back to something that Representative Issa had referred to. He referred to communications that our American citizens and others had received that said, make contingency plans to leave when it is safe to do so that do not rely on the U.S. Government for assistance, notify a trusted person of your travel and movement plans.

This communication was given by the State Department to U.S. citizens, along with legal permanent residents and SIV applicants and holders. My question to you is, can you tell us that these people who—and I appreciate those who have been able to get out successfully—who have not been assisted, who are there in harm's way, will you give us a commitment that our American citizens and our legal permanent residents and others will be out safely?

Secretary BLINKEN. Absolutely. But just to clarify—and, again, I invited Congressman Issa to share that with me.

Here is my understanding. Starting in March, we issued 19 separate—

Ms. TENNEY. Let me just—

Secretary BLINKEN. No, no. But it is important—no, no, it is important. I do not want to take your time, but it is important to talk to this, if I could. No, no—

Ms. TENNEY. [inaudible] Briefly.

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes, no, no. So here is the—just to be clear, and I believe this is what this refers to, but if it is not, we will take that up. In the—

Ms. TENNEY. The question is, can you just make the assurance that these people will be out safely? Because I now have an American citizen, a family of seven, a 2-year-old is an American citizen, and they are still stranded in Afghanistan. They were told by the State Department in a letter, only one parent can accompany the family home—or this 2-year-old home, which means the other five are going to be left in Afghanistan.

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes. That—

Ms. TENNEY. I would like your assurance that all of that family will be kept intact and be brought home and will not be separated at the Afghan border.

Secretary BLINKEN. First of all, Congresswoman, we are committed to bringing any remaining—any remaining—

Ms. TENNEY. Can I just—

Secretary BLINKEN. I would be happy to address the question if I could, please.

We are committed to bringing any remaining American citizens in Afghanistan out who wish to leave, and we are working on that every single day. Under the law—

Ms. TENNEY. Let me just—this is the question, though. We have an American citizen who has six family members who are legal permanent residents. We were told by the State Department only one gets to accompany the American citizen.

These aren't people that do not want to leave Afghanistan. These are people that aren't going to abandon their children. So I just want to be sure that—

Secretary BLINKEN. Under—let me be clear. Could I please answer the question? Because it is an important one and it deserves—

Ms. TENNEY. I just want a yes or no answer. It is really simple, because you are taking up my time, and I have a couple issues I want to get to.

Secretary BLINKEN. Well, look, I am really happy to address because you raise a very important question. Just to be very clear, any American citizen, their spouse and their minor children, we are committed to bringing out. That is what the law provides under the Immigration and Naturalization Act. It is also what the other laws provide for.

If we want to be more expansive than that, we invite Congress to change the law.

Ms. TENNEY. [Inaudible] Question. Thank you. I appreciate that.

Mr. Secretary, would you agree that it would have been safer to evacuate these people had the U.S. and allied troops remained in Afghanistan?

Secretary BLINKEN. Had we remained in Afghanistan?

Ms. TENNEY. No. The question is, do you think it would have been safer to evacuate the—

Secretary BLINKEN. No. No. I highly doubt that, because had we remained in Afghanistan beyond May 1, we would have been back at war with the Taliban not only firing on our forces but also [inaudible] Cities.

Ms. TENNEY. [Inaudible] Would it have been safer if U.S. servicemembers, allied troops were in Afghanistan while we were evacuating these people? Do you agree that that would have been—it would have been safer?

Secretary BLINKEN. I apologize, I missed the last part. Could you repeat it, please?

Ms. TENNEY. Yes. I said, do you agree that it would have been safer to evacuate the people that I described—American citizens, green card holders, and others—had we kept the U.S. troops and allied troops there first and evacuated them later?

Secretary BLINKEN. Oh, I see. Again, if the Defense Department, the government as a whole engaged in the drawdown from Afghanistan. But the single most important factor was the collapse of the Afghan security forces and the Afghan Government in 11 days. That is what radically changed the situation.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentlelady's time has expired.

I now recognize Representative Abigail Spanberger of Virginia, who is the vice chair of the Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, and Environment, and Cyber, for 5 minutes.

Ms. SPANBERGER. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

And, Mr. Secretary, thank you for being with us today. My first question is specific to Afghan allies. And for those of us who have

been working directly with people on the ground trying to get folks out, as I know you have, it has been a really challenging time.

And I think one of the lessons here, one of the takeaways for me is that we must always plan for the worst case scenario, because I think we saw a confluence of worst case scenarios come to fruition.

So, on that end, I would note that in your opening remarks, you stated that we expect the Taliban to ensure freedom of travel, make good on its CT commitments, uphold the basic rights of the Afghan people, including women, girls, minorities, and name a broadly representative permanent government.

But I have also seen videos of women and girls being beaten by the Taliban. I know there have been night letters that have been posted on doors, marking people for interrogation or assassination. I have received photos and written testimonies of some of the beatings and targetings that have occurred, and murders and beatings have been documented against those who have helped the United States.

And so, sir, I would begin by asking, have you seen any of these videos? Have they made their way to you as well?

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes, I have seen videos. I have seen reports. I have read news accounts. Yes. And these incidents are deeply, deeply disturbing.

Ms. SPANBERGER. So looking toward the future, recognizing that perhaps we should hear your plan for the absolute worst case scenario, is the Department talking through what the contingencies are in the scenario in which the Taliban does not do the things that you stated are our expectations and hopes?

Secretary BLINKEN. In short, yes.

Ms. SPANBERGER. Okay. And thank you for that. And I also just want to thank every person on the ground, every person who has been so helpful.

I represent many, many in the veterans community who have focused exclusively on ensuring that those who helped keep them alive and those who worked side by side with them would have a chance at a better life in the future. And so I am grateful for their service and their work.

I recently sent a letter to you, sir, focused on border crossings. And I know there has been some progress toward working with border nations about the possibility of them opening the borders. Could you just briefly comment on what the status is related to the ability to exfiltrate people or allow people to cross at borders?

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes. Thank you. And I saw the letter, and I thank you for it.

We have been working with a number of countries, including Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, to ensure that, ideally, their borders will remain open overall, but certainly that they would remain open to American citizens, green card holders, visa holders, who seek to leave and who are assisting in leaving. And we have basic agreements with all three countries that that will be the case.

And so the work now is to be able to see people start, as we saw last week with the flights that left Qatar—left, excuse me, Kabul for Qatar, that started to happen.

Ms. SPANBERGER. Thank you so very much, Mr. Secretary. And, please, if any of that changes, I ask that you keep us apprised so that we can be helpful as possible.

And last week I visited Fort Pickett, which is in my district, to see Operations Allies Welcome firsthand, and I saw thousands of Afghan children, women, and men who made it out of Afghanistan. It is a testament to a whole-of-government approach—public servants, U.S. servicemembers, NGO workers and volunteers standing up an incredible effort on very, very short notice.

On behalf of the community that I represent, I would just want to reiterate the importance of really ensuring that the interagency team engages and communicates with local government.

I was very happy to learn about the health screenings on the ground and the initiation of English language classes that have begun onsite. I hope that continues.

But I am curious, how long do you anticipate Operations Allies Welcome will continue to utilize military installations across the United States, including the one that is in my district?

Secretary BLINKEN. Well, thank you. And I am really grateful for that support, the engagement of the community. It makes all the difference. And I want to make sure too, like you, that we have the right, you know, connectivity, that we are talking and coordinating with the local community.

We have to make sure that we have the ability to put people into the resettlement process with resettlement agencies across the United States. We are determined to move them as expeditiously as possible. Let me come back to you with a better timeframe, because we also have to do it mindful of making sure we complete any security checks that are necessary.

Ms. SPANBERGER. And I do appreciate the robust security provisions that I witnessed when I was visiting.

And I have run out of time, though I have many more questions. I appreciate your time, Mr. Secretary.

I yield back.

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentlelady's time is expired.

I now recognize Representative August Pfluger of Texas, who is the vice ranking member for the Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment and Cyber, for 5 minutes.

You are muted, Mr. Pfluger. Please unmute.

We will come back to Mr. Pfluger.

I now recognize Representative Nicole Malliotakis of New York, who is the ranking member for the Subcommittee on International Development, International Organization, and Global Corporate Social Impact, for 5 minutes.

Ms. MALLIOTAKIS. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you, Secretary, for being with us today and answering our questions and concerns.

You said that the Afghanistan mission was, quote, successful. You know, I speak for millions of Americans when I say that it was a kick in the gut to see our American military vehicles parading in the streets with the Taliban flags.

You know, this has been a real hasty withdrawal; U.S. citizens unable to get through the gates, the SIV process was a mess. Our

offices had to work with veterans on the ground because you couldn't get responses in some cases from the State Department. And we still have a hundred American citizens still behind enemy lines, which is the same number that it was 2 weeks ago. And, of course, the 13 soldiers who were killed. So I do not know how anyone can call that a success. But then again, it is coming from an administration who has misled the American people throughout this entire withdrawal.

Today you said the Taliban is committed to not allowing Afghanistan to be used as a base for terrorism. You know, the Taliban, as you said, is a designated terrorist organization itself. It harbored al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden leading up to 9/11.

And the U.S. Government has also designated the Haqqani Network a foreign terrorist organization. Mr. Haqqani, as you know, is now one of the Taliban's new cabinet members. He is on the FBI Most Wanted list. We have a \$10 million reward for information leading to his arrest.

I fear that this is a type of weakness, incredulity that has gotten us in the situation that we are currently in.

The FBI still has even questions for the Haqqani Network, the January 8, 2008 attack at a Kabul hotel that killed 1 American and 5 others, a 2011 suicide truck bomb in Wardak province that wounded 77 American soldiers.

You know, now that we have no presence on the ground in Afghanistan, how is the administration working to ensure that these same terrorists do not attack Americans again just as they did at the Kabul Airport? And you know, how can we trust, how can you trust the Taliban to say that they are going to do this and actually work to prevent terrorism when they are a terrorist network themselves? And what have they told you about rooting out ISIS-K, who is responsible for those 13 soldiers' deaths?

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you, Congresswoman. First of all, it is not about trusting the Taliban at all. It is about holding them to the commitments they made not just to us but to the international community when it comes to not allowing Afghanistan to become a haven for outwardly directed terrorism.

There are two groups that you pointed to that are very important in this. One is ISIS-K, the group that killed our servicemen and women just a couple of weeks ago in Afghanistan. As it happens, one thing one could say about the Taliban is that they and ISIS-K are sworn enemies, and the Taliban has spent the last 5 years, even as it has relentlessly been moving to take more territory, to also take territory away from ISIS-K as it sought to implant itself in Afghanistan, and they remain very much at odds.

And I think the greater question with regard to ISIS-K is less whether the Taliban has the intent and more whether it has the capacity to effectively deal with it. But over the last 5 or 6 years, it took away virtually all of the territory that it held.

Then you rightly point to al-Qaeda, the ability of that group to engage in outwardly directed, homeland-focused terrorist attacks has been dramatically degraded. And the assessment of the community right now is that they do not currently have that capacity. Having said that, we will remain extremely vigilant to detect any

reemergence of that capability, and of course, take action against it if it reemerges.

And as we were talking a bit earlier, we would welcome the opportunity to go into more detail about that in a different setting.

Ms. MALLIOTAKIS. I would appreciate that because I am very concerned that, you know, the government is relying on the Taliban for counterterrorism, and that should not be something that we should even be flirting with.

But in addition to that, you know, just while we were in this hearing, \$64 million is being reported in additional aid to Afghanistan. And how do we know and how can you guarantee the American people that this isn't going to end up in the hands of the Taliban just like our military equipment and vehicles and weapons did?

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes. It is an important question, Congresswoman, and here is what I would say. That money and any other assistance we provide, humanitarian assistance we provide, will not be provided to the government of Afghanistan. It is provided to NGO's that we have worked with for many, many years and to U.N. agencies that we have worked for many, many years. And they have tried and true mechanisms in place to make sure that the assistance gets to the people who need it, not to the government.

Ms. MALLIOTAKIS. Well, I mean, I still question that. I think that we have to be—you know, I do not agree with this decision at this time. I do believe that we need to be concerned even about NGO's that are doing work on the ground and making—

Chairman MEEKS. The gentlewoman's time has expired.

Ms. MALLIOTAKIS. And child brides. If you could touch on that, just where the status—

Chairman MEEKS. The gentlelady's time has expired.

I now recognize Representative Chrissy Houlahan of Pennsylvania for 5 minutes.

Ms. HOULAHAN. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Mr. Secretary. I know that most Americans are still supportive of the withdrawal from Afghanistan, and I also know that the airlift was remarkable and historic in its scale, but I do think that this process was not without its missteps, and now we do have some opportunities from which to draw on these lessons and hopefully have the ability to together steer ourselves more positively into the future.

So I do have some questions, and I think it is important to point out that it is appropriate within Congress' constitutional role and responsibility of oversight to ask these questions. I really do this in the spirit of my responsibility, not in the spirit of whether a D or an R is in the White House. In the 20 years that this war has happened, there has been ample opportunity to spread blame all around.

And I can also say that both Rs and Ds on this committee have personally served themselves, and I can personally understand the pain and anxiety that many of us are feeling during this very important and contentious discussion. Our pain and anxiety knows no party, and no party owns patriotism.

That said, here is my first question, Mr. Secretary. In July, the U.S. military left Bagram Air Field, and on August 15, the State

Department made the decision to close the embassy chancery and evacuate to the airport. What drove that decision to withdraw from Bagram and a few weeks later to close the embassy? Sir, I know that you reflected that it was largely the DoD's decision to vacate Bagram, but it certainly was your decision and responsibility with the embassy.

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you, and I very much appreciate the spirit with which you are asking these very important questions as well as the oversight role that the Congress plays. It is central to our system.

With regard to Bagram, this was part of the drawdown plan for the military. Again, the base was handed over to the Afghan national security and defense forces I believe on July 2. I leave it to my colleagues to get into the details of that. But, in essence, as we were drawing down, force protection is job one. It would have taken very significant forces remaining in place to defend Bagram.

And in terms of departures from Afghanistan, and this was before the collapse of the government and the security forces, the airport in Kabul was a much better place to do that from. Bagram, as you know, is about 40 miles outside of the city. So getting there is a challenge, and at the end of the day, any—I am sorry. Go ahead.

Ms. HOULAHAN. If it is okay, I would like to kind of lead into my question because I think it relates to that. I do want to understand something that many of us remain unclear on which is the timelines that were laid out both publicly and privately for withdrawal. It may have something to do with the decision to vacate Bagram and the embassy.

I empathize that you were given an agenda and not necessarily a plan from the prior administration, but as far as I can tell, September 11 was announced publicly as a date certain by which we needed to be gone as was August 31 later on. And I was always led to believe that that telegraphing, let alone speaking out loud the dates that you were planning on doing things was something you should not signal to your enemy. Why did we do that? Can you help me understand that? And was that somehow—did that somehow drive the Bagram decision and the embassy decision.

Secretary BLINKEN. Sure. No. This all goes to the fact that as we have been discussing earlier, we inherited an agreement that required us to leave Afghanistan by May 1. And had we not made good on that agreement, then we would have seen a resumption of the war with Taliban forces firing once again on us and our partners and seeking over to take over the cities which would have required us to put in more forces and restart the work. But having said that—

Ms. HOULAHAN. There was some magic to September 11 that I just do not understand, so—

Secretary BLINKEN. So we—so in doing our work on how to deal with May 1, the military told us that in order to, as they put it, retrograde in an orderly and safe manner, they needed 3 to 4 months to do it the right way. And so the President took a risk in pushing past the May 1 deadline in terms of actually getting everyone out but making it clear that we were doing that to meet the commitment that his predecessor had made.

And the—you get to September by those 3 to 4 months that the military said it needed to retrograde in a safe and orderly manner.

Ms. HOULAHAN. Sir, with my remaining time, once September 11 had been decided, it was also clear that we were on a very much more rapid path than September 11 which left us—we pulled out troops that could been around longer, and then we ended up having to bring back troops. Was that—why did we decide a date and then escalate the date and make it even more rapid?

And I am sorry. I only have 7 seconds of my time, so I will have to take it for the record.

Secretary BLINKEN. Sure, I am happy to come back to you, but in essence, everything changed when the government and the Afghan national security forces collapsed over 11 days in August. And then we moved into an emergency evacuation situation. And what was critical in order to do that, to get American citizens out, to get Afghans at risk out, was to make sure that we had control of the airport.

And to do that as effectively as possible, the President had forces on standby for exactly this kind of emergency or contingency to make sure that we could go in, secure the airport which we did in 72 hours, and get flights moving out of the airport.

So that is why those forces on standby went back in to secure the airport so we could do the evacuation.

Ms. HOULAHAN. Sure. I have run out of time. I yield back.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentlelady's time has expired.

And I will again reach out to Representative August Pfluger of Texas for 5 minutes.

Mr. PFLUGER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Can you hear me?

Chairman MEEKS. Yes, we hear you. You are breaking up, Mr. Pfluger. You are breaking up.

Secretary BLINKEN. I am sorry, Mr. Chairman. I could not hear the Congressman.

Chairman MEEKS. I could not hear either.

Mr. Pfluger, we could not hear you. You broke up.

Mr. PFLUGER. Okay. Can you hear me now.

Chairman MEEKS. We can hear you better.

Mr. PFLUGER. Okay. I would like to start by saying thank you to Ambassador Rosenblum and also to Deputy Secretary Viguerie for their help in getting the Afghan pilots out of Uzbekistan and to their onward destination.

I now want to ask a very pointed question, Mr. Secretary. Are there any American hostages being held in Afghanistan?

Secretary BLINKEN. Mark Frerichs who is of great concern to me and to the entire administration who has been hostage there going back a couple of years and who we work on every single day to bring back home.

Mr. PFLUGER. Are there any other American hostages being held?

Secretary BLINKEN. To the best of my knowledge, no.

Mr. PFLUGER. Are we going to bring Mark Frerichs home now that we have left Afghanistan?

Secretary BLINKEN. We are doing everything in our power as we have been and as the previous administration was doing.

Mr. PFLUGER. Who is holding Mark Frerichs right now?

Secretary BLINKEN. I would be happy to take that up in a different setting.

Mr. PFLUGER. So would it be fair to say that this is going to be very difficult to bring him home now that we have left Afghanistan?

Secretary BLINKEN. It was obviously extremely difficult since it did not happen over the last couple of years, and we are determined to see that through.

Mr. PFLUGER. Have you received any classified briefings on the situation as it relates to the terror threat inside Afghanistan, classified briefings recently?

Secretary BLINKEN. We get briefings, yes, on a regular basis on—

Mr. PFLUGER. Would you characterize those as positive, like the world is a safer place, or negative, like the threat is rising?

Secretary BLINKEN. Well, needless to say, I do not want to get into any details in this setting. Again, happy to come back to you, but it very much depends on what you are looking at. If you are looking at outwardly directed threats against the homeland and against others outside of Afghanistan, the basic assessment is the groups in question currently do not have that capacity. But that could change, and that is why we are being extremely vigilant to see if it reemerges and to do something about it if it does.

Mr. PFLUGER. At the 9/11 museum in New York City, and I will read, in the Bin Laden museum, the al-Qaeda, with Taliban's permission to operate in Afghanistan, pursued its campaign against the U.S. and its allies. The Taliban provided al-Qaeda members with passports and stamps, allowing them to travel freely, and import vehicles, weapons, and money.

I find it hard to believe that so much has changed in the 20-year period that now that threat has been mitigated. How many evacuees have met criteria of known or suspected terrorists at this point in time at our lily pad locations?

Secretary BLINKEN. Known or suspected? I do not—I do not have that information. We are engaged in a—in an extremely vigorous verification process involving multiple agencies, law enforcement, intelligence, security. No one—no one will get to the United States who—

Mr. PFLUGER. Where are they going when they pop on either KST or some other similar list? Where are they going? What are we doing with them?

Secretary BLINKEN. So we have a number of countries I think, as you know, where we are transiting anyone coming out of Afghanistan. That is where the initial checks are done.

And if we need more time on those checks to verify something, they stay in place, or they move to another location where we have arrangements to make sure that we have the time we need to go through all of the checks before they get to the United States.

Mr. PFLUGER. Thank you. And we have requested in a bipartisan manner to conduct oversight and have been denied that ability at the lily pads. We will continue to press. It is not right to be denied that oversight.

Mr. Secretary, did the President follow military, best military advice to the letter, on the execution of the withdrawal as he stated in a speech recently?

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes. And when it comes to, for example, the question of August 31, it was the unanimous recommendation of the military, starting with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the Secretary of Defense, all of the commanders on the ground to move forward with getting out by the 31st because as they said, if we did not do that the risk to force and the risk to mission would be exponentially high.

Mr. PFLUGER. Thank you, Mr. Secretary. Do you feel that the United States of America has abandoned our citizens?

Secretary BLINKEN. No. Absolutely not. On the contrary. On the contrary.

Mr. PFLUGER. Thank you very much, Mr. Secretary. I appreciate your responses. And with that, I yield back.

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you, Congressman.

Chairman MEEKS. I now recognize Representative Tom Malinowski of New Jersey who is the Vice Chair of the full committee for 5 minutes.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Secretary, as someone who was screaming about this from the rooftops at the time, I can count on one hand the number of my colleagues from the other side who joined in expressing any concern about the former President inviting the Taliban to Camp David or the shameful surrender agreement that undoubtedly set us on the path to this tragedy.

And if anybody believes that the previous administration would have evacuated any Afghans to the United States, much less tens of thousands as President Biden did, I would suggest that they ask the Kurds their opinion of that.

That said, those of us who have been consistent about this I think are entitled to say that it was also a mistake for this administration to pick up where President Trump left off. It is certainly true that we were never going to be able to fix what was wrong with Afghanistan. That does not mean that we were obliged to sacrifice everything that was right with Afghanistan. And the sacrifice, I think, is profound.

An extremely important counterterrorism partnership was lost, and a terrorist State is now upon us. Enormous gains for women, for the rule of law, for democracy, for human rights, mass displacement. The Afghans remade their society. We did not do it. They did it. It was our withdrawal, I am afraid, that has unmade their society.

And what have we gained for this? Our troops are not coming home. We need to be honest about that. They are merely moving to other bases in the same region to conduct the same counterterrorism missions, including in Afghanistan, but from a longer distance with no partners on the ground, no NATO allies on the ground, presumably more civilian casualties. That drone strike in Kabul was not the last act of our war. It was unfortunately the first act of the next stage of our war.

Now, I do not want to ask you to respond to all of that. I think this is just a philosophical difference that will have to rest. I do

want to ask you, Mr. Secretary, about the next stage of this evacuation to which I know you are committed.

There was one Afghan woman in particular that I worked to get out, one of many, an activist. I will not name her. She was on social media, interviewed by the international media a lot, tremendously at risk. Tried to get to the airport several times. Once got on a bus that a third country had organized, was taken off that bus. And, again, to be honest, in the very short time we had before August 31, we were never able to make the evacuation of those Afghans at risk a priority.

The message that we got from the State Department was if they got to HKIA, we would try to evacuate them, but they were, in effect, on their own to get there or dependent comment on private groups to get there.

My question for you today, very practically, is whether with this new phase with most Americans out, with the airport restarting operations, whether the State Department will proactively prioritize trying to get individuals like that women's rights activist out.

And let me say what I mean by that specifically. Will the State Department, for example, reach out to all the private groups and NGO's that have been working on this to try to consolidate and rationalize these lists that they have and that you have?

Will you work to try to proactively contact these people to get them visas either to the United States or visas that we can encourage third countries to give them? And would we work, then, proactively with countries like Qatar that are still in place to try to arrange for safe rides to the airport?

Secretary BLINKEN. Congressman, in short, yes, and I think we do have to do everything we can to bring some of these lists together to the extent that has not happened and ultimately to prioritize those who are most at risk.

Our priorities going forward are, of course, on any remaining American citizens who wish to leave as well as on the special immigrant visa applicants who worked side by side with us over the years and Afghans at risk.

And I think we do need to make sure that we are looking at everything that different organizations are providing, Members of Congress are providing so that we can identify those who we believe to be at the highest risk and we can focus on that population.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Thank you. What I am hoping is that you are very proactive about this rather than putting the burden on them to find a way out of the country first.

And then finally, very quickly, I know you have served all kinds of personnel to Germany and to other places where people we evacuated on our planes came out. Are you willing to do the same for Afghans who were brought by private groups to countries like Albania?

Secretary BLINKEN. We want to make sure that we have in place, wherever necessary, the personnel required to help process people and to make sure that we can do what checks are necessary and also to support their efforts to move from their initial landing place to an ultimate destination.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Thank you. I yield back.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman's time has expired.

I now recognize Representative Peter Meijer of Michigan for 5 minutes.

Mr. MEIJER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, Mr. Secretary, for coming before us today. I just want to do two quick clarifications on some of the questions that my colleagues asked.

No. 1. Congressman Green asked whether or not the Taliban was a terrorist organization. You said yes. I am assuming you are referring to their listing as a specially designated global terrorist?

Secretary BLINKEN. That is correct.

Mr. MEIJER. They are not on the foreign terrorist organization list.

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes. Thank you for clarifying that. That is correct.

Mr. MEIJER. And then Congresswoman Houlihan had asked earlier, and you had answered part of this question, but you did not get to one component of it. She was asking about why the deadline had been changed from September 11 which it appears the Taliban had consented to and had acknowledged to August 31, and I did not hear a response from you on that front.

Secretary BLINKEN. The deadline that the Taliban repeatedly made clear that they were looking to was August 31, and we got that in various ways, in various communications. And so one risk, and you have to assess it, is had we pushed beyond that, what actions might they take.

Mr. MEIJER. Mr. Secretary, I certainly understand the risks of pushing for that August 31 deadline. I had initially believed that that was necessary and understood that the position we were in would not allow for that.

But I want to also get at something that we had discussed earlier. You had mentioned several times these emails that the State Department had sent to Americans who were in Afghanistan—

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes.

Mr. MEIJER [continuing]. Warning them to leave. As somebody who was a civilian in Afghanistan, I remember getting alarmist emails from the State Department all the time, so I can also understand if they had a little bit of fatigue in being told the sky was falling. And I am also sure there was maybe some changes to verbiage that maybe did not come across as much. But I guess I am a little bit challenged to square that with the delay that we saw.

As a member of the Honoring our Promises Working Group on special immigrant visa applicants, you know, we had reached out to the administration on April 21, you know, imploring, urging to clear the backlog, and I understand some logistical hurdles there. We worked to expedite and streamline the processes.

But still, if we were so concerned that we are sending these grim emails that Americans should have received and left the country immediately, how come we weren't moving more quickly? Why did it take 99 days before the first charter flight took special immigrant visa applicants out.

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes. So two things. Of course, as you know Congressman, because you know this so well, it is a complicated process, but two things very quickly.

First of all, with regard to the Americans citizens that were there. The warnings were increasingly explicit, and we wanted to make sure to the best of our ability because we were in a very volatile security situation, and we had an obligation, first and foremost, to any American citizens who were there to put them on notice and to strongly urge them to leave while, you know, there were clearly commercial means to do so.

With regard to the special immigrant visas, and I know your commitment to this which I deeply, deeply appreciate. Again, we were in a massive acceleration of the program starting from February, not from, you know, when things—when the government and the security forces imploded.

And we had a program, as we discussed, that was pretty much in a dead stall. We had an executive order from the President on February 4 ordering us to improve it. We went from 100 visas, 100 visas a week to 1,000 a week from March to late July, so we were in the process of doing that.

And then, of course, we put in place something that is not even called for which was Operation Allies Refuge which actually flew people out which, as you know, is not part of the—

Mr. MEIJER. My deep regret is that it just—it took so long because obviously, we had that concern, expressing it to citizens. But, you know, talking with folks behind the scenes and still understanding some of the procedural and logistical impediments, I just—I wish we would have had that task force appointee earlier.

Secretary BLINKEN. This is something I hope we can keep working on together going forward.

Mr. MEIJER. Mr. Secretary, I want to touch upon something that you mentioned multiple times, that some of the folks who were left behind are dual nationals. Do you make a distinction for prioritization between native born American citizens by birth and those who are naturalized citizens?

Secretary BLINKEN. We do not. It is really by means of explanation of why this decision is so hard for so many—for some people, which is to say that especially in the case of dual nationals, often, it is people whose entire life has been in Afghanistan. That is really what they know as home. And that just explains why literally people have been going back and forth; do we want to leave, do we not want to leave.

Mr. MEIJER. Well, and Mr. Secretary, in some of these cases, some of those individuals have maybe not a direct dependent, maybe not a wife or husband, maybe not a son or daughter, but they might have a brother or sister who is an SIV eligible or has had that approved, and those flights are being delayed. So please work to free the planes in Mazar-e-Sharif, and I yield back my time.

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you.

Chairman MEEKS. I now recognize Representative Andy Kim of New Jersey for 5 minutes.

Mr. KIM OF NEW JERSEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And, Mr. Secretary, I wanted to drill down on some elements that you talked about. You talked about the challenge that we faced a month ago as the collapse of the Afghan security forces as

well as the Afghan government, and I want to unpack that a little bit.

From your assessment now that we have a month behind us, was this a situation where the Afghan security forces did not fight, or was this a situation that they were not given the orders to fight or given a strategy to actually implement? I wanted to see if there was a greater sense of granularity that you have on that.

Secretary BLINKEN. So I think it was a combination of both factors, and you are right to point to them. But I think that to some large extent, those security forces were ill served by the leadership that they had in giving them a coherent plan.

We—throughout the summer, we were pressing, and obviously, the experts were pressing, our military leaders and other experts. But also me, in conversations that I had with then President Ghani and others to put in place an effective plan, and in particular, to make sure that they were consolidating their forces to most—more effectively defend the major cities, Kabul, and the large provincial capitols.

And so in the absence, despite extensive efforts to get them to adopt those plans, I think that made it a lot harder on the security forces that wanted to fight.

Mr. KIM OF NEW JERSEY. Yes. No, I think so. And I think, look, this is going to be one of the most important questions, you know, when we look back at this and try to understand and diagnose where the problem was.

A related element to this is a question I have actually asked to some State Department staff and senior staff before, but I wanted to get your take on it.

Mr. Secretary, did former President Ashraf Ghani secure anything for his people with his departure, or did he flee as a coward?

Secretary BLINKEN. Look. I do not want to characterize his departure other than to say that that combined with as an institution, the Afghan security forces, not putting up resistance, and all of this taking place in the space of 11 days obviously is what put us into this emergency evacuation situation.

Mr. KIM OF NEW JERSEY. Did you have any prior knowledge that he was going to flee, or did you hear about it when he announced it on social media?

Secretary BLINKEN. I spoke to President Ghani on Saturday night, and this was when we were in the process of working in Doha to try to organize a transfer of power and to have a—toward a representative government and to see that he would participate in that, and what he told me in that conversation was that he would.

He would go along with that effort but if the Taliban wouldn't, he would, and I paraphrase, fight to the death. That was Saturday night. He left the next day. I had no advance warning of that.

Mr. KIM OF NEW JERSEY. Mr. Secretary, I wanted to ask you. Have you personally spoken to any Taliban leadership?

Secretary BLINKEN. I have not.

Mr. KIM OF NEW JERSEY. I guess the question is are you actively choosing not to speak to them? Is this a point of leverage and legitimacy in your mind? And if that is the case, who is the most senior

person in U.S. Government right now talking directly to the Taliban? And who is their counterpart on the other side?

Secretary BLINKEN. We have made very clear to the Taliban, as have countries around the world with our leadership and organization, that any legitimacy that they may seek from the international community, any support that they may be looking for is going to be contingent on their actions, and basically the nature of the relationship that they might have with us or anyone else will be defined by what they do.

Mr. KIM OF NEW JERSEY. So just—just in terms of what is happening right now—

Secretary BLINKEN. So we have had—yes. We have had a—we have had a political channel with them going back to the previous administration with a team that does engage them politically, and Ambassador Khalilzad has been leading that effort but with other members of the team. They are ones as well our mission in Doha.

The Afghanistan affairs mission, once the embassy shut down, was moved to Doha. Ian McCary who runs that is also engaging with their political commission members in Doha.

Mr. KIM OF NEW JERSEY. Yes. And just a final question here, you know. There is a lot that we need to unpack over the course of 20 years, and certainly, these different committees we are on in Congress will see different elements. We have the political side, the diplomatic side, the military intelligence, et cetera, but I wanted to ask you.

Would the administration support a 9/11-like independent commission that would look across all of these different pillars to try to assess an analysis of what happened?

Secretary BLINKEN. I cannot speak for the administration on that. All I can say is that as others have said, we are all going to do our hot washes, to use the vernacular, on the last 9 months since we have been in office. And I hope and expect that all of us will engage in a review of the last 20 years.

Mr. KIM OF NEW JERSEY. Great. Thank you, Mr. Secretary.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman's time has expired.

I now recognize Representative Ronny Jackson of Texas as the Vice Ranking Member for the subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Global Human Rights for 5 minutes.

Mr. JACKSON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Secretary, how many members of the State Department were killed in the recent evacuation efforts in Kabul?

Secretary BLINKEN. Members of the State Department killed? None.

Mr. JACKSON. Okay. Mr. Secretary, in your earlier testimony, you stated that members of the State Department ran into the airport and were serving side by side with the Marines at that gate. Although I deeply appreciate any and all efforts of the State Department personnel on the ground to rescue American citizens, for you to try and ride the coattails of the 13 brave servicemembers that gave their lives in this effort is absolutely shameful in my mind, and it really shows the American people how out of touch you continue to be.

Secretary BLINKEN. I am not riding anyone's coattails, Congressman. For your information, the men and women of my department—

Mr. JACKSON. It was a statement, not a question. It was a statement, not a question.

Secretary Blinken, exactly 1 week ago, four of my constituents escaped Afghanistan, the first known to leave the country since your administration abandoned American citizens in Kabul on the 30th of August. Your officials left this young mother and her three children behind. The youngest was 2 years old. The family remained hidden and terrified for 12 long days until my team and a group of brave patriots on the ground facilitated their evacuation.

During this time, the State Department did nothing to help this family. Instead, you directed them to go to the Taliban checkpoints repeatedly where the mother eventually had a pistol placed to her head and then told them to stay in their homes as the Taliban went door to door searching for American citizens and Afghan allies, all while you were vacationing in The Hamptons and your diplomats were safe in Doha.

Then miraculously, after their safe arrival, the State Department jumped in to claim full responsibility for what had happened. The response from your team is revolting. It takes credit from the brave patriots who risked their lives to actually bring my constituents home safely.

Mr. Secretary, did you even know of this family's existence until you wanted to take credit for their harrowing journey? Also, can you explain to what your team—exactly what your team did to help them escape Afghanistan?

Secretary BLINKEN. My team has been working 24/7 around the clock and around the world to get every American citizen who wishes to leave Afghanistan and their families out. They have been putting themselves on the line. They have been putting everything on the line to do that.

I very much applaud the efforts that people, including yourself, have engaged in to do the same thing, to help bring people out. And I am glad that we are able to work together to do that including in this case, where to the best of my knowledge, we facilitated their departure from Afghanistan, including making sure that we worked to get the Taliban to allow them to leave as well as working at the border with consular officials to make sure that they could be received when they got to Uzbekistan and cared for. So I am glad that we were able to do that together.

This is not about taking credit. I applaud the work that has been done, including by you, and I hope going forward we can continue to do even more of that in closer cooperation and coordination to get any remaining American citizens who wish to leave out.

Mr. JACKSON. Mr. Secretary, while I do thank you—I do thank you for coming to this committee meeting today. I do thank you for staying the extra time so that you could actually hear my statement and my question, I do have to say that I am deeply disappointed in your administration's action and what I consider to be your gross incompetence.

Not only did you risk countless American lives by prematurely and haphazardly withdrawing from Afghanistan, but in the after-

math, you have tried to act as if you have made zero mistakes, and there has been a continuous effort in the State Department to pat yourselves on the back which most Americans at this particular point do not appreciate.

Your tone deaf approach and your attempts to spin the truth and claim victory from this clear blunder is deeply disturbing. This includes your disgusting attempts to seize credit for this evacuation of my constituents.

We will find out later which I think you had very little, if anything to do with. You and the rest of Biden Administration owe the American people an apology. You have ruined any trust we have with our allies and any credibility we have on the world stage.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back. Thank you.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman yields back.

I now recognize Representative Sara Jacobs of California who is the vice chair of the Subcommittee on International Development, International Organizations, and Global Corporate Social Impact for 5 minutes.

Ms. JACOBS. Well, thank you so much, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Mr. Secretary, for answering our questions and for staying so that some of us more junior members get a chance to ask you questions as well.

I first wanted to say that while I have been publicly critical of many of the positions made around the evacuation as a member of the working group that, as you know, I used to work at the State Department, and I have talked to so many former colleagues and friends who were on the ground in Kabul who were working tirelessly, night and day, no sleep for weeks on end, trying to get people out.

And I think it is an incredible disservice to our diplomatic corps and to the brave people who work there every single day to say that they are not deserving of praise. I disagree with some of the things that were made, but the people doing the work around the clock deserve to be praised.

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you.

Ms. JACOBS. Now I want to raise a letter I sent with Senator Merkley and many of my colleagues. While I remain committed to working to get people out of Afghanistan with my colleagues, I also want to make sure that we are doing everything we can to deliver humanitarian assistance and, you know, urging the Treasury Department to issue an OFAC general license.

So I look forward to working with you and the administration to make sure that the 18 million Afghans that are in need are provided support. I think we heard just today from the U.N. how dire that that need is.

I also think, you know, we talked a lot about policy failures in the last few months, in the last 20 years. And I know you are still observing the lessons of the past 2 decades, and I look forward to working with you on that and on the lessons learned, especially as someone who has done a lot of work on—and complex stabilization.

I wanted to followup on something you addressed with my colleague, Mr. Phillips, on a very specific failure we encountered over and over again in Afghanistan, and that is on corruption. Why was the State Department unable to address this issue over 20 years?

And what can we do to make sure that as we work with other countries and promote good governance around the globe that we are not continuing to have those same problems?

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes. That is a great question and one that I do not have a good answer to because it is manifestly a failure of our policy over the last 20 years and one that we need to address because ultimately, that corruption, I think, among other things, undermined any trust or confidence in the government as well as allegiance to the government.

And so when you are asking, you know, Afghan security forces to fight for their country and to fight for a government, when there is that much corruption that is endemic, it is awfully hard to get that allegiance. So you are a hundred percent right to point to that problem.

We are putting a special emphasis in the department at large on trying to more effectively combat corruption around the world, and I think we need to understand very much the lessons of Afghanistan as part of that effort. We certainly welcome working with you and others on that because we see this around the world as a source of profound instability.

Ms. JACOBS. Well, I appreciate that. I will look forward to working with you on that and especially looking at how the way we do our assistance and security assistance feeds into the incentives around corruption.

I know you have been busy, so I am not sure if you have had a chance to read the recently released cigar lessons learned report, but I was wondering specifically what the administration plans on applying going forward on how we are conducting peace building and development in all of the countries we are working in.

Because I think what we saw in Afghanistan was obviously a failure of some of our military strategy, but also that in 20 years, we could not do the development and peace building programs that would have made the rest of the engagement more durable.

So, you know, how do we plan our foreign engagements going forward with realistic goals, space to course correct, and how do we make sure we are actually peace building and helping countries develop and not just, you know, doing the same thing that we just saw did not work in Afghanistan?

Secretary BLINKEN. Well, first, I hope that I can actually get my senior team in place to work on just that. But as we were talking about a little bit earlier, the most senior officials, unfortunately, are stuck in the Senate right now but we do need to—I have seen summaries of the report.

I have not yet read the whole thing, but I have seen the summaries of it. This is going to be an important, very important document in informing what we do going forward and how we do it better. So, again, this is something we welcome working with Congress on in the weeks ahead.

Ms. JACOBS. Well, thank you.

And, Mr. Chair, I yield back.

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentlelady yields back.

I now recognize Young Kim of California who is the vice ranking member of the Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, Central Asia, and Nonproliferation for 5 minutes.

Ms. KIM OF CALIFORNIA. Thank you, Chairman.

Secretary BLINKEN. I appreciate your patience. It has been a long day. I will get right to the point, and I would appreciate if you could keep your answers brief too.

The withdrawal from Afghanistan continues to be a disaster that has been worsened by this administration's response, and I want to be clear the issue is not whether we should have withdrawn but how we withdrew and the complete lack of accountability from this administration.

We left hundreds of Americans stranded behind enemy lines, abandoned our Afghan partners who fought by our side, left behind 500 journalists from the U.S. Agency for Global Media in Afghanistan, and left the fates of women and children in the hands of Taliban.

Let's recognize that many State Departments and their employees risk their lives and work tirelessly over the last months, so I want to thank them for their service. However, due to a vacuum in the leadership from this administration the veterans, ordinary citizens, and congressional offices were forced to step up, and in many cases, take the lead in helping Americans and allies flee the country through independent rescue operations.

Unfortunately, many of these operations, especially charter flights, have met resistance from the State Department every turn. And one of the Afghan SIVs we work with with the Marine veterans to try to evacuate was Sayed Obaidullah Amin. He served heroically and risked his life as a translator for the U.S. forces.

Despite having a pending SIV, P-1, P-2 application, he was abandoned by this administration during the evacuation process. He and his wife were killed at Abbey Gate during the Kabul airport attack, fighting to get to safety, leaving their two infant sons orphans.

There are still P-1 and P-2 applicants and need the State Department's help. It is too late to save his life, but we still have time to save others. My office and other congressional offices have been working with a third party to evacuate civilians, people that this administration left behind.

This group includes Americans, Afghan partners, and civilians of allied Nations. This operation, without the help of the State Department, has secured routes into a neighboring country and has the approval of officials to stage people there for transfer to a safe third country where NGO's stand ready to feed, treat, and process those people.

Without basic support from the State Department, this country has made it very clear that everyone in this group will be sent back to Afghanistan to die at the hands of the Taliban.

Secretary Blinken, they have started moving as we speak, and the first group has 60 people in it, and 40 of them are children. Your team already has all the necessary information that we provided but has been repeatedly refused to provide any assistance. I have called your office two times and talked to your officials. These

people are all doomed if State does not approve and provide transfer to a safe third country.

Secretary Blinken, I need your commitment now that your department will approve and provide transport for these people. Do I have your word that you will make this happen?

Secretary BLINKEN. We are committed, Congresswoman, to working with you and to working with every other member on securing the safe transport for people that you identified and that seek to leave Afghanistan, so we will work directly with you on that, but I remind you that we do not control who leaves the country.

Ms. KIM OF CALIFORNIA. That is why—Secretary Blinken, you do not understand. If we do not do anything right now, even for another day, these people are in grave danger. I need your commitment now.

You are a Department. Your office have all these information. We just need your commitment right now that you will work with them.

Secretary BLINKEN. I have here,—it may be hard to see on the screen. These are all the cases, and I am—no, from the—from members of this committee that we are working on. We have had 26,000. We have responded to 21,000 of them and we are working on every single case to the best of our ability.

But what we are trying to do right now is to put in place a system that recognizes people who can leave, making good on commitments that have been made to us in the international community by the Taliban, and to get that system moving. That involves the airport, it involves land crossings in three different countries, and it involves working with different groups and organizations so that we can get this and get this moving, and we are committed to doing that wherever we possibly can.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentlelady's time has expired.

I now recognize Representative Kathy Manning of North Carolina who is the vice chair of the Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and Global Counterterrorism for 5 minutes.

Ms. MANNING. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, Mr. Secretary, for your patience and for your service on behalf of our country and the American people.

Mr. Secretary, prior to this hearing, I read the agreement reached between the Taliban and the Trump administration, and I was shocked. Basically, President Trump agreed to withdraw all troops, all coalition partners, all civilian personnel by May 1. He agreed to release 5,000 prisoners to work with the U.N. to lift the sanctions against the Taliban, to seek economic cooperation for the reconstruction of Afghanistan, and to refrain from the threat or use of force against Afghanistan or intervene in its domestic affairs.

In exchange, the Taliban agreed to release up to a thousand prisoners. It agreed not to allow its members to attack our personnel on the way out and not to allow Afghanistan to be a base for the training or fostering of terrorists against the U.S. in the future.

I did not see any demand for the protection of Afghan women and girls. I did not see any guarantees that the Taliban will prosecute anyone who commits atrocities against women or girls or Afghan men, for that matter. I did not see any commitment by the Taliban to prosecute people who take steps to attack the United

States or any of our citizens. The Trump administration did not leave you with much to work with, did they?

Secretary BLINKEN. Not much.

Ms. MANNING. Nevertheless, Mr. Secretary, you have stated a commitment to the safety and well being of Afghan women and girls, and I am proud that this committee passed a bipartisan resolution that I authored to support these women at risk.

Unfortunately, the Taliban recently announced that they have abolished the Ministry of Women's Affairs, replacing it with a Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. Certainly this is a very worrisome sign, as is the lack of any women in the Taliban's interim government.

Representative Spanberger has detailed videos and news reports of atrocities that are already taking place.

Do you plan to assemble an international coalition to hold the Taliban accountable for the treatment of women and girls in Afghanistan? And can you tell us how you plan to monitor their safety, and how can the coalition be effective in ensuring those protections?

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes. Thank you, Congresswoman, and in short, the answer is yes. And, in fact, we have already been doing that. We put together a group of leading countries. I led a meeting with about 22 of them, as well as NATO, the European Union, and the United Nations on the expectations of the international community when it comes to the Taliban-led government's conduct to include upholding the rights of women and girls and minorities.

And so there is a clear understanding. It is also enshrined in a U.N. Security Council resolution that we initiated and got passed, and that has some real meaning to it beyond the fact that it is a resolution because there are significant U.N. sanctions on the Taliban.

There are travel bans and other things that if the Taliban is in violation of this U.N. Security Council resolution, to the extent it wants to see those sanctions lifted or travel bans lifted, that is not going to happen.

There are many other points of influence and leverage, and overall, we have made very clear, not just us, countries around the world, including many leading countries have made very clear that the Taliban's conduct will dictate whether they get any support or any legitimacy whatsoever from the international community. And that conduct goes among, other things, critically to how it treats women and girls.

Ms. MANNING. Mr. Secretary, this committee met over Zoom with brave and highly intelligent Afghan women who told us they were determined to stay in Afghanistan and fight for the soul of their country. These extraordinary women who held important professional, educational, and governmental positions in Afghanistan, should they find themselves targeted by the Taliban, will we have their backs? Will our country be willing to help these women and their families escape to safety?

Secretary BLINKEN. We would do everything within our means to have their backs, and so would many other countries around the world with whom we are working. And we look forward also to

working with you in Congress to make sure that we have every possible tool to support these women.

Ms. MANNING. Thank you, Mr. Secretary. I know my time is almost up, so I just want to encourage you to please do everything you can to speed up the SIV processing and to provide assistance to those whose documents, whose passports, documents, applications were destroyed in the embassy in the tumult of the evacuation.

And, again, thank you for your service.

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you.

Chairman MEEKS. I now recognize Representative Jim Costa of California for 5 minutes.

Mr. COSTA. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, Mr. Secretary, for staying the entire length of time so all of us could answer our questions and for your service to our country.

In listening to the hearing today, I am reminded that the old adage that we try in America to limit politics at the water's edge. With all the finger pointing that has been taking place, this maybe a thing of the past. But I would like to focus on the current situation with the P-2 process and the P-1s. We have been trying to work with the State Department, and we have, frankly, been frustrated. What is the extent that the administration is exploring options for in country or virtual processing for P-2 humanitarian patrol applicants?

Secretary BLINKEN. We are looking at all of that, Congressman, and I would very much appreciate working with you, working with your office, and if that is not happening, we will make sure that we fix it. But we are looking at everything to figure out how can we—whether it is an SIV or whether it is a P-1 or P-2 streamline, expedite, consistent, of course, with our security.

Mr. COSTA. Like a lot of my colleagues, I have a lot of constituents, and we have a hospital that an NGO group here in the California valley has sponsored for women and children over the last 13 years. Seventy-five percent of the physicians and nurses are women. Excuse me, 40 percent of them are women and children. They are in great fear. They are minorities in the country, and they have been trying to find a way out.

Are you considering fast tracking the P-2 applicants? And what is the process date the department is looking at scaling up on the high volume of these applicants, and what sort of infrastructure? I mean, it is not equipped to handle, and will the department's—will the State work—will you expedite any humanitarian patrol petitions, parole petitions, and how long is that process for State to finish.

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes. We are looking at all of that. I want to come back to you and come back to Congress on some of the ideas that we have for doing that as well as looking at what resources would be needed to do that because I think we are going to need more support, and this goes across the SIV program to P-1, P-2.

Mr. COSTA. Who would be the key person that our office would work with you folks at State?

Secretary BLINKEN. I am going to have the head of Legislative Affairs in the first instance, her office followup with you and your office, and we can take it from there.

Mr. COSTA. It has been very frustrating. There are about, you know, almost 200 individuals with their families that are kind of in just great frustration and fear of their lives, frankly—

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes.

Mr. COSTA [continuing]. Notwithstanding all the good work that they have done. And so, you know, I am just reminded of the fact that it seems like with what the State Department maybe has not been able to do, and I know you have made a great effort, a humanitarian effort in the evacuation.

But I am working with other folks, and it seems like a modern underground railroad of some kind is taking place with a lot of third parties trying to get people by any means to the Uzbekistan border or to Tajikistan. How do you see that continuing, and with great risk, I might add.

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes. Look. I think that there are people who are doing extraordinary things to try to help get people out of Afghanistan who want to leave, whether it is NGO's, individuals, veterans groups, and others. Wherever possible, we want to make sure that we are coordinated. We want to make sure that we are doing whatever we can to support these efforts.

But we are also working, Congressman, to make sure to the best of our ability that we have in place an overall process, and an overall understanding that will allow people to leave openly and freely with the necessary documents. That would be the best way to do this.

Mr. COSTA. Right. But you are processing these P-2 applicants, and getting some understanding by the Taliban is obviously key to that happening.

Secretary BLINKEN. That is correct.

Mr. COSTA. And so let me just close on this, on the bigger picture at 20,000 feet. You have been asked this question, and please get back to us because these brave people are in great fear of their lives.

Last night I do not know if you saw it, but CNN did a great presentation, 2 hours of 20 years of Afghanistan, was it worth it, under four different administrations. And I remember meeting with Malakey the third time in 2010. I made the same comment that was made earlier. How do you expect to create Democratic institutions where corruption in this part of the world is endemic, it is a way of life, and he gave me a BS answer. What is the lessons to learn here that you have gotten, and you cannot answer that in 10 seconds, but—

Secretary BLINKEN. Well, I think one of them is exactly the one you just cited, Congressman, which is when you have got corruption corroding everything that you are trying to do, it makes it a lot harder, if not impossible, but that is certainly something we need to followup on.

Mr. COSTA. Look forward to working with you. Thank you.

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you.

Chairman MEEKS. I now recognize Representative Juan Vargas of California who is the vice chair of the Subcommittee for the Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security, Migration, and International Economic Policy for 5 minutes.

Mr. VARGAS. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and I want to thank the Secretary. Mr. Secretary, I appreciate the words that you said that you were working with the veterans groups in particular. We stood up—not we. The veterans stood up an incredible group here in San Diego and did heroic work as they did when they were serving.

I hope you continue to work with them and the State Department as a whole. They know the interpreters. They know the people that helped them. And, again, they did magnificent work obviously as soldiers, as airmen, as Marines, and they are doing magnificent work now as citizens trying to help those that helped us.

Secretary BLINKEN. Sure. I agree with you. Yes. Thank you for underscoring that. I very much agree, and we are doing everything we can do work closely with them. As I mentioned, I met with about 75 veterans groups about 10 days ago, and our leadership has been engaged with them across the board as well as the Pentagon and others, so thank you.

Mr. VARGAS. Well, good. The one thing that we have kind of talked around a little bit but haven't really hit square on is the issue of intelligence, and obviously, this is not a classified briefing.

But you did bring up the notion that while the briefing had stated that we thought that it would be 2 years, potentially, I think you said, 18 months to 2 years before the collapse. Then you said the shortest time was maybe by the end of this year. How many months would that have been? So what is the shortest period?

Secretary BLINKEN. That, I believe, was an assessment that was made in July, so 4 or 5 months, 6 months.

Mr. VARGAS. I have to say I read all the classified information. I went to all the briefings. I do not remember anything shorter than that.

Secretary BLINKEN. I do not either, but look. I want to be clear and be fair. You know, there are going to be individuals' voices who may point to something different. As you know, you try to do this with worst case scenarios as well as best case scenarios and other scenarios, and you have to look across the board at all of this. The question is, where does the kind of weight of it land, and that is what I was referring to.

Mr. VARGAS. What I remember and how I remember this, is all the information that I read—and obviously some we cannot discuss in this setting—but nobody said that they would collapse in a month.

Secretary BLINKEN. That is correct.

Mr. VARGAS. Nobody said they would collapse in 2 months. There were some people that were saying that, you know, it might go quicker than 6 months. But this was a real failure of intelligence.

And my concern is this, that I believe that we could have that same failure of intelligence with Iran and its nuclear program. Again, I do not think that we are looking at this wide-eyed and open-minded. I think that Iran, we are going to wake up one of these mornings and find out that our intelligence is very wrong there.

I think we have a very difficult time understanding these religious fanatics and what they would do to either liberate their country as they see it or to create the weapon of choice as they see it.

I do not think we have good intelligence on them. I do not think we understand what they would be willing to do, and it very much concerns me.

We can look at blame, and certainly I agree with Mr. Malinowski. I was very upset when President Trump announced that he had secretly invited the Taliban to come to Camp David, and then the smiling pictures that we saw—and I hope you do not do this—the smiling pictures that we saw with Pompeo and the Taliban, saying that he looked into their eyes and he could see that they were telling the truth and all that kind of crap. I hope you do not do that. I hope you have wide eyes open and not those starry eyes of Mr. Pompeo, looking into the eyes of Taliban and saying, oh, yes, they are going to be good boys this time. They are not.

But, again, I think our intelligence is lacking, and I do not know how we can correct that.

Secretary BLINKEN. Let me just say, this is—look, this is a collective responsibility, and I think all of us, whether it is the intelligence community, whether it is the military, whether it is the State Department, need to make sure that we are doing everything we can to provide the best possible assessments and feeding all of the information in and coming to conclusions. So I think this is a collective responsibility, and that is very important.

You know, Iran, there is lots that goes into that, different things, but when it comes to what we put in place through the agreement that is now no longer being adhered to, the JCPOA, we actually had on the ground, eyes-on intelligence inspections monitoring unlike any we have ever had, and that is different than, you know, assessing someone's intent.

Mr. VARGAS. Well, again, my time is almost up. I do thank you for all the work that you have done, but, again, I do think we got it all wrong with our intelligence. And I think we are going to get it all wrong with Iran, and I think we are going to pay a big price. But, again, I thank you for your hard work. I appreciate it.

I yield back.

Chairman MEEKS. I now recognize Representative Brad Schneider of Illinois, for 5 minutes.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to thank you for hosting this critically important hearing.

And before I go any further, I want to remember and honor the service and sacrifice of our military, as well as our diplomats and others, who have served our Nation in Afghanistan over the last 20 years.

As you, Chairman Meeks, noted at the top of this hearing, 800,000 people have served in our military operations in Afghanistan. 2,461 U.S. personnel have given their life, including, tragically, 11 Marines, one Army soldier, and one member of the Navy who died at Hamid Karzai International Airport last month.

I also want to acknowledge the tremendous effort expended last month to coordinate the evacuation of more than 124,000 people from Afghanistan. Nevertheless, I know we are all concerned to know that Americans and Afghani allies remain in Afghanistan after our last troops left on August 31.

Mr. Secretary, as you have previously affirmed, our Nation remains committed to help any American, as well as citizens of allied

nations and Afghans wanting to leave. I know this body is counting on your commitment there, and please know that we are prepared to assist in any way.

Mr. Secretary, I also want to thank you for staying for a very long hearing to allow all of us to have a chance to speak and ask questions. We have covered a lot of ground today, some of it addressing very difficult issues.

Let's be clear. The current situation in Afghanistan and the tragic events of this August were the consequence of policies taking place over 20 years, not the policies or even the events of the previous 20 weeks or even 20 months.

I can just touch on some of those, going back to the very beginning, as was noted earlier, in December 2001, less than 3 months after the 9/11 attacks, the Taliban leader, Mohammad—Mullah Mohammad Omar, reportedly offered to recognize the new government and surrender their arms, but U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld rejected that.

We can go on into 2010 when we surged to 100,000 troops, but in that, President Obama said that he would begin withdrawing those troops within 18 months, which he did.

By 2010, the Obama Administration came to a sense that there was no political—or no military solution and began low-level negotiations with the Taliban in 2010.

Then jump ahead to last year in 2020, when the U.S. signed an agreement with the Taliban after Donald Trump's administration initiated the first high-level direct U.S. talks with the Taliban.

In November of last year, President Trump ordered the draw-down of our troops.

On January 15 of 2021, the number of U.S. Forces was at 2,500 troops, the lowest level since 2001.

And on April 14 of this year, President Biden announced that though he would not have negotiated the deal that the previous administration did with the Taliban, he would follow through. And we know Kabul fell on August 14, and the last troops left on August 31.

Mr. Secretary, I would like to focus a little bit on the agreement that was struck in 2020. According to the agreement, the Taliban was supposed to prevent terrorists from threatening the U.S. and our allies which, of course, was a farce, given the attack that we saw take place over the course of many months.

My question is, under that agreement, how many prisoners were released as a condition of the negotiations with the Taliban?

Secretary BLINKEN. We prevailed upon—the previous administration prevailed upon the Afghan Government to release about 5,000 prisoners. The Taliban released about 1,000 prisoners.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Did any of these prisoners play a leadership role in the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan?

Secretary BLINKEN. It appears to be the case that some of them played a significant role in leading military operations in various parts of the country, yes.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. So, you know, jumping forward from the agreement, as you said, it left an agenda without a plan—the previous administration left an agenda without a plan.

Based on the 2020 agreement, what would have been the implications of keeping U.S. troops in Afghanistan beyond the deadline set?

Secretary BLINKEN. The implications were very clear, Congressman. Had the President not made good on the agreement reached by the previous administration, the attacks on our forces and partner forces would have resumed, and the offensive to take over Afghanistan's cities would have commenced.

And the result of that would have been that in order to protect ourselves and to prevent the takeover of the country, we would have had to have reintroduced a substantial number of forces into Afghanistan, in effect, restarting and re-upping the war, not ending it.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. So with the last couple of seconds, just to quickly summarize, had we stayed beyond the deadline, we would have had more troops than the 2,500 that started at the beginning of this year. Those troops would have been at risk and engaged in active conflict with the Taliban, likely resulting in casualties to American forces, costs of both blood and treasure for our country. Is that a fair statement?

Secretary BLINKEN. It is.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. My time has expired, but, again, I just implore you, we must do everything we can to bring every American home that wants to come home, all of those special immigrant visa applicants seeking to come to the United States after vetting—

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman's time has expired.

Mr. SCHNEIDER [continuing]. Anything we can do to help you, please let us know.

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you.

Chairman MEEKS. The gentleman's time is expired.

Member questions are now concluded.

I want to first thank Secretary Blinken for his testimony, his patience, and his time here today. He has been accessible to this committee, and we look forward to continuing the relationship that we have as we utilize our oversight responsibilities.

And as I close, I think it is important to recognize that our actions have consequences, and many times these actions are not easily reversible.

The Trump administration's excluding the Ghani government, while legitimizing the Taliban through direct negotiations, fundamentally altered the power of the country. The deal the Trump administration struck with the Taliban forced the Afghan Government to release 5,000 prisoners. It was a deal they failed to obtain a commitment for a cease-fire or a commitment to not attack the Afghan Government, and that failed to obtain a commitment from the Taliban to separate from al-Qaeda.

In exchange, the Trump administration agreed to withdraw all of our troops, to include all nondiplomatic personnel, by May 2021. There was a consequence to this agreement and consequences of the policy decisions that were made throughout the 20 years our military was deployed in Afghanistan.

When I first became chair of this committee, I said that the American foreign policy is in desperate need of humility, and that includes understanding the limits of U.S. military intervention.

And at the start of this hearing, I cited how many Americans were killed over 20 years of war in Afghanistan. But that alone does not capture all the full human cost.

Those numbers do not capture the family members and friends forever changed by this conflict. It does not capture the suffering endured by Afghan civilians trapped in the middle of a civil war.

The costs of war are immeasurable, and not just the human toll. Last year alone resulted in 17 veteran suicides a day, on average. We could not ask our servicemembers to fight overseas without a clear, winnable objective.

As Members of Congress, this is our responsibility. In the weeks and months to come, we will continue our oversight of Afghanistan and take a sober look on how we got here for over 20 years of war and how we can prevent making the same mistakes.

I also would be remiss if I did not say thank you, after 20 years, to all of our military and all of DoD. Thank you to the State Department and all of our diplomats there. Thank you to USAID, USAGM, the Department of Homeland Security, the DEA, the CIA, the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Justice, the Department of Commerce, and of course, our Afghan allies who stood side by side with us for 20 years. I want to thank each and every one of them.

This is not the end. We will conduct, as I have stated earlier, continue our oversight responsibilities, bringing in individuals from the past administrations as we completely oversee and look back and forward to what has been and should be and will be in the future.

And, with that, this hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 7:22 p.m., the committee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

**FULL COMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE**  
**COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS**  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6128

**Gregory W. Meeks (D-NY), Chair**

September 13, 2021

**TO: MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS**

You are respectfully requested to attend an OPEN hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs to be held in Room 2172 of the Rayburn House Office Building. Pursuant to H. Res. 8, Members who wish to participate remotely may do so via Cisco WebEx. The hearing is available by live webcast on the Committee website at <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/>.

**DATE:** Monday, September 13, 2021  
**TIME:** 2:00 p.m., EDT  
**LOCATION:** 2172 Rayburn House Office Building  
**SUBJECT:** Afghanistan 2001-2021: Evaluating the Withdrawal and U.S. Policies - Part I  
**WITNESS:** The Honorable Antony J. Blinken  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of State

**By Direction of the Chair**

*The Committee on Foreign Affairs seeks to make its facilities accessible to persons with disabilities. If you are in need of special accommodations, please call 202/225-5021 at least four business days in advance of the event, whenever practicable. Questions with regard to special accommodations in general (including availability of Committee materials in alternative formats and assistive listening devices) may be directed to the Committee.*



**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS**  
*FULL COMMITTEE ATTENDANCE*

<i>PRESENT</i>	<i>MEMBER</i>
X	Gregory W. Meeks, NY
X	Brad Sherman, CA
X	Albio Sires, NJ
X	Gerald E. Connolly, VA
X	Theodore E. Deutch, FL
X	Karen Bass, CA
X	William Keating, MA
X	David Cicilline, RI
X	Ami Bera, CA
X	Joaquin Castro, TX
X	Dina Titus, NV
X	Ted Lieu, CA
X	Susan Wild, PA
X	Dean Phillips, MN
X	Ilhan Omar, MN
X	Colin Allred, TX
X	Andy Levin, MI
X	Abigail Spanberger, VA
X	Chrissy Houlahan, PA
X	Tom Malinowski, NJ
X	Andy Kim, NJ
X	Sara Jacobs, CA
X	Kathy Manning, NC
X	Jim Costa, CA
X	Juan Vargas, CA
X	Vicente Gonzalez, TX
X	Brad Schneider, IL

<i>PRESENT</i>	<i>MEMBER</i>
X	Michael T. McCaul, TX
X	Christopher H. Smith, NJ
X	Steve Chabot, OH
X	Joe Wilson, SC
X	Scott Perry, PA
X	Darrell Issa, CA
X	Adam Kinzinger, IL
X	Lee Zeldin, NY
X	Ann Wagner, MO
X	Brian J. Mast, FL
X	Brian K. Fitzpatrick, PA
X	Ken Buck, CO
X	Tim Burchett, TN
X	Mark Green, TN
X	Andy Barr, KY
X	Greg Steube, FL
X	Dan Meuser, PA
X	Claudia Tenney, NY
X	August Pfluger, TX
X	Nicole Malliotakis, NY
X	Peter Meijer, MI
X	Ronny Jackson, TX
X	Young Kim, CA
X	Maria Elvira Salazar, FL

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD FROM REPRESENTATIVE  
CONNOLLY

1

**Statement for the Record from Representative Gerald E. Connolly**  
**“Afghanistan 2001-2021: Evaluating the Withdrawal and U.S. Policies – Part 1”**  
**House Foreign Affairs Committee**  
**Monday, September 13, 2021**

As President of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, I am forever appreciative of the solidarity our NATO allies demonstrated by invoking for the first time in the history of the Alliance Article 5 in order carry out a united response to the September 11 attacks, and I honor the sacrifices made by our allies during the two decades we spent fighting together in Afghanistan. After 20 years of war, trillions of dollars, thousands of lives, and tens of thousands of injured servicemembers, however, our presence had long since served its purpose. Withdrawing from Afghanistan was the right decision.

As part of this Committee’s May hearing on Afghanistan, I noted that our top priorities following withdrawal needed to be to ensure the safety of all departing forces, that Afghanistan never again becomes a wellspring for global terrorism, and to preserve the significant political, economic, and social gains made by Afghan citizens, especially women and girls, since 2001. Sadly, these priorities are in peril in the wake of the near-overnight fall of the Afghan government, subsequent takeover by the Taliban, and urgent need to evacuate hundreds of thousands of Afghans over the last month. As I warned in that hearing, Ambassador Khalilzad’s assertion that it was “false” that the Taliban would prevail following our withdrawal did not appear to be based on facts and that we would likely be facing a situation like our withdrawal from Vietnam.

I was always skeptical of the so-called ‘peace process’ between the Afghan government and the Taliban, and I was devastated to see my fears realized. The 2020 U.S.-Taliban bilateral agreement was a misguided and deeply cynical effort by former President Trump to cut a deal with the Taliban to ostensibly prevent terrorist groups like Al Qaeda from using Afghanistan as a sanctuary from which to attack the United States even though the Administration knew that Taliban-Al Qaeda ties remain strong. The recent appointments of individuals like Sirajuddin Haqqani and Khalil Haqqani, members of the US-designated terrorist organization the Haqqani network, to the ‘caretaker’ Taliban government have proven that assessment. However, President Biden understood that remaining in Afghanistan indefinitely, no matter how flawed the agreement, was simply not an option.

I do have serious concerns, however, about how the withdrawal was planned and conducted, particularly where it concerns evacuating at-risk Afghan civilians. For the last 20 years, our servicemembers, non-profit organizations, and government contractors in Afghanistan have relied on the assistance of Afghan employees. Whether serving as security guards, translators or drivers, the success we did manage to achieve in Afghanistan would not have been possible without their help, despite what it meant for their safety. Even after the Taliban, Al Qaeda and ISIS-K no longer had a significant presence in Afghanistan, the men and women who assisted Americans were still met with threats from those who remained loyal to terrorist organizations. We assured them that we would guarantee their safety and would not forget their service.

Fast-forward to August 14<sup>th</sup>, the day the Taliban entered Kabul, and we see a much different story. Thousands of American citizens and Afghan nationals swarmed Hamid Karzai

International Airport (HKIA), desperate to make it onto a flight. Over the next few days, 6,000 United States soldiers quickly returned to Afghanistan to secure the airport and coordinate dozens of military and coalition flights. Our Embassy staff set up shop in HKIA, having abandoned the United States Embassy in Kabul. Staff worked around the clock to process Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants and get as many people onto planes as possible before the final withdrawal date of August 31<sup>st</sup>, a date that I urged the President to reconsider. The urgency increased as more and more reports emerged of security threats and risks to those trying to enter HKIA. Sadly, on the 26<sup>th</sup>, our worst fears were realized when an ISIS-K suicide bomber detonated in the crowd outside the airport, killing 13 U.S. servicemembers and hundreds of Afghans. Unwilling to risk additional American lives, efforts refocused on only evacuating U.S. passport holders, leaving tens of thousands of Afghans to fend for themselves.

Our focus now needs to be on completing the evacuation for everyone still at risk in Afghanistan, which means quickly repairing our immigration system that the Trump administration spent four years dismantling. In the 9 months prior to January 20<sup>th</sup>, there were no SIV interviews conducted, serving to increase the already bloated backlog of applicants seeking safety. In April, I asked for increased appropriations to streamline the SIV process and allow for remote processing, understanding that we were not prepared to offer help to everyone that would need it when we withdrew. I applaud President Biden's recent request that an additional \$6.4 billion be included in the upcoming Continuing Resolution specifically aimed at processing an estimated 50,000 Afghan refugees in the coming year.

We also need to direct immediate resources to Afghan humanitarian parolees. While this program got Afghan citizens out of immediate danger, it offers them almost no assistance once they arrive. I recently toured the Dulles Expo Center, where Afghan evacuees are being held upon arrival, and saw firsthand what little they were able to bring from their former lives. Our local resettlement agencies are doing extraordinary work to provide funding for as many of them as possible, but they were unprepared for the rapid increase in cases. We need to ensure that these organizations have all the support they need, both financial and logistical. I am a proud cosponsor of the WELCOMED Act (H.R. 5168) which would provide the same benefits to humanitarian parolees as are received by refugees and relieve the burden from these agencies.

Finally, it's not just at-risk Afghans that were left behind during our rapid withdrawal. American citizens wishing to leave are still trapped in Afghanistan. My office alone is handling at least a dozen cases. I recognize that charter flights are now leaving Afghanistan with American citizens on board, which is a welcome development, but I feel strongly that we could be doing more.

I recognize the herculean efforts undertaken by the State Department to evacuate as many people as they did in such a short amount of time, but our work is far from over. I look forward to getting answers from the Secretary on how many Afghans still need to be evacuated, status updates on the more than 20,000 names my office submitted for evacuation assistance, and what additional funding and legislation is necessary to guarantee that we keep our promises to the Afghan citizens who supported us for the last 20 years.

## RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

1

**Questions for the Record from Chairman Gregory W. Meeks  
"Afghanistan 2001 – 2021: Evaluating the Withdrawal and U.S. Policies Part 1"  
House Foreign Affairs Committee  
Monday, September 13, 2021**

**Question:**

"How many SIV applicants does the Department assess remain in Afghanistan? How many USRAP referrals and eligible individuals does the Department assess remain in country? Please break it down by P-1, P-2, P-3, and I-730."

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The Department of State continues to prioritize Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applications at every stage of State's responsibility for the SIV process, including by transferring cases to other U.S. embassies and consulates around the world where applicants are able to appear. Although one will not be able to complete visa processing in Afghanistan, we are expediting continuing SIV processing at all other stages of the process and assessing locations for processing outside of Afghanistan. This effort is of utmost importance to the U.S. government and our commitment to continue to provide services has no expiration date.

As of October 6, 2021, the SIV pipeline has approximately 27,000 principal applicants. Over 19,000 are at the initial stage of the process, pending applicant action to submit a complete set of documents for consideration of eligibility by the Chief of Mission (COM) committee. At this time, the Department of State continues to receive and process new requests for SIV status and is assessing how many applicants remain in Afghanistan or have moved to third countries.

Over 25,000 referrals have been submitted to the Afghan P-1 and P-2 refugee resettlement program to date, although thousands more remain to be processed. As PRM is still conducting quality checks on the data, it is too soon to report on the number of P-1 and P-2 referrals that are inside or outside of Afghanistan. We do not have any P-3 applicants in Afghanistan.

**Question:**

"How many SIVs were on the flights that departed?"

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* Many of the individuals who were relocated out of Afghanistan were at various stages of Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) processing. The Department of State is currently assessing how many individuals had outstanding SIV applications.

**Question:**

"Have those who were on the flights, and who were not SIV candidates, been vetted for human rights?"

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* All Afghans relocated to the United States as a part of Operation Allies Refuge are processed in accordance with all relevant immigration laws and practices.

**Question:**

“What percentage of those on flights were DOD referred?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* During operations in Afghanistan in August 2021, the United States government and our allies and USG partners facilitated the departure of 124,000 individuals on U.S. military aircraft, foreign military aircraft, and charter aircraft organized by private groups. Not all of these travelers went to the United States as their final destination. DHS, working with its representatives located at the various military safe havens, continues to process information on Afghans at the safe havens and ultimately will be in the best position to provide the most accurate breakdown of the various categories of individuals relocated to the United States as a part of Operation Allies Welcome.

**Question:**

“What led to decision to close the United States Embassy in Kabul?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The safety and security of U.S. citizens and our personnel are top priorities for the Department. The U.S. embassy in Kabul suspended operations on August 31, 2021 due to the security situation in Afghanistan.

**Question:**

“Was there a plan agreed to with the Taliban that allowed a two-week grace period to allow for evacuations?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The United States engaged in communications with the Taliban on matters of important U.S. interests, including the removal of U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents from Afghanistan. As part of these communications, the Taliban moderated their actions in ways that allowed us to complete the mission. On August 15, the Taliban announced they would not enter Kabul forcefully and were negotiating for a peaceful transition of power. President Ghani fled the country on the same day, and top members of the Taliban military commission arrived at the presidential palace in Kabul as Taliban fighters took positions at key posts in the city. I refer you to the Department of Defense for questions about security during the operation. In conjunction with rest of the United State Government, the Department remains committed, to providing Congress with any agreement or arrangement with the Taliban subsequent to the

February 29, 2020 U.S.-Taliban Agreement, consistent with Section 1217(b)(2) of the William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 (P.L. 116-283), but has not identified any such agreement or arrangement, including with respect to these operations.

**Question:**

“From where will the United States conduct over the horizon counter terrorism operations?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* As President Biden has articulated, it is critical for the United States to retain over the horizon counter-terrorism capabilities to prevent, detect, and disrupt terrorism threats. We refer you to the Department of Defense for questions regarding how they are postured to execute over the horizon counter terrorism operations.

**Question:**

“Does the Department assess the Haqqani network has aspiration to conduct attacks on the United States homeland or interests outside of South Asia?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The Haqqani Network was designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization because of the threat it posed to U.S. nationals and the national interest of the United States. The Intelligence Community has the best insight into whether the Haqqani Network harbors aspirations to attack the United States or our interests outside of South Asia, but the Haqqani Network does not have a track record of targeting Americans or U.S. interests outside of Afghanistan.

**Question:**

“How does the Department assess the relationship between Jaish-e-Mohammed and the Taliban?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* While the Department does not have indications of the Taliban providing any specific assistance to Jaish-e-Mohammed for planning or conducting attacks outside of Afghanistan, this subject is best addressed by the intelligence community. We continue to hold the Taliban to their commitment not to allow terrorist groups to use Afghan soil threaten the security of the United States or its allies.

**Question:**

“How does the Department assess the relationship between Lashkar-e-Tayyiba and the Taliban?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* While the Department does not have indications of the Taliban providing any specific assistance to Lashkar-e-Tayyiba for planning or conducting attacks outside of Afghanistan, this subject is best addressed to the intelligence community. We continue to hold the Taliban to their commitment not to allow terrorist groups to use Afghan soil threaten the security of the United States or its allies.

**Question:**

“Has the Department captured all of SRAR Khalilzad’s WhatsApp messages with the Taliban dating from 2018 to September 13? How many messages does this entail?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* In the context of the negotiations in which Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad participated, where the preferred method of communication among non-U.S. government participants was through the use of messaging platforms, he adapted to such use as needed. Such use has been subject to the Federal Records Act and Department guidance as to the preservation of communications on Departmental systems. The Department has confirmed that Ambassador Khalilzad took the steps required for the preservation of such materials under the Federal Records Act and Department guidance.

**Question:**

“Is the Administration considering pursuing any new, additional temporary humanitarian evacuation visa categories for other vulnerable Afghans to provide for people who may not qualify under any of these programs? What are the impediments to more speedy processing of existing visa and parole mechanisms?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* We are continuing to examine all available avenues to provide protection for vulnerable Afghans, including refugees and asylum seekers, internally displaced Afghans, victims of conflict, women, children, journalists, persons with disabilities, members of ethnic and religious minority groups and other extremely at-risk populations.

Our commitment to providing humanitarian assistance inside Afghanistan also has not changed. The United States is the largest single donor of humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, and we will continue our support for vulnerable populations in Afghanistan and in neighboring countries in the region. Our humanitarian assistance for Afghans in need allows our partners to provide lifesaving food, nutrition, protection, shelter, livelihoods opportunities, essential health care, water, sanitation, and hygiene services to respond to the humanitarian needs generated by conflict, drought, and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Admission into the United States, including the granting of humanitarian parole or significant public benefit parole, is overseen by the Department of Homeland Security.

U.S. immigration law and Department of State regulations require immigrant visa applicants to appear before a consular officer to take an oath and execute the visa application biometrically, in addition to submitting to the collection of biometric information for security vetting. The suspension of operations at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul has made it impossible to provide visa and parole processing in Afghanistan. All visa services for Afghan nationals are being provided at other immigrant visa processing posts. Our consular posts in Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Jordan, India, Kosovo, Poland, Ukraine, and Germany have all processed or interviewed Afghan Special Immigrant Visa applicants since the drawdown. We defer to the Department of Homeland Security on parole and adjustment of status mechanisms.

**Question:**

“Improving access to quality education, especially for girls, has been a key objective for United States foreign assistance in Afghanistan over the past two decades, and our investment has contributed to significant progress for Afghan children and youth. From 2001 to 2021, the number of children enrolled in general education (grades 1-12) in Afghanistan rose from 0.9 million (with almost no girls) to 9.2 million (39 percent girls). The number of schools has also increased from 3,400 to 16,400.

- Will the United States continue to support education in Afghanistan to protect these gains and prevent backsliding, especially for Afghan women and girls?
- Furthermore, will the administration expand the license to operate humanitarian programs in Afghanistan to allow for continued education assistance?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* We have been clear on our intention to work alongside the international community to preserve the gains over the past 20 years that increased the rights of women and girls. We are deeply worried about Afghan women and girls, particularly their rights to education, work, and freedom of movement. We call on those in positions of power and authority across Afghanistan to guarantee their protection. Also, we will continue to press the Taliban on the need to respect the rights and dignity of all Afghan women and girls in terms of their meaningful participation in political processes and public life, as well as access to education and employment.

Both the President and I have made clear our enduring commitment to support the Afghan people, especially women, children, and members of minorities groups. As part of an ongoing review of assistance to support the Afghan people, the Department recently determined that community basic education programs promote U.S. national interests and should continue to the extent possible in support of the Afghan people. Otherwise, prohibited transactions that are ordinarily incident and necessary to such activities are authorized by a specific license updated by the Department of the Treasury on September 21. We believe that these sets of programs complement humanitarian assistance programming, provide support to Afghans at risk, and help mitigate the humanitarian impacts of further economic collapse

**Questions for the Record from Ranking Member Michael T. McCaul  
“Afghanistan 2001 – 2021: Evaluating the Withdrawal and U.S. Policies Part 1”  
House Foreign Affairs Committee  
Monday, September 13, 2021**

**Question:**

“What was the State Department’s contingency plan in the event of a collapse in the Afghan government?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The Department of State engaged in prudent contingency planning with interagency partners for a range of scenarios in Afghanistan that included a possible suspension of operations in Afghanistan and the establishment of operations in a third country. The planning scenarios were based on a range of potential security conditions on the ground and a declining level of mission functions.

**Question:**

“Did the administration at any point commit to the Taliban to be out by August 31<sup>st</sup>?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* President Biden announced the following on July 8, 2021: “When I announced our drawdown in April, I said we would be out by September, and we’re on track to meet that target. Our military mission in Afghanistan will conclude on August 31st. The drawdown is proceeding in a secure and orderly way, prioritizing the safety of our troops as they depart.”

**Question:**

“Has the administration made any commitments, financial, sanctions-related, or otherwise, to the Taliban to enable our evacuation operations?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* I remain committed to keeping Congress informed of any agreement or arrangement with the Taliban subsequent to the February 29, 2020 U.S.-Taliban Agreement, as well as materials relevant to such agreement or arrangement, consistent with section 1217(b)(2) of the William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 (P.L. 116-283) which the Department has identified and is under the purview of the State Department.

**Question:**

“What were the conditions on the ground that resulted in the CDA’s decision to initiate non-combatant evacuation operations?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The safety and security of U.S. citizens and our personnel is the top priority for the Department. On April 27, the Department ordered the departure of U.S. government employees from U.S. Embassy Kabul due to increasing violence and threat reports in Kabul. The U.S. Embassy continued to adjust the footprint of the Embassy based on the security environment and began relocating Special Immigrant Visa applicants in July 2021. The Embassy released 26 consular messages to U.S. citizens in Afghanistan between April 27 and August 31, 2021 due to the dynamic security situation. On August 6, 2021, the Taliban captured the provincial capital of Nimroz and was threatening the provincial capital of Jowzjan, and by August 12, 2021, had captured 10 provincial capitals. As a result of the steady Taliban encroachment of the Kabul province, the Department of State requested Department of Defense support to execute a noncombatant evacuation operation of Kabul.

**Question:**

“Who made the decision to execute noncombatant evacuation orders, what date, and what were the conditions on the ground that prompted this decision?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* On August 6, 2021, the Taliban captured the provincial capital of Nimroz and was threatening the provincial capital of Jowzjan. By August 14, 2021, the Taliban had captured 24 of 34 provincial capitals. The U.S. embassy began relocating personnel under Chief of Mission (COM) security responsibility from the embassy compound to U.S. facilities at Kabul International Airport. Senior Department leadership requested Department of Defense evacuation assistance on August 14, 2021. The Executive Secretary memorialized the request via a transmitted memorandum on August 16, 2021.

**Question:**

“Why were consular services not made available at alternate locations, such as HKIA, prior to the evacuation given the urgent need for such services to be available for Amcits, LPRs, and Afghan allies during that period?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The U.S. embassy in Kabul provided consular services at the embassy compound until August 14 when it relocated its operations to Kabul International Airport (KIA). The consular team at KIA, supported remotely by domestic and overseas consular personnel, continued to provide emergency services to the best of their ability until their departure.

**Question:**

“How much money has the State Department paid to third parties for support in evacuation operations at HKIA and Mazar-i-Sharif beginning in August 2021? What funding source did these funds originate from?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The Department has employed all available resources and funding authorities in supporting evacuation operations at Kabul International Airport (KIA) and Mazar-I-Sharif since August, including partnering with DoD to effect swift evacuation via military and charter aircraft as well as private aircraft, when available. Additionally, the Department established a network of temporary locations (“lily pads”) in Qatar, Germany, and other countries to facilitate onward movement to the United States and other endpoint locations. These activities were funded using \$150.4 million from the Emergencies in Diplomatic and Consular Services (EDCS) account, including \$92.4 million obligated for State-contracted flights, “lily pad” operations, and allowances for evacuated Foreign Service and locally employed staff as well as \$58.0 million reserved for DoD reimbursement for KIA evacuations attributable to American citizens and Chief of Mission personnel.

**Question:**

“Will the Department seek reimbursement from Amcits and LPRs for military or charter flights they took as part of the evacuation?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The Department of State has not charged any private U.S. citizen, vulnerable Afghan, or third country national to depart on a Department-arranged flight out of Kabul, and individuals have not been asked to sign a promissory note.

**Question:**

“What is the outcome of Embassy staff belongings that were left at the compound? How much is the Department spending and from what funding source to provide temporary house, per diem, and related funds to Embassy staff that have been evacuated and assigned to different duty stations?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The U.S. government has not accessed the embassy compound. We are unable to currently assess the status of personal belongings left behind. We have advised staff to treat their belongings as lost to meet claims’ deadlines.

To date, the Department has obligated \$9.8 million in Emergencies in the Diplomatic and Consular Service funding for allowances and stipends, including \$2.8 million for evacuated

Foreign Service and \$7 million for locally employed staff. Embassy staff evacuated and reassigned to different duty stations, will no longer receive evacuation-related temporary housing or per diem.

**Question:**

“What is the current status of Taliban access to the Embassy compound?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* We have information indicating that U.S. government property has been moved around within and removed from U.S. Embassy Kabul grounds. We have no information indicating that buildings on the embassy compound have been entered since suspension of operations.

**Question:**

“Where is Marc Frerichs and what is the Department doing to gain his safe return to the United States?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The Taliban have claimed they are holding U.S. Navy veteran Mark Frerichs. We continue to raise with the Taliban at every possible opportunity the need for Mark’s immediate release and safe return. The Taliban must immediately release Mark Frerichs. We have been clear that any legitimacy and support will have to be earned. We have also sought assistance from senior leaders in Qatar, Pakistan, and others while we continue to press the Taliban to release Mark.

**Question:**

“The February 2020 Agreement discusses withdrawal of all foreign forces. When did the U.S. government begin discussing withdrawal of Americans from Embassy Kabul with Taliban?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The safety and security of U.S. citizens, our personnel and their dependents is the Department’s highest priority. U.S. Embassy Kabul and various Department offices participated with the interagency in Noncombatant Evacuation Operations planning discussions throughout the spring and summer of 2021. Planning efforts included a range of evacuation scenarios. U.S. Embassy Kabul worked closely with U.S. Forces–Afghanistan to ensure close coordination with the U.S. military on the ground in Afghanistan, and with USCENTCOM.

**Question:**

“Who urged the U.S. government not to begin evacuation Americans from Kabul and when did these urgings get conveyed to the Department and to whom? Why did the Department place American lives in Afghanistan at risk by not immediately beginning evacuation operations at the cost of maintaining a perception that the U.S. government remained confident in the Afghan government’s ability to retain control over the country once all U.S. forces had departed Afghanistan?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The safety and security of U.S. citizens and our personnel is a top priority for the Department. On April 27, the Department ordered the departure from U.S. Embassy Kabul of U.S. government employees due to increasing violence and threat reports in Kabul. The embassy consulted with appropriate Afghan government officials throughout the spring and summer evacuations operations. The U.S. embassy began relocating Special Immigrant Visa applicants in July 2021. The embassy released 26 consular messages to U.S. citizens in Afghanistan between April 27 and August 31, 2021, due to the dynamic security situation.

**Question:**

“Who made the final decisions on who to allow through the gates at HKIA? Who made the decision to not allow individuals who were prompted by the Department to come to the airport entry at the gates at HKIA once they arrived?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The safety and security of U.S. citizens and our personnel is a top priority for the Department. Access into the airport was controlled by the Department of Defense. Due to the deteriorating security environment and specific and credible threats to Kabul International Airport (KIA), on August 21, 2021, U.S. Embassy Kabul issued a security alert and urged U.S. citizens to avoid traveling to the airport and to avoid airport gates. U.S. embassy personnel were processing people at multiple gates. However, due to large crowds and security concerns, gates opened and closed without notice. There was limited capacity at KIA to process individuals seeking relocation assistance to include those that had not been notified by U.S. government personnel or Allies and partners to travel to KIA.

**Question:**

“On March 10, 2021, you stated before this Committee that ‘The President’s goal is very, very clear. It’s [to end] the conflict. It’s to bring our troops home. And it’s to ensure that Afghanistan does not become a haven for terrorism and an ongoing threat to the United States.’ How do you characterize the current state of Afghanistan under the rule of Taliban and Haqqani leadership?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* We went to Afghanistan over 20 years ago to bring justice to those who attacked us on 9/11 and to ensure that it would not happen again. We achieved those objectives

long ago. Osama bin Laden was killed in 2011 – a decade ago. Al-Qaida’s capabilities were degraded significantly, including its ability to plan and conduct external operations. We intend to monitor and mitigate the threat of terrorist activity emanating from Afghanistan and we will hold the Taliban accountable for preventing terrorist groups, such as al-Qaida and ISIS-K, from using Afghanistan as a base for external operations that could threaten the United States and/or our allies.

**Question:**

“Do you have concerns that information shared with the Taliban during the evacuation and afterwards was relayed to members of the Haqqani Network, a designated foreign terrorist organization?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The United States Government takes steps to ensure that any information it shares is not misused. The Department of State would refer you to the Department of Defense and the Intelligence Community for further details on information shared with the Taliban.

**Question:**

“You noted during our hearing that we will maintain ‘robust counterterrorism capabilities in the region’ – what exactly are those capabilities? Where are they located in the region? Are these capabilities solely over-the-horizon capabilities based in the gulf? How is the administration going to secure our counterterrorism interests with no American eyes and ears on the ground, no allied eyes and ears on the ground, and no partner force eyes and ears on the ground to inform us about threats that are growing in this terrorist safe haven?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* As the President has articulated, it is critical for the United States to retain over the horizon counter-terrorism capabilities to prevent, detect and disrupt terrorism threats. We will continue to engage partners, allies, and key states around the world on how best to bolster and maintain these capabilities. We refer you to the Department of Defense for questions regarding how they are postured to support these operations. We refer you to the appropriate Intelligence Community agencies for questions on intelligence collection capabilities for Afghanistan.

**Question:**

“Why did you fail to secure basing, ISR, and strike capability agreements with 3<sup>rd</sup> countries bordering Afghanistan? Where do efforts to secure these agreements stand? Is Russia being considered by the administration as an option for such an agreement?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* Fighting terrorism is a global effort. We will continue to engage partners, allies, and key states around the world on how best to address it. We are coordinating closely with the Department of Defense to carry out President Biden’s directive to maintain vigilance and robust counterterrorism capabilities in the region to respond to emerging threats. I would address any questions about military planning and capabilities to my colleagues at the Department of Defense.

**Question:**

“During your opening statement you implied that it was acceptable to leave Americans behind in Afghanistan because we have done it before – ‘for example, in Libya, Syria, Venezuela, Yemen, and Somalia.’ Is this the official Biden Administration position? Was the Biden Administration’s commitment to get every American and Afghan partner out before our withdrawal was completed genuine?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The safety and security of American citizens is the State Department’s top priority in Afghanistan. The evacuation operation in August succeeded in evacuating more than 124,000 American citizens, foreign nationals, and Afghans seeking to depart Afghanistan. We continue to seek the safe passage of all U.S. citizens and their immediate family members, Lawful Permanent Residents, our Afghans allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans who wish to leave Afghanistan.

**Question:**

“What are the Department’s lessons learned and biggest takeaways from this failed drawdown and evacuation to inform our actions moving forward so we never leave Americans and partners behind again?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The Department is beginning the process to convene Department and interagency stakeholders to gather and preserve lessons learned after this critical operational event.

**Question:**

“What is Taliban leadership’s relationship with Al Qaida?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* On August 31, al-Qa’ida released a public statement congratulating the Taliban on their “victory” in Afghanistan. The Taliban did not issue any public response to the statement, though in a September 21 interview Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid repeated a longstanding Taliban message that al-Qa’ida does not have a presence in Afghanistan.

Separately, international media reported that Amin al Haq, Osama bin Laden's former security chief, entered Afghanistan and transited to Nangarhar on August 30. Speaking to the BBC on September 29, Mujahid noted that the group had "given guarantees to the world that there will not be any threat against any country including the United States from Afghan soil." "We are committed to the agreement which has been signed in Doha between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and the United States," he continued.

The United States continues to call on the Taliban to fulfill their commitments, which include preventing any group or individual that would threaten the United States or its allies from training, fundraising, and recruiting, and not hosting them. The Taliban's adherence to their commitments has been uneven, and we continue to expect that they will fully implement the U.S.-Taliban Agreement.

**Question:**

"What is your assessment of Taliban forces' ability to defeat ISIS-K?"

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The Taliban have previously demonstrated the ability to counter ISIS-K and contest ISIS-K's ability to hold territory, although coalition operations had heavily attrited ISIS forces in both circumstances. We continue to assess the Taliban's ability to counter ISIS-K in urban environments.

**Question:**

"During your opening statement, you said, 'In March, we began urging them [American citizens] to leave the country. In total, between March and August, we sent 19 specific messages with that warning – and with offers of help, including financial assistance to pay for plane tickets.'

- o Beginning in March and ahead of the July 1 Taliban offensives, Embassy Kabul issued 41 news and events alerts. FIVE of these 41 were security alerts, the first occurred on March 18 and was issued twice that day (the exact same alert) ...it said, '**U.S. citizens already in Afghanistan should consider departing.**' The 36 other alerts issued during this time reflected the following:
  - Visits to Kabul by Ambassador Khalilzad.
  - Afghan holiday announcements.
  - Promoting USAID's work in Afghanistan on advancing women's rights.
  - Meetings between the President, you and Secretary Austin with President Ghani and National Reconciliation Chair Abdullah Abdullah.
  - A request for proposals for U.S. Government-funded project in Afghanistan.
  - On June 11, an announcement that on June 13, the consular section would be suspending all visa operations due to a third wave of COVID.
  - On June 26, a quote from the President Biden after meeting with President Ghani, "the partnership between Afghanistan and the United States is not ending...we're going to stick with you." We will continue to support the

Afghan National Defense and Security Forces and will provide \$3 billion in security assistance in 2022. That is a quote from President Biden's remarks to President Ghani.

- How would any American in Afghanistan take the March 18 or April 27 security alerts at face value? What could the Department have done to communicate clearly and directly to Americans and legal permanent residents that they should depart Afghanistan?"

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The Department of State has had a Travel Warning/Advisory for Afghanistan that has warned U.S. citizens not to travel there for over 20 years. On April 27, we ordered the departure of embassy personnel and informed U.S. citizens in Afghanistan of this via our USCIT direct [MASCOT] messaging system. In this message we said they should strongly consider departing and if they stayed, we would only be able to provide minimal assistance. Our goal in our Travel Warnings/Advisories and MASCOT messaging is to provide the most up-to-date security information to U.S. citizens traveling or living in a country in order to assist them in making informed decisions.

**Question:**

"How is crisis management responsibility divided among the Management (M), Administration (A), Secretary (S), Consular Affairs (CA), and Diplomatic Security (DS) bureaus? Please detail how each of these bureaus responded to the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan July/August 2021."

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* For any crisis, bureaus across the Department, to include M, A, S, CA, and DS, coordinate and bring together expertise and resources from their requisite authorities and responsibilities. These same bureaus worked closely on response efforts with the Afghanistan Task Force.

**Question:**

"Who in the Department has chief responsibility over aviation management? Which senior officials play supporting roles? Please explain how these officials responded to the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan July/August 2021."

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* We defer to the Department of Defense on questions pertaining to aviation management at Kabul International Airport in July/August 2021.

**Question:**

"When was the last time Embassy Kabul updated its Emergency Action Plan (EAP)?"

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* U.S. Mission Afghanistan certified its Emergency Action Plan update on April 8, 2021. On May 4, 2021, the Committee on Overseas Risk Evaluation completed its annual review of U.S. Mission to Afghanistan's Decision Points.

**Question:**

“When was the last time Embassy Kabul updated its F-77 form?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The most recent F-77 report for the U.S. Mission to Afghanistan was released on June 17, 2021.

**Question:**

“What steps has the State Department taken to account for all defense articles, military vehicles, night vision goggles, and the like authorized by the State Department for transfer to the Afghan forces?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The vast majority of defense articles including military vehicles, aircraft, and night vision goggles were transferred to Afghan security forces under DoD's Title 10 Afghanistan Security Forces Fund. The State Department relies on the resources and capabilities of DoD to track the status of any defense article that was transferred to Afghanistan through U.S. security assistance and security cooperation programs and thus I respectfully defer to DoD for that additional information.

**Question:**

“What major U.S. military equipment is now in the possession of the Taliban?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The vast majority of equipment transferred to the Afghan military was provided through the Afghanistan Security Forces Fund (ASFF), a DoD-managed fund under its Title 10 authority. The State Department relies on the very significant resources and capabilities of the DoD to track equipment transferred to the Afghan security forces through U.S. security assistance and security cooperation programs, including those transferred through the ASFF. We defer to DoD to provide this information.

**Question:**

“Why did the Charge D ’Affairs, Ambassador Wilson allow the Department of Defense to continue making deliveries of military aircraft (Blackhawk helicopters and Super Tucanos) to the Afghan Air Force in July and August, despite the Taliban’s continued seizure of provinces?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The Department defers to DoD on additional details regarding U.S. military support to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces.

**Question:**

“What conversations have occurred with the Taliban on humanitarian access and operational independence of our partners, what assurances if any have been provided, and are there certain areas/provinces that we are prioritizing? What steps are being taken to mitigate diversion, security threats to partners, and waste, fraud, and abuse of U.S. assistance in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan? Given the lack of U.S. diplomatic and military presence on the ground, how will you monitor and enforce proper implementation of U.S.-funded assistance programs?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* U.S. Government representatives have pressed for the ability to deliver humanitarian assistance with neutrality, impartiality, and independence, particularly for our partners that have committed to staying and delivering assistance in Afghanistan. We are pushing for united messaging from international leaders and across UN agencies to ensure broad humanitarian access and operational independence for all humanitarian actors. Unimpeded access is necessary across all of Afghanistan.

State and USAID bureaus are assessing their non-humanitarian assistance programs, the operating environment, and other potential issues to mitigate risks. As part of that process, bureaus are planning for how they will make adjustments to monitor and evaluate continuing programs from outside Afghanistan, including through third parties, given the current footprint. State and USAID and our implementers have experience using similar mechanisms, such as in Syria. Both agencies have years of experience in successfully managing projects remotely or through third party monitors inside and outside of Afghanistan. Additionally, bureaus undertake steps to guard against the risk that our programs could benefit terrorists or their supporters. This may include mitigation measures such as name check vetting and specific program design to reduce those risks. Our partners are also required to mitigate against diversion, fraud, waste, and abuse, including such incidents involving the Taliban and Haqqani Network.

State and USAID bureaus are assessing their non-humanitarian assistance programs, the operating environment, and other potential issues to mitigate risks. As part of that process, bureaus are planning for how they will make adjustments to strengthening the monitoring and evaluation of continuing programs from outside Afghanistan, including through existing third parties, given that the operations of the U.S. embassy in Kabul are suspended. A number of bureaus have years of experience in successfully managing projects from outside of Afghanistan.

Additionally, bureaus undertake steps to guard against the risk that our programs could benefit to terrorists or their supporters. This may include mitigation measures such as name check vetting and specific program design to reduce those risks.

**Question:**

“What are the specific benchmarks and conditions under which the administration would consider the resumption of non-humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The United States has prioritized support for Afghan refugees, refugee returnees, and other forcibly displaced persons for years, and our enduring commitment is clear. We remain engaged through our full diplomatic and assistance toolkit to support the peaceful, stable future the Afghan people want and deserve. We will also work with the international community to help ensure that the Taliban follow through on their commitments and advance unhindered humanitarian access, freedom of movement for aid workers of all genders, safety and security of humanitarian staff, and safe passage for all those who wish to leave Afghanistan.

**Question:**

“Has the State Department Office of Legal Adviser (L) provided you with any guidance as to the U.S. executive branch’s official position on whether the Taliban’s takeover qualifies as a coup d’état and what ramifications that determination has on foreign assistance?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* Afghanistan’s military forces did not support or participate in the Taliban’s advance on Kabul, nor did they depose President Ghani or other leadership of the government of Afghanistan.

**Question:**

“What is being done to restore credibility with our implementing partners and how is the Department working to evacuate up to tens of thousands of implementing partner staff looking to get out of the country?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The evacuation and relocation effort has been a monumental task and the U.S. government understands the need to continue improving our coordination across agencies, as we have done and continue to do. The State Department has established a team, led by the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts, to coordinate across government agencies and with advocacy groups, nongovernmental organizations, and others. The team is working closely with USAID, the Department of Defense, Department of Energy, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and other partners to facilitate for the departure of those who wish to leave Afghanistan.

The initial priority is on supporting departures of U.S. citizens and Lawful Permanent Residents and their immediate families. We are also facilitating the ongoing departure of Special Immigrant Visa holders and other Afghans who worked with and for the U.S. government. We are actively engaged with USAID and implementing partner organizations to discuss their staff who may still be in Afghanistan and wish to leave.

**Question:**

“When did the Biden Administration begin consulting with NATO allies on the timing and logistics of the withdrawal prior to its start? Did that consultation extend beyond dictating that the withdrawal was coming?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The United States consulted with Allies and partners throughout the process of ending NATO’s military presence in Afghanistan, as NATO’s Secretary General has publicly noted. The Secretary of Defense and I discussed Afghanistan in multiple ministerial meetings and secured Allied consensus at the North Atlantic Council on April 20, 2021 for the withdrawal of troops. Other senior U.S. officials also consulted in Brussels. Allies collectively decided to end our military engagement after assessing where it made the most sense to position our militaries based on the global threat picture as it exists today.

**Question:**

“Did any U.S. allies advocate for an extension of the August 31st withdrawal deadline? What was the U.S. response?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The United States consulted with Allies and partners throughout the process of ending NATO’s military presence in Afghanistan, as NATO’s Secretary General has noted publicly. The Secretary of Defense and I attended multiple ministerial meetings at NATO and conducted multiple bilateral meetings with Allied counterparts. In those discussions, we outlined the reasons behind withdrawing troops by August 31 and engaged in a robust dialogue. Throughout the twenty years we had troops in Afghanistan we have adhered to the “in together, consult together, leave together” principle.

**Question:**

“Do you believe Russia can be a partner in either mitigating a potential humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan or holding the Taliban accountable on counterterrorism? Pakistan? The PRC?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* As a regional power with significant interests in Central Asia, Russia has reasons to hold the Taliban accountable on counterterrorism. While Russia cannot bring a significant foreign aid budget to bear in mitigating a potential humanitarian crisis, it does seek a role as a key negotiating partner in the region, and as such can potentially prove a partner on key issues such as ensuring the allowance of unimpeded humanitarian access. Through regional diplomacy Pakistan has made repeated, public calls for the international community to directly engage with the Taliban to halt further violence, prevent economic collapse, and avert a humanitarian disaster. Further, Pakistan has provided humanitarian assistance to the Taliban and have made similar calls for other countries to support. In September 2021, the PRC pledged approximately \$31 million worth of grant-based aid to Afghanistan, including food supplies and coronavirus vaccines.

**Question:**

“President Putin reportedly made clear to President Biden at the June 16th Geneva summit that he opposed any U.S. counterterrorism presence in Central Asia following the withdrawal. Did President Putin’s opposition alter any U.S. plans on how to contend with the potential terrorist threat emanating from Afghanistan after the withdrawal?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The United States remains committed to countering terrorist threats emanating from Afghanistan, whether or not Russia agrees with our approach. We have the arrangements necessary with partners in the region for continued U.S. over-the-horizon operations in Afghanistan. These arrangements have allowed the United States to maintain uninterrupted counterterrorism operations over Afghanistan. We will continue to work with partners to adjust and maintain these arrangements as necessary.

**Question:**

“What conversations has this administration had with Russia and the PRC about preventing Afghanistan from transforming into a terrorist safe haven once again? Are you concerned about growing Russian and CCP influence in Afghanistan?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* Russia has serious concerns about Afghanistan’s possible role as a haven for global terrorism, especially with respect to ISIS-K. The Biden Administration has had, and continues to have, frequent conversations with Moscow to coordinate in pressing the Taliban to adhere to the counterterrorism commitments of the U.S.-Taliban Agreement. Russian and PRC influence in Afghanistan is likely to grow in the future due to the geographic proximity of these nations, but neither has thus far leapt ahead of international consensus to recognize the Taliban’s so-called “caretaker” government in pursuit of such influence.

**Question:**

“What does official U.S. coordination with private groups and organizations continuing to facilitate charter flights and evacuations out of Afghanistan look like? Who is the administration’s point person for engaging with these private groups?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* We are aware that private entities have arranged for private charter flights out of Afghanistan. In many cases, the State Department does not have full visibility on the composition of the flight manifests for these private charters, making it difficult to verify the identities of those on board and protect U.S. national security and that of our partners in the evacuation effort.

The State Department has established a team, led by the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts, to coordinate across government agencies and with advocacy groups, nongovernmental organizations, and others. The team is working closely with interagency partners and other partners to facilitate for the departure of those who wish to leave Afghanistan, including U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents, and at-risk Afghans whom we have committed to assist.

**Question:**

“Who has been the administration’s point person for negotiating with the Taliban for the chartered planes grounded in Mazar-i-Sharif?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* As we have consistently said, we are prepared to communicate on a practical, pragmatic basis to the Taliban on issues of core U.S. national interests, including safe passage and counterterrorism. We continue to press the Taliban on their public commitments, including safe passage and counterterrorism. The State Department has established a team, led by the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts, to coordinate across government agencies and with advocacy groups, nongovernmental organizations, and others. The team is working closely across the interagency and other partners to facilitate for the departure of those who wish to leave Afghanistan, including U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents, and Afghans whom we have committed to assist.

**Question:**

“What are the conditions under which this administration will designate the Taliban as a foreign terrorist organization?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* Since 2002, the Taliban has been designated as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist entity under E.O. 13224, which blocks all property and interests in property of the Taliban subject to U.S. jurisdiction and prohibits U.S. persons from engaging in any transactions with it or to its benefit, subject to penalty. In addition, section 691(d) of the Consolidated

Appropriations Act of 2008 mandates that the Taliban is considered a terrorist organization for immigration purposes. We do not comment on internal deliberations or potential deliberations regarding designations, but we are fully committed to taking appropriate action against foreign persons engaging in acts of terrorism.

**Question:**

“What are the administration’s intentions with regard to both U.S. and U.N. sanctions on Taliban leaders? Assuming we see no significant change in Taliban actions, does the administration intend to seek changes to these sanctions programs?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The United States continuously reviews its domestic sanctions to ensure they align with U.S. foreign policy. The United States engages with fellow UN Security Council members on a routine basis to ensure the UN Security Council’s 1988 (2011) Taliban sanctions regime aligns with U.S. policy.

**Question:**

“How many American citizens have been evacuated from Afghanistan by the Department of State, Department of Defense, or private charters from August 14 to present? Of those citizens, how many were evacuated after the August 31 withdrawal date?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The U.S. government evacuated approximately 6,000 U.S. citizens from Kabul before it suspended operations on August 31, 2021. Between September 1 and November 9, we have assisted in the departure of 385 U.S. citizens. The Department of State cannot definitively state the number of U.S. citizens evacuated by private charters, as we are not always able to verify manifests on these flights and not all individuals contact the Department for assistance.

**Question:**

“How many LPRs have been evacuated by the Department of State, Department of Defense, or private charters from August 14 to present? Of those LPRs, how many were evacuated after the August 31 withdrawal date?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* We continue to fulfill our pledge to U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs), our Afghans allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans. We will be relentless in helping them depart Afghanistan, if and when they choose to do so. And we will continue our efforts to facilitate the safe and orderly travel of U.S. citizens, LPRs, our Afghans allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans who wish to leave Afghanistan. The Department of State cannot

definitively state the number of LPRs evacuated by private charters, as we are not always able to verify the manifests on these flights and not all individuals contact the Department for assistance. We do not have a figure for how many lawful permanent residents were evacuated prior to August 31, 2021. Between September 1 and November 9, we have assisted in the departure of 385 U.S. citizens and 285 LPRs.

**Question:**

“How many SIV applicants have been evacuated by the Department of State, Department of Defense, or private charters from August 14 to present? Of those SIV applicants, how many were evacuated after the August 31 deadline?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* While we are currently unable to provide consular services in Afghanistan, we will continue to process Immigrant Visa (IV) applications, including by assisting to transfer cases that are ready for interviews to other U.S. embassies and consulates around the world where applicants are able to appear. We recognize that it is currently extremely difficult for Afghans to obtain a visa to a third country or find a way to enter a third country. The U.S. government is pressing the Taliban to provide safe passage to U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents, and Afghans with travel documentation who wish to leave Afghanistan, while encouraging neighboring countries like Qatar to allow Afghans to enter. Afghan IV applicants who are able to leave Afghanistan and whose IV case is ready for interview may transfer their cases to any immigrant visa processing post. Information on how to transfer their case is available on our website.

**Questions for the Record from Representative Albio Sires**  
**“Afghanistan 2001 – 2021: Evaluating the Withdrawal and U.S. Policies Part 1”**  
**House Foreign Affairs Committee**  
**Monday, September 13, 2021**

**Question:**

**“Processing for Special Visa Applicants in a Third Country:** One of the Afghans who reached out to my office is an SIV applicant who served alongside U.S. forces for nearly 12 years. He knows that he will be targeted by the Taliban but remains hopeful that the US government is upholding its promise to help him, and his family, evacuate. However, in all correspondence with the State Department, we have been told that Afghans need to find their own way to a US Embassy in a third country in order to process their case and interview for a visa.

- Is the United States planning to help to coordinate flights out of Afghanistan for those who are at risk?
- Is the State Department considering a process of virtual interviews or any other accommodation for those still in Afghanistan, so they do not need to put their lives at risk trying to find their way to a third country?
- Will the State Department update our caseworkers with guidelines for how to submit the information that P2 and SIV applicants need to be included in these flights, should they be organized?
- Can the State Department provide Congressional caseworkers and staff with a definitive list of which embassies/posts around the world are able to process SIV and P2 applicants, so they can better help the constituents who are contacting our office on behalf of their family in Afghanistan?
- We have been told that P2 visas will not **begin** to be processed until the applicant arrives in a third country. However, the processing of this visa can take 2 years. Is the State Department considering processing P2 applications without requiring that an applicant first travels to a third country?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* We know that it is currently extremely difficult for Afghans to obtain a visa to a third country or to find a way to enter a third country, and like many refugees, may face significant challenges fleeing to safety. Our expectation – and the expectation of the international community – is that people who want to leave Afghanistan should be able to do so. We will continue our efforts to facilitate the safe and orderly travel of U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents, our Afghan allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans who wish to leave Afghanistan.

We are also continuing to press the Taliban to live up to their commitment of free passage for those who wish to leave the country. We are also doing this in tandem with our allies and partners around the world. We will continue to engage diplomatically to resolve any issues and to hold the Taliban to their pledge to let people with valid travel documents, including

U.S. citizens and Lawful Permanent Residents, freely depart Afghanistan. We have reiterated this point to the Taliban.

We recognize that it is currently extremely difficult for Afghans to obtain a visa to a third country or find a way to enter a third country. The U.S. government is pressing the Taliban to provide safe passage to U.S. citizens and their families, Lawful Permanent Residents, and Afghans with travel documentation who wish to leave Afghanistan, while encouraging countries like Qatar to allow Afghans to enter.

The Department is investigating ways to streamline the visa application process wherever possible, including the technical viability of virtual interviews; however, most immigrant visa applicants must submit fingerprints at U.S. government facilities overseas. The Department has implemented many other processing flexibilities such as issuing foil-less visas to applicants who completed their interviews and were ready for visa issuance but were unable to collect their visas due to the suspension of operations at U.S. Embassy Kabul and who were slated to fly on U.S. chartered flights. Additionally, the Secretary of State, in conjunction with the Secretary of Homeland Security, authorized an exemption from the legally required panel physician exam for certain special immigrant visa applicants in Afghanistan. The Department of State also extended the validity of the mandatory oath required of all immigrant visa applicants.

We are working closely with interagency partners and with other partners to facilitate for the departure of those who wish to leave Afghanistan, particularly U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs), our Afghan allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans. We continue to identify ways to support U.S. citizens, LPRs, and Afghans who have worked with us and who may choose to depart. We have no illusion that any of this will be easy or rapid. The State Department has established a team, led by the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts, to coordinate across government agencies and with advocacy groups, nongovernmental organizations, international organizations, and others. The Bureau of Consular Affairs also provided a training for congressional caseworkers on September 15, 2021 to share best practices when managing Afghanistan case referrals.

The Department will expeditiously process any Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicant that is ready for consular interview at any immigrant visa processing post an applicant is able to reach. Additionally, we are evaluating which embassies or consulates to designate as official Immigrant Visa – which includes SIVs – processing posts for Afghans. For U.S. Refugee Admissions Program P-2 and other refugee resettlement processing, the Department aims to process applicants in their current country of asylum, but generally cannot operate in countries without a U.S. embassy or diplomatic representation (Iran, Syria, North Korea, and Yemen, for example).

**Questions for the Record from Representative Chris Smith**  
**“Afghanistan 2001 – 2021: Evaluating the Withdrawal and U.S. Policies Part I”**  
**House Foreign Affairs Committee**  
**Monday, September 13, 2021**

**Question:**

“In your response to my question about President Biden’s July 23rd phone call, you stated that you would not comment on a purportedly leaked transcript of a phone call. You may recall that Reuters has both the transcript of that call, and the audio, so I am not asking you to comment on a purportedly leaked transcript. I ask you again, commenting from your memory of the phone call,

- Was the statement ‘And there is a need, whether it is true or not, there is a need to project a different picture.’ an ad lib by President Biden, or was that line scripted into the phone call, and if it was scripted, by whom?
- What do you mean by ‘purportedly leaked?’
- Did you concur with or support that statement?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* I am not in a position to detail a private conversation between the President and a foreign counterpart. Broadly speaking, however, the President conveyed privately exactly what he conveyed publicly: it was essential for the government and the military to step up, and it was pivotal for President Ghani to lead. The President delivered three key messages: work with my team to nail down the details of an effective military strategy, consolidating around population centers; let your military commanders implement that strategy; and rally the political leaders behind that strategy to reinforce the confidence of the Afghan public and the international community behind that strategy.

**Question:**

“In your response to my question about the vetting of the Afghan evacuees, you stated:

‘As you know, before Afghans evacuated from Afghanistan reach the United States, they go to a transit country, and that’s where the initial checks are done. We’ve surged Customs and Border Patrol, we’ve surged our intelligence and law enforcement capacity, to do those initial checks. And when they get to the United States, first at a military base, those checks are continued using all of law enforcement and intelligence, security agencies to do that, so that we can make sure that we aren’t letting anyone into the country who could pose a threat or a risk...’

This strongly suggests that we are flying these evacuees here to the United States, and then paroling them into our streets without fully vetting them.

- Is this the normal practice for vetting someone who wishes to enter the United States, whether as a refugee, or through one of our many visa programs, to allow them in the United States before they are fully vetted?
- What will we do with an Afghan who has been admitted to the United States and doesn't pass vetting? Will we return them to Afghanistan?
- Can you describe what vetting the State Department did for evacuees before Afghan national evacuees were allowed on to U.S. flights for lily pad countries?
- Did you vet every evacuee that made it onto a U.S. evacuation flight?
- Were any Afghan nationals allowed onto U.S. evacuation flights without any vetting beyond searching their persons and baggage before they boarded? 2
- How is it that you are able to do full vetting of these evacuees, when we do no longer have access to police or security records in Afghanistan and we need to rely on the Taliban for information? Further, the Taliban is factionalized, so who would we contact to find out information about the evacuees, and why would we give credence to any information received from them?
- Of the estimated 120,000 evacuees, how many were:
  - American citizens, ○ U.S. permanent residents,
  - SIV holders or SIV eligible,
  - P-1, or P-2 referrals for the USRAP, or
  - Others who did not fit in any of those categories?
- Since you stated that the vetting process is not completed before evacuees are flown to the United States and are paroled into our streets, what additional vetting do these evacuees undergo after they have arrived in the United States?
- Are these evacuees given COVID vaccines? What about measles vaccines?"

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* For full information on the screening and vetting of Afghan arrivals, I refer you to the Department of Homeland Security. Our Afghan allies complete a rigorous and multi-layered screening and vetting process before they can enter the United States and are eligible to resettle in communities across our country. This process includes intelligence, law enforcement, and counterterrorism professionals from the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security, Federal Bureau of Investigation, National Counterterrorism Center, and other Intelligence Community partners reviewing fingerprints, photos, and other biometric and biographic data for every single Afghan national before they are cleared to travel to the United States. As with other arrivals at U.S. ports of entry, Afghan evacuees undergo a primary inspection when they arrive at a U.S. airport, and a secondary inspection is conducted as the circumstances require. The vetting process is ongoing to ensure the continued protection of public safety and national security.

Interagency vetting of Afghans admitted to the United States continues. No final determination regarding the destination of those who do not pass vetting has been made.

For full information on the screening and vetting of Afghan arrivals, I refer you to the Department of Homeland Security. Our Afghan allies complete a rigorous and multi-layered screening and vetting process before they can enter the United States and are eligible to resettle in communities across our country. This process includes intelligence, law enforcement, and

counterterrorism professionals from the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security, Federal Bureau of Investigation, National Counterterrorism Center, and other Intelligence Community partners reviewing fingerprints, photos, and other biometric and biographic data for every single Afghan national before they are cleared to travel to the United States. As with other arrivals at U.S. ports of entry, Afghan evacuees undergo a primary inspection when they arrive at a U.S. airport, and a secondary inspection is conducted as the circumstances require. The vetting process is ongoing to ensure the continued protection of public safety and national security.

The Department of State expanded and accelerated its evacuation operations on August 15 and had evacuated 5,526 U.S. citizens from Afghanistan by August 31, 2021. We do not have a figure for how many lawful permanent residents (LPRs) were evacuated. LPRs are not required to register their location with the Department. As a result, we are unable to determine the number of LPRs in Afghanistan or any other given country.

Many of the individuals relocated were at various stages of Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) processing. The Department of State is actively assessing how many of these had outstanding SIV applications.

The majority of the Afghans who will be resettled in the United States have worked directly with the United States on its mission in Afghanistan, including across military, diplomatic, and development efforts, or will be a family member of someone who did. Some are Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants who were already in the SIV pipeline. Additionally, others worked as journalists, human rights activists, or humanitarian workers and had careers that put them at risk. And many are family members of American citizens and Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs).

We are still working with all Afghans brought to the United States to help them determine their status. This will take time and we'll need to work with each and every one of them. Because of that, we do not yet have precise numbers.

**Question:**

“Since it seems possible that many of the evacuees received no vetting at all before they boarded U.S. flights for transit countries, and then only partial vetting before they were admitted to the United States:

- Are you concerned that the Taliban may have embedded its members as evacuees?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* For full information on the screening and vetting of Afghan arrivals, I refer you to the Department of Homeland Security. Our Afghan allies complete a rigorous and multi-layered screening and vetting process before they can enter the United States and are eligible to resettle in communities across our country. This process includes intelligence, law enforcement, and counterterrorism professionals from the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security, Federal Bureau of Investigation, National Counterterrorism Center, and other Intelligence Community partners reviewing fingerprints, photos, and other biometric and biographic data for

every single Afghan national before they are cleared to travel to the United States. As with other arrivals at U.S. ports of entry, Afghan evacuees undergo a primary inspection when they arrive at a U.S. airport, and a secondary inspection is conducted as the circumstances require. The vetting process is ongoing to ensure the continued protection of public safety and national security.

**Question:**

“In your response to my question about China and Taiwan, you stated:

‘Whatever protestations they may be making in newspapers or in their propaganda, there is nothing that China would have liked more than for us to have re-upped the war in Afghanistan, and to remain bogged down for another five, ten, or twenty years. That would have been profoundly against our strategic interests, and profoundly in China’s strategic interests.’

Indicating that in your view, our hasty withdrawal actually increased our security posture vis à vis the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

- Can you please explain in detail how it is you conclude that China, and our other strategic competitors such as Russia and Turkey, are upset that the United States left Afghanistan in the manner it did?
- Can you explain how the decision to abandon Bagram Air Force Base, which had the ability to strike targets in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and western China, enhanced our security posture vis-à-vis the PRC?
- Please assess the likelihood of the PRC recognizing the Taliban regime as a legitimate government”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* Our strategic competitors like China and Russia – or adversaries like Iran and North Korea – would have liked nothing more than for the United States to continue to funnel billions of dollars in resources and attention into stabilizing Afghanistan indefinitely. We have vital interests in the world that we cannot afford to ignore. The decision to close Bagram Air Base was made in the interest of our long-term national security. Keeping the base open would have required the presence of thousands of U.S. troops. We could not make the mistake of staying and fighting indefinitely in a conflict that was not in our national interest, doubling down on a civil war in a foreign country, and attempting to remake a country through the endless military deployments of U.S. forces. We continue to engage with Afghanistan’s neighbors and countries in the region, including the PRC, on the importance of the international community holding the Taliban accountable for its public commitments and obligations. The entire international community has a stake in ensuring the Taliban live up to its commitments. The world is united in what they expect the Taliban to do, and Beijing has to decide where it is in that effort.

**Question:**

“According to 2 FAH-2 H-115, regarding Chief of Mission (COM) authority:

The COM is the President’s official U.S. Government representative to the designated foreign country or international organization. The COM is therefore in charge of and responsible for U.S. relations with the foreign country or international organization in their area of responsibility and always has a coordination role in any U.S. government activity taking place within that area, regardless of branch of government, whether the activity is under COM authority or not.

The COM in Afghanistan, Ross Wilson, exercised significant authority and oversight of the scope and nature of all USG personnel in Afghanistan, including the troops under the command of CENTCOM.

- Did the COM urge the President or direct CENTCOM to increase the amount of troops deployed to Afghanistan to better enable the U.S. Mission to carry out its evacuation goals?
  - If not, why not?
- What was the COM’s role in advising the President to abandon Bagram airbase?
  - In retrospect, do you think the right decision was made to abandon Bagram, when it would have been a significant asset in the evacuation?
  - Why did we decide to abandon Bagram at all when it is so strategically located in view of Iran, China, and other threats?
  - What do you think of abandoning Bagram now in view of the recent [credible reports](#) that China is evaluating whether it can make use of the airbase for its own purposes?
- When faced with the massive crowd outside the gate, particularly in view of the fact that the crowd was hampering the evacuation efforts, and posed a significant security threat, did the COM urge or direct CENTCOM to expand the perimeter?
  - If not, why not?
- In view of the many credible reports that the Taliban were preventing individuals, especially Afghan individuals, who were eligible for evacuation based on their status, from reaching HKIA, did the COM urge or direct CENTCOM to secure the route to the airport or create an effective humanitarian corridor?
  - If not, why not?
- Given the large number of American citizens, and eligible Afghans who were left behind, and whose fate we left in the hands of the Taliban, did the COM urge the President and CENTCOM to continue evacuations after the Taliban’s August 31 deadline?
  - If not, why not?
- Did the COM give the Taliban authority to set curfews during the evacuation?
  - If so, why?
- Will the State Department do an evaluation of the consequences of abandoning our efforts to promote democracy and human rights in Afghanistan on our broader global efforts to promote democracy and human rights?
- Does our chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan and the vulnerability now faced by educated Afghan women in particular, send an implicit message to the world that we now

have concluded that democracy doesn't work in all cultures, and that the liberal values that underlie democratic systems and human rights are not universal?

- o Have we assessed what impact our withdrawal will have with regards to China's efforts to present a counter model to the world where human rights and democracy are disregarded or subordinated to the interests of those who are in power?"

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* Following the President's decision to withdraw U.S. military forces from Afghanistan, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) updated contingency planning for a non-combatant evacuation operation, in coordination with the Department of State, including Embassy Kabul. The Department of Defense assessed the mission requirements and determined the proper number of military personnel to safely undertake the NEO given the footprint and staffing of the U.S. embassy. The interagency made decisions on Afghanistan collectively and we coordinated closely to evacuate more than 124,000 U.S. citizens, foreign nationals, and Afghans seeking to depart Afghanistan. For further details on military deployments, I would refer you to my colleagues at the Department of Defense.

The safety and security of U.S. citizens and safe passage for our allies and Afghan partners is a priority for the U.S. government. The decision to close Bagram Air Base was always part of the U.S. Forces Afghanistan retrograde plans. For additional information about Bagram Airfield, I would defer to my Department of Defense colleagues.

The decision to close Bagram Air Base was made in the interest of our long-term national security. Keeping the base open would have required the presence of thousands of U.S. troops. We could not make the mistake of staying and fighting indefinitely in a conflict that was not in our national interest, of doubling down on a civil war in a foreign country, and of attempting to remake a country through the endless military deployments of U.S. forces.

There were several layers of perimeter security, to include U.S. and partner-nations, under the command of the U.S. military, as well as Afghan personnel. The placement and employment of U.S. and partner-nation personnel was directed by military chain-of-command. That being said, the non-combatant evacuation (NEO) plan, like all NEO plans, was done by the Department in coordination with our counterparts at the Department of Defense. During this NEO, there was a tragic loss of lives, but we as a nation honor the sacrifices made by American servicemembers who helped facilitate the largest airlift in history: 124,000 personnel were evacuated on 788 military and civilian flights. The perimeters set up to guard this operation were designed to maximize both security and efficiency while keeping U.S. personnel and Afghan civilians safe. Due to the rapidly shifting security situation in Kabul at the time, that was not always possible, but I think we can be proud of the mission we, along with our coalition partners, accomplished in this NEO.

Without going into operational details, any attempt to create a "humanitarian corridor" - no matter how large - would have ultimately had Taliban in control of its exterior as well as in the city and country at large, and the issue of initial Taliban vetting or screening of personnel would

still be present. Ultimately, U.S. military and others were instrumental in creating a number of rally points and convoys from across Afghanistan to bring evacuees to Kabul International Airport (KIA). These were done in accordance with the NEO plan, developed under COM guidance in coordination with Department of Defense personnel. For tactical and operational details, I defer to the Department of Defense.

The safety and security of U.S. citizens and safe passage for our allies and Afghan partners is a U.S. government priority. As of the conclusion of our noncombatant evacuation operations, the United States facilitated the evacuation or relocation of more than 124,000 individuals through Kabul International Airport. However, there is still more to do. Our commitment to U.S. citizens and their immediate family members, Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs), and Afghans who fought and worked alongside the United States during our 20-year mission who remain in Afghanistan is steadfast. We have been working intensely across the U.S. government, and with our allies, to ensure the safe departure and transit of aircraft operating into Afghanistan. We remain committed to ensuring that no U.S. citizen who wishes to depart is left behind and we continue to press for safe passage of any remaining American citizens who wish to depart Afghanistan. Similarly, we want to ensure that foreign citizens and our Afghan partners are also able to leave as well if they desire. Our efforts will continue until the mission is complete.

Embassy Kabul's Chief of Mission did not give the Taliban authority to set curfews during the evacuation.

As President Biden said in April, the United States did what we went to do in Afghanistan: to get the terrorists who attacked us on 9/11, to deliver justice to Osama Bin Laden, and to degrade the terrorist threat to keep Afghanistan from becoming a base from which attacks could be continued against the United States. We achieved those objectives. We did not go to Afghanistan to nation-build. And it is the right and the responsibility of the Afghan people alone to decide their future and how they want to run their country.

The longing for fair, representative, and inclusive governance and respect for human rights is universal; however, democratic values do not defend themselves. Democracy can be undermined by corruption and poor governance and become vulnerable to extremist and/or non-democratic actors. This is not an indicator that democracy is dependent upon cultures. Human rights and fundamental freedoms are universal and deserved by all regardless of culture, religion, or tradition.

The competition with China, Russia, and other authoritarian actors is one of the central challenges that will define the 21st century. The PRC engages in conduct to reshape the international system to accommodate and more closely align with its ideology. Its actions undermine the foundations of the international system that has provided peace and stability since the end of World War II.

There remains widespread support in the international community for strong U.S. engagement to support a free, open, and prosperous world. As we face threats to that order, we must continue to reaffirm our commitment to a shared vision of peace and stability, freedom on the seas,

unimpeded commerce, advancing human rights, and international standards that address the challenges of today and tomorrow.

**Question:**

“Who is the Administration’s designated point person with regard to engaging the United Nations and its various entities with regard to Afghanistan and the subsequent transfer of evacuees across borders?”

- Did the Administration engage the UN or other organizations, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, to try to establish a humanitarian corridor to assist the evacuation of AMCITS, LPRs, SIVs and those eligible for P1 or P2 consideration, so that they could actually get to HKIA through Taliban check points?
  - If not, why not?
- As you know, there is a need to process thousands of Afghan adults and children who were evacuated to 2nd and 3rd countries, such as the United Arab Emirates, or have made their way overland to countries such as Pakistan. There is concern that we have failed to enlist various UN agencies (UNHCR, IOM, and UNICEF, at minimum) for assistance in processing and protecting Afghan evacuees, in particular vulnerable women and children, especially as UN involvement is necessary before NGOs become fully engaged in Reception, Staging, Onward Movement and Integration, or RSOI efforts.
  - Can you elaborate on when we started to engage the UN, and which UN agencies we have contacted to assist with processing and protecting Afghan refugees?
  - What has the response been from UN agencies?
  - Have you received, either informally or formally, push back from UN actors essentially saying that this is America’s problem so America should fix it?
  - What steps has the State Department taken to assist NGOs willing to provide help to evacuees in 2nd and 3rd countries navigate the UN bureaucracy? Do you have a designated person at the State Department to assist such NGOs?
  - What has the role of the PRM Bureau been in all this, and who is tasked with responsibility with assisting those in 2nd and 3rd countries?
- As you know, evacuated children are at particular risk for trafficking, exploitation, and abuse while waiting for processing in these 2nd and 3rd countries. What have we done to expand efforts by UNICEF and various nongovernmental organizations to protect, reunite, and find permanent placements for these thousands of unaccompanied and separated Afghan children?
  - What is the plan for these children?
- David Beasley is the Executive Director of the World Food Programme and an American within the UN System who is wellregarded by many, including in Congress on both sides of the aisle.
  - What efforts has the State Department made to request his assistance in coordinating our engagement with various United Nations entities?
- The autonomous, self-governing region of Somaliland, which is *de facto* independent of Somalia, has offered to provide temporary refuge for RSOI processing of Afghan evacuees, up to 10,000 for a year, with the possibility of extending that. Our Defense Department, which understands the strategic importance of Berbera as a port, is interested in greater engagement with Somaliland, and indeed, just last month landed a transport

plane in Somaliland *en route* to a humanitarian mission, presumably to deliver supplies in connection with the conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region.

- What steps has the State Department taken to actively follow up on this offer of assistance?
- Has the State Department helped third parties who evacuated at-risk Afghans to second and third countries explore the option of Somaliland as a safe-haven for RSOI processing, and has it taken necessary steps to engage the United Nations entities and NGOs to help with those efforts as well as integration to third countries as a place of refuge?"

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The Department has established a Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts. Ambassador A. Elizabeth Jones holds this position and has assumed oversight of the entire Afghanistan relocation effort, from our ongoing efforts to facilitate the departure of individuals from Afghanistan to their onward relocation and resettlement in the United States. She focuses on the complex issues pertaining to relocation and resettlement, including effective coordination within the Department, across the interagency, with international partners, and outreach to colleagues in Congress.

The Administration did have cooperation from the Taliban as evidenced by our ability to successfully facilitate the evacuation and relocation of 124,000 U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs), foreign citizens, and Afghans seeking to depart Afghanistan. Our commitment to U.S. citizens and their immediate family members, LPRs, our Afghans allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans is steadfast. We remain committed to ensuring that no U.S. citizen who wishes to depart is left behind and we continue to press for safe passage for those who wish to leave Afghanistan.

The United States is working closely with allies and partners on our shared objective of quickly assisting vulnerable Afghans including by providing humanitarian aid and refugee resettlement. The United States coordinates closely with and provides funding to UNHCR to support its efforts to provide third-country resettlement to refugees around the world, including those from Afghanistan. We commend countries who have already started to accept Afghan refugees who are in need of protection. We strongly encourage Afghanistan's neighbors to allow entry for Afghans and coordinate with international organizations and other humanitarian partners to provide humanitarian assistance to Afghans in need. We have not received pushback from UN agencies.

For P-1 or P-2-referred individuals who are in a third country and have contacted PRM, their case will be assigned to a PRM-funded Resettlement Support Center for refugee processing based on the individual's location. The Administration has sought to increase the capacity of these RSCs to handle the anticipated surge in new cases as part of an overall larger U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. Please note that most of PRM's RSCs work regionally and can process cases in some countries even if there is not a physical RSC presence, though it may take some time for teams to deploy to particular locations for processing. While we are working expeditiously, there is no specific timeline nor a specific number of Afghan P-2 referrals that the

Department expects to process in the next year, and there is no limit to the number of P-2 referrals the Department will accept. In general, it takes approximately 12 to 14 months to process a refugee resettlement case from start to finish including pre-screening, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services interview, and rigorous security vetting.

Prior to arrival in the United States, the Department of State supports international organization partners to conduct best interest assessments for identified unaccompanied children when possible. The Department of State prioritizes family reunification, when in the best interest of the child, whenever possible. These assessments help identify any family members for reunification but also any specific protection needs. Upon arrival in the United States, unaccompanied children are referred to HHS Office of Refugee Resettlement to provide culturally appropriate care while continuing to locate family or other sponsors.

At a time when more than 155 million people are in a state of food insecurity around the world, the World Food Program (WFP) is an indispensable partner in addressing the needs of the most vulnerable around the world. The State Department and USUN Rome maintain close contact and coordination with Executive Director David Beasley and WFP senior leadership to discuss critical issues including the response to humanitarian crises and UN coordination. The United States also exercises leadership and guidance through our participation on the WFP Executive Board. Executive Director Beasley has been a key partner of the U.S. government in achieving our shared goals of providing assistance to the most vulnerable around the world. The State Department will continue our close and robust partnership with the Executive Director and WFP.

The United States supports the territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Somalia and recognizes its sovereignty over Somaliland. Accordingly, any relocation of Afghan evacuees to Somaliland by the United States would require the approval of the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS). As the Somaliland offer does not have the approval of the FGS, the State Department has not pursued this offer of assistance. The Department likewise has not taken steps to help third parties explore the option of Somaliland as a safe haven for RSOI processing, given the need for FGS approval.

**Question:**

“LPRs are considered ‘United States Persons’ under 22 US Code Section [6010](#).

- Was there an order to turn away LPRs from HKIA?
- Were any LPRs denied admission to HKIA prior to August 31?
- How many United States Persons remain on the ground in Afghanistan?
- While the White House maintains that US citizens who want to leave can leave, the Taliban appears to condition such departures on their leaving family members behind. Can you confirm that?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* We will continue our efforts to facilitate the safe and orderly travel of U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs), our Afghans allies, and vulnerable and at-risk

Afghans who wish to leave Afghanistan. The U.S. government continues to press the Taliban to provide safe passage to U.S. citizens and their families, LPRs, and Afghans with travel documentation who wish to leave Afghanistan, while encouraging countries in the region like Qatar to allow Afghans to enter.

The U.S. government facilitated the evacuation or relocation of approximately 120,000 U.S. citizens, LPRs, and Afghans at risk. We defer questions about admission to the Kabul International Airport to the Department of Defense, which was charged with controlling access to the airport. It is difficult to definitively state the exact number of U.S. persons currently in Afghanistan, as these individuals are not required to register their location with the Department of State, and the numbers fluctuate as individuals depart. The Department of State continues to help U.S. citizens, along with their Afghan immediate family members, depart Afghanistan.

**Question:**

“Why were unvetted and undocumented Afghans given parole and brought to the United States when so many United States Persons and SIV eligible Afghans were left in Afghanistan?”

- Why were evacuations arranged by third party Americans of SIV eligible Afghans delayed on the grounds that the evacuees were not fully vetted, when similar criteria was not applied to those given humanitarian parole to come to the United States on flights arranged by the State Department?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* An emergency relocation effort was sparked by the collapse of Afghan security forces. We worked alongside military and intelligence professionals around the clock to get U.S. citizens, Afghans who helped us, citizens of our allies and partners, and at-risk Afghans on planes to the United States or to transit locations that our diplomats had arranged and negotiated in multiple countries. We continue to assist U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents, our Afghans allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans who wish to leave Afghanistan.

For full information on the screening and vetting of Afghan arrivals, I refer you to the Department of Homeland Security. Our Afghan allies complete a rigorous and multi-layered screening and vetting process before they can enter the United States and are eligible to resettle in communities across our country. This process includes intelligence, law enforcement, and counterterrorism professionals from the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security, Federal Bureau of Investigation, National Counterterrorism Center, and other Intelligence Community partners reviewing fingerprints, photos, and other biometric and biographic data for every single Afghan national before they are cleared to travel to the United States. As with other arrivals at U.S. ports of entry, Afghan evacuees undergo a primary inspection when they arrive at a U.S. airport, and a secondary inspection is conducted as the circumstances require. The vetting process is ongoing to ensure the continued protection of public safety and national security.

We are aware that some private entities have arranged for charter flights out of Afghanistan. We have supported some of these flights to depart Afghanistan, but unfortunately there have been

significant challenges with these flights. A significant percentage of those who departed Afghanistan on these flights were not the same as those listed on manifests provided before departure. Without personnel on the ground to ensure the fidelity of the intended manifests, there is no ability to determine whether the passengers aboard the plane are actually eligible for relocation or resettlement in the United States.

**Question:**

“When will we get status updates on the progress of processing the at-risk Afghans we submitted to the Legislative House mailbox <HAfghanInquiries@state.gov>?”

- What should we tell our constituents about what the State Department did with the information we submitted on their behalf?
- Was personal information, including flight manifests, shared with the Taliban?
  - Who made the decision and why?
  - Was this information shared as a result of negotiations with the Taliban that allowed a group of high-value individuals to leave Afghanistan? [Please answer in a classified setting.]”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* Information about individuals in Afghanistan submitted to [HAfghanInquiries@state.gov](mailto:HAfghanInquiries@state.gov) was forwarded to teams at the Department of State who worked around the clock to support the noncombatant evacuation operation in August.

As announced on August 2, the Priority 2 (P-2) designation grants U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) access for certain Afghan nationals and their eligible family members. Once individuals who have been referred to the P-1/P-2 program depart Afghanistan and relocate to a country where processing is possible, they are then eligible to start processing through the USRAP. Even if individuals are properly referred to the P-1/P-2 program, there is no guarantee that they will be approved for resettlement to the United States. In particular, all applicants must pass extensive security checks and complete an interview with a Department of Homeland Security/U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services officer.

The Department of State did not provide names of any potential evacuees to the Taliban at any point during evacuation operations. We are continuing to press the Taliban to live up to their public commitment of free passage for those who wish to leave the country. We are doing this in our direct and pragmatic communications to the Taliban and in tandem with our allies and partners around the world.

**Question:**

“We are still receiving inquiries from constituents who have relatives living in Afghanistan and are at-risk for execution. They are terrified, and their loved ones were not able to make it to and through the gates, especially once violence escalated. What will we do for them – ones that qualify for SIV, P1 and P2 status?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* We are working closely with interagency partners and with other partners to facilitate the departure of those who wish to leave Afghanistan, particularly U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs), our Afghans allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans. We continue to identify ways to support U.S. citizens, LPRs, our Afghans allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans who may choose to depart. We have no illusion that any of this will be easy or rapid. The State Department has established a team, led by the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts, Ambassador Beth Jones, to coordinate across government agencies and with advocacy groups, nongovernmental organizations, and others.

**Question:**

“Why did we remove our military presence in Afghanistan before we evacuated all of our people?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The safety and security of U.S. citizens and safe passage for our allies and Afghan partners is a U.S. government priority. During the evacuation operations in August, we coordinated closely with our Department of Defense colleagues to successfully evacuate 124,000 U.S. citizens, Legal Permanent Residents, foreign citizens, and Afghans seeking to depart Afghanistan. The Taliban were clear that they regarded August 31 as a deadline for the departure of our forces, and we understood that staying beyond that date would lead to risks not only for Afghans trying to leave, but also to our diplomats and servicemembers. Even though the noncombatant evacuation operation has concluded, our commitment to U.S. citizens and their immediate family members, Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs), and Afghans who fought and worked alongside the United States during our 20-year mission who remain in Afghanistan is steadfast. We remain committed to ensuring that no U.S. citizen who wishes to depart is left behind and we continue to press for safe passage of any remaining American citizens, foreign citizens, or Afghans who wish to depart Afghanistan.

**Question:**

“While foreign assistance to Afghanistan is frozen, there is concern that the Biden Administration is engaged in negotiations with the Taliban, and that these funds will be unfrozen and the Taliban recognized as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. However, the legitimate government of Afghanistan, under former Vice President Amrullah Saleh who has now assumed the constitutional duties of President, appears to hang on, barely, in the Panjshir Valley, though reports have been confusing:

- Do you affirm that the State Department considers Amrullah Saleh to be the de jure head of the Afghan government?
- Did the State Department convey condolences to President Saleh upon learning that the Taliban had tortured and killed [his elder brother](#) Rohullah Saleh?

- What steps is the State Department or USAID taking to address the [humanitarian crisis](#) in the Panjshir Valley, and has the State Department engaged the United Nations in this regard?
- Insofar as the Taliban has obtained power in Afghanistan, do you acknowledge that it seized power in a coup?
- Do you acknowledge that under Section 508 of the Foreign Assistance Act, a regime that has come to power via a coup, such as the Taliban, must remain under sanctions?"

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The United States has been clear that any international legitimacy will need to be earned through sustained action by the Taliban on their public commitments, including on safe passage for American citizens, other foreign nationals, and our Afghan allies; counterterrorism; safe and unfettered access for humanitarian actors; respect for the rights of all Afghans, including women and members of minority groups; and the establishment of an inclusive government with broad support. While the United States continues to provide humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan to the people of Afghanistan, the Taliban is not a direct recipient of that assistance and does not have access to Afghanistan's Central Bank assets held in the United States. The Department is not aware of Amrullah Saleh's current whereabouts.

On September 13, the United States announced nearly \$64 million in new humanitarian assistance to the people affected by the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. This new funding will support the work of the United Nations, as well as international NGO actors – and will not go to the Taliban. This funding brings total U.S. humanitarian aid in Afghanistan and for Afghan refugees in the region to nearly \$4 billion since 2002.

Afghanistan's military forces did not support or participate in the Taliban's advance on Kabul, nor did they depose President Ghani or other leaders of the government of Afghanistan. However, the Taliban remain under U.S. sanctions and members of the Taliban are listed at the UN Security Council's 1988 (2011) Taliban sanctions regime.

**Question:**

“On August 29, [the New York Times reported](#) that American authorities at HKIA told an estimated 600 students from the American University in Afghanistan (AUAF) to return home, that efforts to evacuate Afghan civilians had ended. Other estimates are as high as 1,200 persons, including staff and faculty. They did return home. These were students who, because of their ages, for the most part had no memory of the Taliban administration, but rather only America's efforts to foster democracy and human rights in Kabul. The United States effectively promised them that they were free now to pursue whatever dreams they wanted, whatever dreams that were possible where the government protected their fundamental human rights. [A Washington Post op-ed dated 8/24/21 entitled, 'The U.S. Dare Not Betray the Students at the American University of Afghanistan'](#), stated: ‘AUAF's story reminds us that, however misconceived or mismanaged U.S. efforts in Afghanistan might have been, there were bright spots, and that, in any case, real people — flesh-and-blood human beings — staked their lives on this country's promises.’

- What are your plans to ensure continued support for this incredible university – one of the few investments we have left - and can you confirm you will help these vulnerable young people, who are desperate to evacuate, leave Afghanistan?"

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* We are aware that some American University in Afghanistan (AUAF) students have departed Afghanistan but for security reasons we cannot offer additional details about those departures or how many students remain. While U.S. government relocation flights out of Afghanistan have ended, our commitment to U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs), our Afghans allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans remains steadfast. We have no deadline for supporting U.S. citizens, LPRs, our Afghans allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans, such as the students, faculty, and staff of the American University of Afghanistan. The U.S. will continue to support equal access to education in Afghanistan. The Department continues to explore options for those who wish to depart, and we continue to advocate for the full resumption of commercial flights out of Kabul International Airport.

**Questions for the Record from Representative Gerald E. Connolly**  
**“Afghanistan 2001 – 2021: Evaluating the Withdrawal and U.S. Policies Part I”**  
**House Foreign Affairs Committee**  
**Monday, September 13, 2021**

**Question:**

“What are the next steps for inquiries submitted to the Afghan Task Force?

- What is the expected timeline, overview of the referral-to-evacuation pipeline?
- Now that HKIA is operational and flights are leaving, who do we contact to get people on manifests for charters?
- What specific countries/NGOs is State/Administration working with to continue diplomatic efforts?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* We thank our Congressional partners for their ongoing commitment on these issues. The Department of State is dedicating additional resources to address the significant volume of inquiries it has received from members of Congress and other stakeholders about Afghan relocations and related concerns.

The Department is consolidating its Afghanistan relocation and resettlement support efforts into a dedicated work unit focused on Afghanistan relocation matters. As the updated operating posture of this unit is finalized, we will continue to keep Congressional stakeholders informed and will also update press guidance and information on our Afghanistan Inquiries page (<https://www.state.gov/afghanistan-inquiries/>).

Referrals to the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) in Afghanistan are not linked to evacuation. After the USRAP has received a referral from a U.S. government agency, a U.S.-based non-governmental organization, or a U.S.-based media organization, and the individual has relocated to a country where refugee processing can occur, the referred individual must contact PRM to begin processing their case. In general, it takes approximately 12 to 14 months or longer to process a refugee resettlement case from start to finish including pre-screening, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services interview, and rigorous security vetting.

Commercial airlines have been operating some relief and charter flights from the airport in Kabul. We refer you to the airlines for details of their operations. The State Department has established a team, led by the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts, to coordinate across government agencies and with advocacy groups, nongovernmental organizations, international organizations, and others. The team is working closely with interagency partners and other partners to facilitate the departure of those who wish to leave Afghanistan, including U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents, our Afghan allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans. Please contact your office’s liaison in the Legislative Affairs Bureau for assistance with specific inquiries.

The Department initiated a statement joined by more than 100 countries and a United Nations Security Council resolution setting out the international community's expectations of the Taliban. The Department has also organized contact groups of key countries to ensure that the international community continues to speak and act together on Afghanistan and to leverage our combined influence. On September 8, the Secretary led a ministerial meeting of 22 countries, plus NATO, the EU, and the United Nations, to align our efforts. Senior State Department officials also engaged with allies and partners on Afghanistan in a series of multilateral events on the margins of the UN General Assembly on September 21-23, during Deputy Secretary Sherman's trip to the region on October 4-8, and at the October 12 G20 extraordinary meeting on Afghanistan.

**Question:**

“Is State coordinating with DHS, HHS, etc. regarding refugee processing? When does State's role end? Can you direct us to the appropriate contacts at those agencies for Afghan refugee inquiries? (this will probably be USCIS headquarters: [USCISCongressionalInquiries@uscis.dhs.gov](mailto:USCISCongressionalInquiries@uscis.dhs.gov))”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) is managed by the Department of State in coordination with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Individuals and their family members granted refugee status overseas by DHS are brought to the United States for resettlement by the Department of State, which also provides initial resettlement services through the Reception and Placement Program, partnering with nine national resettlement agencies. The Department of Health and Human Services/Office of Refugee Resettlement provides refugees with resettlement assistance that includes employment training, English language training, cash assistance, and job placement. To contact USCIS about Afghan refugee inquiries, please reach out to USCIS Headquarters via [USCISCongressionalInquiries@uscis.dhs.gov](mailto:USCISCongressionalInquiries@uscis.dhs.gov).

**Question:**

“Do we know what happened to everyone whose passports were destroyed by the Embassy?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The Department of State remains steadfastly committed to the welfare of U.S. citizens, Special Immigrant Visa holders, and others to whom we have a special commitment who remain in Afghanistan. The documents in question were destroyed in an effort to protect from Taliban retaliation individuals who may have had a close association with the United States. As we become aware of individual cases in which documents were destroyed, we are working with other posts in the region to issue the appropriate U.S. travel documents. The Department continues to assist vulnerable Afghans and has made clear that we will judge the Taliban on their behavior. To date, we have not seen systematic retaliation against those closely associated with the United States or the Ghani-led government of Afghanistan.

**Question:**

“Congressional staff were told Afghans with pending/approved SIVs could email helpme@jdi.socom.mil and State/DOD would make effort to contact about possible evacuation options if available. This inbox is no longer functional. How is State collection/tracking information of those not evacuated?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* We refer you to the Department of Defense regarding the status of any .mil email address. The Department maintains a number of methods to receive information and communicate directly with individuals seeking relocation from Afghanistan as detailed on our website for Afghanistan inquiries <https://www.state.gov/afghanistan-inquiries/>.

**Question:**

“There have been some reports of evacuees who have reached the US not being release form the airport for multiple days, some being separated from their families. Are you aware of people who are being held for that amount of time? Would you consider that amount of time normal? Do people have access to attorneys throughout this process? If yes, are they being informed of these rights?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* We refer you to the Department of Homeland Security for questions regarding admission to the United States and U.S. port of entry protocols.

**Question:**

“Has State set up Congressional-specific email inboxes for P1/P2 inquiries? If not, when will it be set up? How are you ensuring that Congressional requests are being prioritized?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* Questions on the P-1/P-2 program for Afghan nationals may be directed to the email inbox [USRAPAfghanInquiries@state.gov](mailto:USRAPAfghanInquiries@state.gov). Please note, there is currently a backlog of inquiries that we are working to address as quickly as possible.

**Question:**

“Mr. Secretary, who is the point of contact or does the State Department have a point of contact for those who are helping extract Afghans and US Citizens still stranded in Afghanistan, and how best to get timely, responsive, answers to inquiries, so that they come directly to you instead of Members of Congress? Who’s in charge of the Afghan and American citizen extraction efforts?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The State Department has established a team, led by the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts, to coordinate across government agencies and with advocacy groups, nongovernmental organizations, and others. The team is working closely with interagency and other partners to facilitate the departure of those who wish to leave Afghanistan, including U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents, our Afghan allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans.

**Question:**

“Since the evacuation began, my office has submitted more than 20,000 names to the State Department of people who need our assistance, but we’ve had a very hard time receiving timely updates on each case once submitted. What architecture/procedure is the State Department putting in place to be responsive to each submission of names made by Members of Congress?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts (C/ARE) team responds to inquiries received as soon as possible but is unable to provide information on individual U.S. citizens due to privacy considerations. C/ARE is also limited in its ability to provide updates on individual Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants or their case status to anyone other than the applicant or their counsel of record. C/ARE cannot share information on anyone who may have been relocated from Afghanistan, including their location. The National Visa Center maintains a call center and email box to respond to applicant and Congressional questions. Applicants are notified by email at each step of the SIV application process. Congressional staff may contact the Bureau of Consular Affairs for more detailed case specific information not available to C/ARE.

**Question:**

“What is the current status of negotiations with Taliban leadership to continue to allow evacuations, by air or land?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The evacuation and relocation effort has been a monumental task. The initial priority is supporting departures of U.S. citizens and Lawful Permanent Residents and their immediate families. We are also facilitating the ongoing departure of Afghans who worked with and for the U.S. government, including Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders. We are actively engaged with USAID and implementing partner organizations to discuss their staff who may still be in Afghanistan and wish to leave. The Department, through international organizations and our foreign partners, has continually communicated to the Taliban that it is obligated and has committed to facilitate the free, unimpaired passage out of Afghanistan of all who wish to leave, including any remaining U.S. citizens, their families, Lawful Permanent Residents, SIV holders, and Afghans who are at risk.

**Questions for the Record from Representative Steve Chabot**  
**“Afghanistan 2001 – 2021: Evaluating the Withdrawal and U.S. Policies Part I”**  
**House Foreign Affairs Committee**  
**Monday, September 13, 2021**

**Question:**

**“Contingency Planning:** President Biden stated that his Administration has planned for every contingency. It is clear that if there was a plan for what happened, it was woefully inadequate but my questions has to deal with Afghan governmental collapse that was not so immediate. Repeated statements suggest that the Administration found such a situation more likely than what actually occurred. So I would like to know, what was the Administration’s plan to evacuate Americans and Afghan partners if the Government fell to the Taliban three months after we withdrew? Six months? Could you provide documents to this committee to support this answer?

On August 31, NBC reported that: ‘A senior State Department official said ... that it appeared a “majority” of Afghans who had worked for the U.S. military and applied for Special Immigrant Visas had not been successfully evacuated and remained in Afghanistan.’ Also, at the working level in the Department, there were concerns with the administration’s slow pace in planning for the evacuation of interpreters and other Afghans at risk. These were conveyed to senior Department leadership. Congress too had been pressing the Administration for months to prepare to get them out. Can you provide this committee with documents demonstrating that it was *not* the Administration’s plan to leave SIV applicants behind in the event of a hasty evacuation?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The Department of State engaged in prudent contingency planning with interagency partners for a range of scenarios affecting its mission. The planning scenarios were based on a range of potential security conditions on the ground and planned for a reduction in the embassy footprint while maintaining core mission functions under various scenarios, including a scenario that planned for closure of the embassy.

Within two weeks of President Biden taking office, the Department of State restarted the special immigrant visa (SIV) interview process in Kabul. In the spring of this year, I directed significant additional resources to the program, expanding the team in Washington processing applications from 10 to 50 and doubling the number of SIV adjudicators at our embassy in Kabul. Even as many embassy personnel returned to the United States under ordered departure status due to COVID restrictions, more consular officers went to Kabul to process SIV applications. We will continue to expedite the processing of SIV applications to the greatest extent possible. As I stated, there is no deadline or end date on our commitment to this effort.

**Question:**

**“Afghanistan Cultural Heritage:** Afghanistan has had a very long and rich Hindu, Buddhist and Zoroastrian civilization prior to its Islamization in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, it has a very

rich repository of this heritage in the form of manuscripts, paintings, artifacts, sculptures and heritage sites. Between September 1996 and September 2001 Taliban destroyed many historical artifacts and monuments considered pre-Islamic. It is reasonable to believe they will likely continue this campaign, now that they are back in power. With this in mind, prior to the withdrawal, what steps did the U.S. government take to secure and preserve Afghanistan's ancient artifacts, including Hindu statues, and the immense cultural wealth of Afghanistan going back three millennia?"

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* Since 2005, the Department of State supported the documentation, conservation, rehabilitation, and preservation of Afghanistan's rich and diverse structural and intangible heritage. More than forty cultural preservation projects totaling almost \$50 million were successfully implemented between 2005 and August 2021. These projects include the creation of a digital inventory of the holdings of the National Museum of Afghanistan, creation of an emergency action plan for the patrimony housed in the museum, restoration of more than ten monuments across Afghanistan, detailed documentation of the archaeological landscape using data acquired from satellite imagery ranging in date from the 1980s to the present day, and extensive training and educational augmentation of the cadre of young Afghan professionals in the heritage preservation sector.

**Questions for the Record from Representative David Cicilline**  
**“Afghanistan 2001 – 2021: Evaluating the Withdrawal and U.S. Policies Part I”**  
**House Foreign Affairs Committee**  
**Monday, September 13, 2021**

**Question:**

“Subcontractors and subgrantees have often worked on U.S. Government-funded projects, oftentimes for decades, yet they have no official recourse for evacuation and are not recognized as eligible for any visa pathway. How will the U.S. support these requests especially considering their elevated risk of danger from the Taliban?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The evacuation and relocation effort has been a monumental task and the U.S. government understands the need to continue improving our coordination across agencies, as we have done and continue to do. The State Department has established a team, led by the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts, to coordinate across government agencies and with advocacy groups, nongovernmental and international organizations, and others. The team is working closely with USAID and other partners to facilitate the departure of those who wish to leave Afghanistan.

The initial priority is supporting departures of U.S. citizens and Lawful Permanent Residents and their immediate families. We are also facilitating the ongoing departure of Afghans who worked with and for the U.S. government, Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders, and those eligible of an SIV. We are actively engaged with USAID and implementing partner organizations to discuss with them their staff who may still be in Afghanistan and wish to leave.

**Question:**

“Given the expansion of the P-2 designation eligibility for Afghans, what processes are the State Department undertaking to scale up and address the high volume of applicants for which the current P-2 infrastructure is not equipped to handle? How will the Department seek equitable outcomes for these individuals?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The Department is surging resources to review the tens of thousands of Priority 1 (P-1) and Priority 2 (P-2) refugee referrals received in recent weeks. The Department is committed to working with Congress, international partners, and advocacy groups to ensure that the P-2 designation is used appropriately and fully where applicable, and that all Afghans who have arrived have access to the resources needed to start anew in America.

**Question:**

“Is the Administration planning on opening at least one resettlement support center (RSC) in Pakistan or in any country hosting large numbers of Afghan refugees? What is the timeline on that/those RSC(s) being operational? If not, please explain how the Administration plans to process Afghan refugees?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* For individuals who are in a third country and have contacted the Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM), their cases will be assigned to a PRM-funded Resettlement Support Center (RSC) for refugee processing based on the individual’s location. The Administration has sought to increase the capacity of these RSCs to handle the anticipated surge in new cases as part of an overall larger USRAP.

Please note that most of PRM’s RSCs work regionally and can process cases in some countries even if there is not a physical RSC presence. While we are working expeditiously, there is no specific timeline nor a specific number of Afghan P-2 referrals that the Department expects to process in the next year. In general, it takes approximately 12 to 14 months to process a refugee resettlement case from start to finish including pre-screening, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services interview, and rigorous security vetting.

**Question:**

“Due to insecurity and Taliban crackdowns, many Afghan women and girls are confined to their homes. What is the Administration doing to ensure that women and girls receive equal access to aid?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* We have been clear about our intention to work alongside the international community to preserve the gains made by women, girls, and members of minority groups over the past 20 years. We are committed to using all of the economic, diplomatic, and political tools in our toolkit in that effort. Afghan women and children, as all Afghan people, deserve to live in safety, security, and dignity. Any form of discrimination and abuse should not be tolerated and should be prevented from occurring in the first place. We in the international community stand ready to assist them with support to ensure that their voices can be heard. We will monitor closely how any future government upholds the human rights and freedoms that have become an integral part of the life of women and girls in Afghanistan during the last twenty years.

**Question:**

“Before August 31, 1200 American University of Afghanistan (AUAF) students, staff and faculty were mobilized and ready with paperwork to evacuate on a convoy of buses. AUAF had Taliban assurances the buses would be granted safe passage to the airport. AUAF had secured planes to transport the students to an impressive number of secure locations including at the American University of Iraq – Sulamani, American University of Central Asia in Kyrgyzstan, and Education City in Doha and so on. On August 26 CENTCOM agreed to allow the AUAF

convoy through the airport gates, then reversed its decision on August 27, citing an Administration decision from Washington that AUAF was no longer a priority. The evacuation did not take place.

- AUAF started Fall classes on time on August 30, 2021. Nearly one thousand students, about half of whom are women, are now privately studying from their cell phones.
- What are your plans to ensure continued support for this university – one of the few investments we have left - and can you confirm you will help these vulnerable young people leave Afghanistan?"

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* We are aware that some AUAF students have departed Afghanistan, but for security reasons we cannot offer additional details about those departures or how many students remain. While U.S. government relocation flights out of Afghanistan have ended, our commitment to U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs), our Afghan allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans remains steadfast. We have no deadline for supporting U.S. citizens, LPRs, and at-risk groups in Afghanistan, such as the students, faculty, and staff of the American University of Afghanistan. The U.S. will continue to support equal access to education in Afghanistan. The Department continues to explore options for those who wish to depart, and we continue to advocate for the full resumption of commercial flights out of Kabul International Airport.

**Questions for the Record from Representative Tim Burchett**  
**“Afghanistan 2001 -2021: Evaluating the Withdrawal and U.S. Policies Part I”**  
**House Foreign Affairs Committee**  
**Monday, September 13, 2021**

**Question:**

“Special Immigrant Visa (SIVs) holders were told to hunker down, hide, and not come to Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) during the evacuation process. Then all American planes and troops left, leaving these SIVs stranded. These poor souls now must rely on the Taliban and notably Siraj Haqqani, a terrorist and the Taliban’s new Interior Minister, to allow them to leave the country. Please explain this decision and who was the official who made this decision?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* U.S. citizens and SIV holders were advised to shelter in place during some period of the U.S.-led evacuation and relocation operations due to unsafe conditions and credible threats in and around the airport. Massive crowds, which led to people being crushed to death, the risk of terrorist attacks, and the generally tenuous security situation outside of the Kabul airport meant that the Department could not recommend these groups travel to the airport en masse for evacuation or relocation flights.

**Question:**

“Who made the decision to rely on the Taliban for security at HKIA? And who made the decision to rely on the Taliban to provide “safe” passage for American citizens and Afghans to get to the airport?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The Taliban assumed responsibility for the Kabul airport’s security only after significant portions of Afghanistan’s civilian and military leadership abandoned their posts and, in the case of some senior leaders, fled the country, and the United States completed its military withdrawal. The U.S. government continues to expect the Taliban to fulfill their commitment to allow safe passage for all remaining U.S. citizens, foreign nationals, our Afghan allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans who wish to depart.

**Question:**

“Not every American and at-risk Afghan was living in Kabul. Why then were no plans made to conduct evacuation flights from other airports around the country, like from Kandahar and Herat?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* I understand the security situation outside Kabul limited the U.S. ability to conduct evacuation and relocation flights from other airports around the country, though I defer to the Department of Defense on U.S. military capabilities and the exact details of the security situation at that time.

We are working with local entities, non-governmental and international organizations, and third countries to facilitate relocation efforts from other airports following the withdrawal of the U.S. military.

**Question:**

“Why was there no plan in place for the rapid collapse of the Afghan government?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The Department of State engaged in prudent contingency planning with interagency partners for a range of scenarios. The planning scenarios were based on a range of potential security conditions on the ground and a declining level of State Department mission functions. The scenarios assumed reductions in embassy staffing while maintaining core mission functions under various conditions, up to and including closure of the embassy.

**Question:**

“What is the plan for Afghans who have been approved for a Special Immigrant Visa, but who do not have their physical documents?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* We continue to prioritize SIV applications at every stage of the process, including by transferring cases to other U.S. embassies and consulates around the world where applicants can appear. We know it is currently extremely difficult for Afghans to obtain a visa to a third country or to find a way to enter a third country, but we are developing processing alternatives so we can continue to deliver these important consular services for the people of Afghanistan. We also continue to expect the Taliban to live up to their commitment of free passage for those who wish to leave the country. We are doing this ourselves in our direct and pragmatic communications to the Taliban, as this is of the utmost national security concern and our national priority, and in tandem with our allies and partners around the world.

Afghans who had been approved for a Special Immigrant Visa may transfer their case to any immigrant visa processing post outside of Afghanistan for their visa to be printed either in their current passport or, if they do not have a passport, on a DS-232 form with an approved passport waiver.

**Question:**

“What is next for Special Immigrant Visa holders who are in the US, but whose families are still trapped in Afghanistan? Is there a plan to get their family members out?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* We continue to fulfill our pledge to U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents, our Afghan allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans. We will be relentless in helping them depart Afghanistan, if and when they choose to do so. The State Department has established a team, led by the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts, to coordinate across government agencies and with advocacy groups, nongovernmental organizations, international organizations, and others. The team is working closely with interagency partners and other partners to facilitate the departure of those who wish to leave Afghanistan, including U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents, our Afghan allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans.

**Questions for the Record from Representative Joaquin Castro**  
**“Afghanistan 2001 – 2021: Evaluating the Withdrawal and U.S. Policies Part I”**  
**House Foreign Affairs Committee**  
**Monday, September 13, 2021**

**Question:**

“How will the United States continue to process Special Immigrant Visas for individuals and families who remain in Afghanistan?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* While we are currently unable to provide consular services for Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants in Afghanistan, we will continue to process SIV applications, including by assisting to transfer cases to other U.S. Embassies and Consulates around the world, where applicants are able to appear. We recognize it is currently extremely difficult for Afghans to obtain a visa to a third country or find a way to enter a third country. The U.S. government continues to expect the Taliban to provide safe passage to U.S. citizens and their families, Lawful Permanent Residents, and Afghans with travel documentation or to whom the U.S. has a special commitment, who wish to leave Afghanistan, while encouraging neighboring countries like Qatar to allow Afghans to enter.

With the exception of the consular interview, biometrics, and visa processing, all other steps of the Special Immigrant Visa process take place in the United States. These steps will remain unaffected by the suspension of operations at the U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan. As part of filing the I-360 petition with USCIS, the applicant selects an immigrant visa processing post for their interview. Applicants who have already filed their I-360 petition with USCIS and received notification from the National Visa Center (NVC) that USCIS approved their petition should contact the NVC at [NVCSIV@state.gov](mailto:NVCSIV@state.gov) to request that their case be transferred to another embassy or consulate to which the applicant is able to travel.

**Question:**

“Is the United States seeking any kind of diplomatic or consular presence in Afghanistan? If so, how would it be structured?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The U.S. Embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan suspended operations on August 31, 2021. For the time being, the U.S. government will manage our diplomatic mission to Afghanistan out of Doha, Qatar, to include consular affairs, administering humanitarian assistance, and working with allies, partners, and regional and international stakeholders. To resume operations at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, the Department will need to complete a deliberative planning process. A decision to resume operations at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul would be made based on an assessment of U.S. national security interests and the security situation on the ground and after required consultations with Congress.

**Question:**

“What do you see as the objective and mission of the United Nations in Afghanistan after the Taliban’s takeover of the country?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The United States believes the United Nations (UN) will continue to have a critical role in promoting peace and stability in Afghanistan, as well as in coordinating the humanitarian response. The United States is committed to providing humanitarian assistance for vulnerable populations inside Afghanistan and we continue to channel our assistance in part through specialized UN agencies. The UN-led humanitarian response will address food insecurity, prevent the collapse of the health system, and prepare vulnerable communities for winter. The UN and its partners will ensure aid is delivered impartially and independently to all Afghans, including women, girls, and minority populations.

**Question:**

“There are reports of Pakistani military officers and service members working directly with the Taliban after August 15th, 2021, including in Kabul. Is this accurate? If so, what activities did they pursue?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* Pakistani civilian and military officials have sustained continued, active diplomatic engagements with all regional countries and have engaged with the Taliban since August 15. In early September, for example, Pakistan’s Director General for the Inter-Services Intelligence, Lieutenant General Faiz Hameed, reportedly visited Kabul to hold meetings focused on peace and stability in Afghanistan.

**Question:**

“How do you characterize the Pakistani government’s relationship with the Afghan Taliban between 2001 and the present?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* Pakistan has fought and prosecuted militants from multiple groups but has acted inconsistently with respect to eliminating safe havens for the Taliban throughout the country. Since August 15, Pakistani civilian and military officials have sustained active diplomatic engagements with all regional countries and have engaged with the Taliban. In early September, for example, Pakistan’s Director General for the Inter-Services Intelligence, Lieutenant General Faiz Hameed, reportedly visited Kabul to hold meetings focused on peace and stability in Afghanistan. Other potential aspects of the Pakistan-Taliban relationship would

need to be addressed in a classified setting that would include other agencies of the U.S. government.

**Question:**

“How do you characterize the Pakistani government’s relationship with the Haqqani Network between 2001 and the present?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* Multiple groups designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations operate from Pakistan. Pakistan has fought and prosecuted terrorists from multiple groups but has acted inconsistently with respect to eliminating terrorist safe havens throughout the country. We have made clear to the highest levels of the Pakistan government the need to aggressively counter all terrorist organizations and to abolish their sources of support. Other potential aspects of the Pakistan-Taliban relationship would need to be addressed in a classified setting that would include other agencies of the U.S. government.

**Question:**

“Has the Pakistani government given any aid or support to any organization designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the United States? If so, what aid or support have they provided and to which organization?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* Pakistan is home to multiple groups designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations. Pakistan has fought and prosecuted terrorists from multiple groups but has acted inconsistently with respect to eliminating terrorist safe havens throughout the country. We have made clear to the highest levels of the Pakistan government the need to aggressively counter all terrorist organizations and to abolish their sources of support. Further information in this regard would need to be provided in a classified setting that would include other agencies of the U.S. government.

**Question:**

“What lessons has the United States learned in the failure of development programs in Afghanistan to achieve their intended objectives and how will those lessons be applied to U.S. assistance in other conflict zones?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* As I said, we are committed to drawing lessons from everything we have done from day one through the present. We have transformed how we work on these issues, having learned and applied lessons in Afghanistan. One example is learning how to better monitor projects in semi-permissive security environments. USAID utilized a Multi-Tiered

Monitoring tool, requiring project managers to develop a three-tier monitoring approach utilizing multiple sources of information to verify implementation and performance and to ensure a rigorous level of oversight. In addition, with Implementing Partners, USAID/Afghanistan was one of the first Missions to establish a Partner Liaison Security Office. USAID has been in Afghanistan for 20 years. By 2021, Afghans were healthier, more prosperous, and enjoyed greater freedoms than they did two decades ago. A generation of young Afghans have come of age in a society of expanding freedom of information and economic opportunities. Enormous health development gains were achieved in two decades. Life expectancy increased from 42 years to over 62 years between 2002 and 2012. The maternal mortality rate has declined by 75 percent, and child mortality was cut in half. In 2002, fewer than 1 million Afghan children attended school—and virtually no girls. Over the last two decades, student enrollment grew to nearly 10 million students—39 percent of whom were girls (2020). Access to electricity expanded from just four percent of the population to 36 percent.

**Question:**

“What risks does the presence of entities designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations in Afghanistan pose to other countries in the region, including China, Pakistan, India, and Iran?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* There are Foreign Terrorist Organizations present in Afghanistan which continue to pose significant threats throughout the region. Terrorist groups have used Afghanistan’s porous borders for years to threaten neighboring governments and civilian populations. The State Department is actively engaged throughout South and Central Asia to bolster our counterterrorism partnerships and efforts to prevent and counter terrorist threats from Afghanistan.

**Question:**

“What is the purpose of Pakistan’s status as a major non-NATO Ally following the withdrawal of U.S. and allied forces from Afghanistan?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* As I have noted, events in Afghanistan necessitate reexamination of our regional relationships, including with Pakistan. We continue to engage closely with Pakistan on U.S. strategic interests in the region, including shared counterterrorism concerns, calls for a more inclusive Afghan government, and support for the relocation of persons to whom the United States has a special commitment.

**Questions for the Record from Representative Peter Meijer**  
**“Afghanistan 2011 – 2021: Evaluating the Withdrawal and U.S. Policies Part I”**  
**House Foreign Affairs Committee**  
**Monday, September 13, 2021**

**Question:**

“HAfghanInquiries@state.gov was contacted regarding Mohsin Shefayee, a SIV applicant. It was relayed that he had been ‘hold[ing] at home the past few days per your instruction’ and assistance was requested. Consistent with other contact, a response was received the following afternoon stating that ‘[y]our message has been received and forwarded to the appropriate team for action.’ Several follow-up emails were sent regarding this individual, all with similar standard replies. He is still in Kabul and his life is now in imminent danger. To date, he, nor Congressional staff, have received any specific guidance.

- This situation is just one example of thousands where individuals within Afghanistan trusted the State Department to provide them with guidance regarding evacuation and State Department failed to do so.
- With thousands of SIV final and conditional visa holders still within Afghanistan, please specifically articulate the strategy going forward to evacuate these individuals from the country, as well as your plan to communicate with them.”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* We continue to fulfill our pledge to U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents, our Afghans allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans. We are continuing to process Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applications at every stage of the SIV process, including by transferring cases to other U.S. embassies and consulates around the world where applicants are able to appear. We know that it is currently extremely difficult for Afghans to obtain a visa to a third country or to find a way to enter a third country, but we are developing processing alternatives so that we can continue to deliver these important consular services for the people of Afghanistan. We are also continuing to press the Taliban to live up to their commitment of free passage for those who wish to leave the country.

**Question:**

“How is the State Department planning to communicate with congressional offices about cases like this that they had previously referred to the State Department’s Afghanistan Task Force? How should congressional offices proactively seek updates on previously referred cases?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The new Coordination for Afghan Relocation Efforts (CARE) office headed by Ambassador Beth Jones will be standing up a congressional mailbox for inquiries regarding Afghan relocation efforts for U.S. Citizens, Legal Permanent Residents, Afghan Special Immigrant Visa holders, as well as their spouse and minor children. CARE anticipates this new mailbox will be operational no later than the week of November 8, 2021.

**Question:**

“What is the current process for congressional offices to raise new cases of US LPRs or SIVs (not previously sent to the State Department) who are seeking evacuation from Afghanistan?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* We continue to fulfill our pledge to U.S. citizens and their families, Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs), our Afghans allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans. We will be relentless in helping them depart Afghanistan, if and when they choose to do so. We will continue our efforts to facilitate the safe and orderly travel of U.S. citizens, LPRs, our Afghans allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans who wish to leave Afghanistan.

The Department of State has established a team, led by the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts, to coordinate across government agencies and with advocacy groups, nongovernmental organizations, and others. The team is working closely with interagency and other partners to facilitate freedom of movement for those who wish to leave Afghanistan, including U.S. citizens and their families, LPRs, and at-risk Afghans whom we have committed to assist. For Special Immigrant Visas, Congressional staff may reach out to [ConsularontheHill@state.gov](mailto:ConsularontheHill@state.gov). For LPRs requesting assistance, please reach out to [AfghanistanACS@state.gov](mailto:AfghanistanACS@state.gov).

**Question**

“Is there a mechanism in place for congressional offices to track updates on cases they have previously referred to the State Department? If not, when will that kind of mechanism be available?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The new Coordination for Afghan Relocation Efforts (CARE) office headed by Ambassador Beth Jones will be standing up a congressional mailbox for inquiries regarding Afghan relocation efforts for U.S. Citizens, Legal Permanent Residents, Afghan Special Immigrant Visa holders, as well as their spouse and minor children. CARE anticipates this new mailbox will be operational no later than the week of November 8, 2021.

Once this is new congressional mailbox is operational, CARE will provide guidance to congressional members and staff regarding previous inquiries as well as new requests for the Department of State’s assistance with Afghan relocations.

**Questions for the Record from Representative Dean Phillips  
“Afghanistan 2001 – 2021: Evaluating the Withdrawal and U.S. Policies Part I”  
House Foreign Affairs Committee  
Monday, September 13, 2021**

**Accountability, Planning, Coordination**

**Question:**

“Please describe what, if any, whole-of-government planning and coordination happened in the lead up to and during the withdrawal.”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The President’s decision to begin Noncombatant Evacuation Operations (NEO) involved extensive interagency consultations, during which the safety and security of U.S. citizens, U.S. government personnel, and their dependents remained the highest Department priority. U.S. Embassy Kabul and various Department offices participated with the interagency in NEO planning discussions throughout the spring and summer of 2021. Planning efforts included a range of evacuation scenarios. U.S. Embassy Kabul worked closely with U.S. Forces – Afghanistan to ensure close coordination with the U.S. military on the ground in Afghanistan, and with CENTCOM.

**Question:**

“If you could do it all over again, what would you do differently?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The Department is beginning the process to convene stakeholders to gather and preserve lessons learned and to evaluate how we can better evacuate U.S. citizens when events unravel quickly, particularly under such dangerous conditions.

**Question:**

“What lessons have we learned?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The Department is beginning the process of convening Department and interagency stakeholders to gather and preserve lessons learned after this critical operational event.

**Taliban****Question:**

“The Taliban have formed a hardline, all male interim government, already breaking their promises to be more moderate and inclusive. I want to know where do we go from here. You said that any legitimacy or international support for the Taliban “will have to be earned.” What does the Taliban have to do to earn that legitimacy and what accountability mechanisms are in place to put pressure on the Taliban to honor its commitments? What are the United States and our allies doing to counter support and/or engagement they are receiving from countries like Pakistan, China, and Russia?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The legitimacy and support the Taliban seeks from the international community will depend on their adherence to their commitments on human rights and fundamental freedoms, allowing freedom of passage, preventing terrorist groups from posing a threat to the United States from Afghanistan, allowing unimpeded humanitarian access, and forming an inclusive government, including women and members of minority groups. The United States maintains a wide range of tools to ensure the Taliban upholds these commitments, including diplomatic engagement, sanctions, and economic assistance.

The Biden Administration has had, and continues to have, frequent conversations with Moscow to coordinate in pressing the Taliban to adhere to the counterterrorism commitments of the U.S.-Taliban Agreement. Russian and PRC influence in Afghanistan is likely to grow in the future due to the geographic proximity of these nations, but neither has thus far leapt ahead of international consensus to recognize the Taliban’s so-called “caretaker” government in pursuit of such influence.

**Question:**

“Please describe the changes you have seen in the Taliban over the last 20 years, and how, if at all, their motivations and tactics have changed?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The Department of State has observed distinct changes within the Taliban over the last 20 years to include a higher degree of administrative competency, broader experience engaging the international community and moderation in some of their public policies. However, it remains to be seen whether the Taliban will behave differently than when they were last in power. The State Department will continue to press them and hold them to their commitments, especially on counterterrorism, human rights – particularly those of women – and inclusive governance.

**Question:**

“How does the Taliban’s rise to power impact security dynamics in the region and in particular for countries that share a border with Afghanistan? What impact do you think the Taliban’s ascendance will have on terrorist groups in other parts of the world, including in Africa? How do we see the war on terror evolving going forward?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* It is too soon to tell how the Taliban assuming power will affect regional and global security. Its impact largely will depend on whether the Taliban proves willing and able to prevent terrorist groups from using Afghan soil to pose external threats, as it has pledged to do. Although we will continue to press the Taliban to counter terrorists inside Afghanistan, we also will maintain capabilities to counter terrorist threats to the United States or our interests.

**Question:**

“What steps are being taken to ensure that pending SIV applicants are safe from Taliban reprisals as their applications are adjudicated?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The Department of State continues to press the Taliban to refrain from conducting any retaliatory attacks against Afghans, including SIV applicants. We will continue to hold the Taliban to their public commitment to not conduct reprisals.

**Evacuation of Vulnerable Afghans****Question:**

“Even with the massive airlift from Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA), many Afghans eligible and in process for Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) and Priority-2 designation were unable to gain access to flights or even the airport. What is the Biden Administration’s plan to safely evacuate these specific Afghans left behind?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* We are working closely with interagency partners and with other partners to facilitate the departure of those who wish to leave Afghanistan, particularly U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs), our Afghans allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans. We continue to identify ways to support U.S. citizens, LPRs, and Afghans who have worked with us and who may choose to depart. We have no illusion that any of this will be easy or rapid. The State Department has established a team, led by the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts, to coordinate across government agencies and with advocacy groups, nongovernmental organizations, and others.

**Question:**

“How is the Administration coordinating with the NGO coalition and private entities still conducting time-sensitive evacuation efforts out of Afghanistan? In particular, how is the Administration supporting efforts to facilitate civilian evacuation flights?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The departure effort has been a monumental task and the U.S. government understands the need to continue improving coordination across agencies, as we have done and continue to do. We also appreciate the desire of NGOs and private citizens to assist and have identified a greater need for coordination there. The State Department has established a team, led by the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts, to coordinate across government agencies and with advocacy groups, nongovernmental organizations, and others. The team is working closely with interagency and other partners to launch a process to facilitate departures of those who wish to leave Afghanistan.

We are aware that some private entities have arranged for private charter flights out of Afghanistan. In many cases, the State Department does not have full visibility on the composition of the flight manifests for these private charters, making it difficult to verify the identities of those on board and protect U.S. national security and that of our partners in the evacuation effort. We have been evaluating requests for assistance on a case-by-case basis to support privately organized flights. This support involves evaluating the passenger manifest provided to us by the private group or groups organizing these flights to see which proposed passengers, if any, are potentially eligible for relocation to the United States.

**Question:**

“Several third countries to which Afghan evacuees are landing are currently requesting assurances from the U.S. Government that they have an immigration pathway forward, but such assurances have not been forthcoming. How is the Administration planning to address the issue of landing rights for evacuation flights in surrounding countries?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* There are two important elements to relocating groups and individuals via privately chartered flights – arranging departure and safe passage out of Afghanistan as well as the issue of where these individuals can go temporarily and eventually permanently resettle. We have been evaluating requests for assistance on a case-by-case basis to support privately organized flights.

We know that it is currently extremely difficult for Afghans to obtain a visa to a third country or to find a way to enter a third country, and like many refugees, may face significant challenges fleeing to safety. Our expectation – and the expectation of the international community – is that people who want to leave Afghanistan should be able to do so. We are also continuing to press the Taliban to live up to their public commitment of free passage for those who wish to leave the

country. We are doing this in our direct and pragmatic communications to the Taliban and in tandem with our allies and partners around the world.

**Question:**

“According to a State Department briefing, the Afghans are on U.S. bases in America or lily pads overseas have a path to resettlement, but there is no clear path for those Afghans at risk who remain in Afghanistan. What does the State Department need to help those at risk in Afghanistan? How can we safely start the process for them? What actions are the Administration taking to improve capacity and efficiency at lily-pad locations, as well as to facilitate evacuee travel to lily-pad locations?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* This Administration has been clear about its enduring commitment to supporting the people of Afghanistan, including individuals who remain in country as well as those who seek to leave. While there are no plans for in-country processing, given the operational environment, or relocation support for individuals referred to the Priority 1 or Priority 2 program who remain in Afghanistan, the Administration is encouraging Afghanistan’s neighbors to allow entry for Afghans and coordinating with humanitarian international organizations to provide assistance to Afghans in need. The United States is also urging countries to comply with their respective non-refoulement obligations and to respect the principle of non-refoulement. Please note a P-2 referral enables applicants to access the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) and is not a visa category.

**Question:**

“Thousands of our Afghan partners either do not have passports or have had their passports taken or destroyed due to recent events. The Taliban and bordering countries are reportedly blocking travel without these documents. What is the Administration doing to ensure that Afghans who do not have passports, but who are eligible as an SIV, P-1, P-2, or P-3 designation, or through humanitarian parole, have access to safe pathways out of the country?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* We recognize that it is currently extremely difficult for Afghans to obtain a passport or a visa to a third country or find a way to enter a third country, and like many refugees, may face significant challenges fleeing to safety. Many refugees worldwide do not have passports, and passports are generally not required to register with UNHCR or for referral to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. We strongly encourage Afghanistan’s neighbors to allow entry for Afghans and coordinate with international organizations to provide humanitarian assistance to Afghans in need. We also particularly urge states to uphold their respective obligations related to Afghan refugees or asylum seekers, and to respect the principle of non-refoulement.

**Immigration Processing****Question:**

“Given the existing backlog, which will continue to grow for the foreseeable future, Afghans seeking to complete U.S. immigration processing could take years and travel to third countries is largely blocked without verifiable travel documents. What systems and processes has the State Department deployed to undertake the immigration pathway determination in a timely fashion?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The Department of State continues to process SIV applications at all stages of the process under our control. Several recent efforts to decrease processing time include quintupling (since May 2021) the staff who process Chief of Mission (COM) approval applications, the elimination of COM Committee review from the COM approval process, and the waiver of the requirement for a medical examination for SIV applicants in Afghanistan who completed all other requirements for a visa. The Department of Defense continues to assist with verifying employment records for SIV applicants employed either directly with the U.S. military or with DoD contractors. Consular staff at U.S. embassies and consulates worldwide have assisted with the adjudication of Afghan SIV applications.

**Question:**

“To what extent is the Administration exploring options for in-country and/or virtual processing for SIV applicants, P-1s, P-2s, P-3s, and humanitarian parole applicants? If not, why not?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002 requires that visa approvals include the review of biometric identifiers, which include fingerprints. Under U.S. law, immigrant visa applicants are required to appear before a consular officer to take an oath and sign their visa application biometrically. The Department is investigating ways to streamline the visa application process wherever possible, including the technical viability of virtual interviews. Under the President’s E.O. 14013, the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program is expanding the use of virtual interviews for refugee applicants in their current country of asylum. We defer to the Department of Homeland Security for more details on refugee interviews and parole processing domestically.

We will continue to fulfill our pledge to U.S. citizens and their families, Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs), our Afghans allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans. We will be relentless in helping them depart Afghanistan, if and when they choose to do so. And we will continue our efforts to facilitate the safe and orderly travel of U.S. citizens, LPRs, our Afghans allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans who wish to leave Afghanistan.

**Question:**

“What resources does the State Department need to expeditiously process this influx of visa applicants and potential parolees?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The Department is maximizing its available resources to meet the current processing influx. For the Bureau of Consular Affairs, no additional resources are required at this time beyond the recent Continuing Resolution anomaly appropriation, as well as the \$320 million appropriation and expanded fee authorities requested in the FY 2022 President's Budget. For the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, Congress appropriated \$976.1 million in Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance funds in the Afghanistan Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2022 for support for Operation Allies Welcome and related efforts by the Department of State, including additional relocations of individuals at risk as a result of the situation in Afghanistan and related expenses. The Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs also continues to draw upon funding previously notified for Embassy Kabul operations. Given the size, scope, and scale of this operation, the Department will continue to evaluate the requirements and may require additional funds to support the urgent refugee and migration needs as a result of the situation in Afghanistan.

**Question:**

“Given the expansion of the P-2 designation eligibility for Afghans, what processes are the State Department undertaking to scale up and address the high volume of applicants for which the current P-2 infrastructure is not equipped to handle? How will the Department seek equitable outcomes for these individuals?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The Department is surging resources to review the tens of thousands of Priority 1 (P-1) and Priority 2 (P-2) refugee referrals received in recent weeks. The Department is committed to working with Congress, international partners, and advocacy groups to ensure that the P-2 designation is used appropriately and fully where applicable, and that all Afghans who have arrived have access to the resources needed to start anew in America.

**Question:**

“Many SIV applicants are having trouble contacting their former supervisors since some of them were employed with the United States government up to 19 years ago. What efforts is the State Department, USAID, or Department of Defense taking to ensure those who are having trouble finding former employers and supervisors are still able to apply for SIV status? How is the State Department working with the Department of Defense to assist with employment records from CENTCOM or the Defense Contracting Management Agency?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The Department of State continues to work with other agencies to ensure that individuals having trouble finding former employers and supervisors are able to apply for SIV status.

**Question:**

“When and how will Congressional offices be able to get information/updates on specific cases (SIV and P1/P2) that we submitted during the evacuation?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The Department of State established a team, led by the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts (C/ARE), to coordinate across government agencies and with advocacy groups, nongovernmental organizations, and others. The team is working closely with interagency partners and others to facilitate the departure of those who wish to leave Afghanistan. C/ARE responds to inquiries received as soon as possible but is legally limited in our ability to provide updates on individual Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants or their case status to anyone other than the applicant or their counsel of record. Additionally, we cannot share information on anyone who may have been relocated from Afghanistan nor their location. The Bureau of Consular Affairs continues to provide detailed case-specific status on open SIV cases, answering inquiries as quickly as possible at the National Visa Center and from Consular on the Hill.

**Question:**

“Is the current refugee visa ceiling too low to process all the requests? What authorization and appropriations actions can Congress take to ensure we can assist all those at risk?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The President affirmed the United States’ commitment to welcoming refugees by issuing the Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions that raises the refugee admissions ceiling to 125,000 for Fiscal Year 2022. The United States is, and will continue to be, a global leader in international humanitarian response, including in refugee resettlement. Persons admitted with Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) or who have been paroled into the United States are not refugees and not counted toward the number of refugee admissions.

On September 30, President Biden signed into law the Afghanistan Supplemental Appropriations Act, which allows for relocated Afghan nationals to receive domestic refugee benefits in the United States and contains a provision requiring USCIS to expeditiously adjudicate asylum applications filed by certain Afghan nationals described in the Act. Given the size, scope, and scale of this operation, the Department will continue to evaluate the requirements and may require additional funds to support urgent refugee and migration needs.

**Question:**

“What commitments has the Administration secured from third countries to host Afghans for a sufficient duration to allow the Administration to process their SIV, P-1, P-2 visas, or humanitarian parole requests? What happens when someone is unable to secure a U.S. visa? Is asylum still a possibility in those countries?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The Department is engaging countries that might host Afghans for significant durations of time. We assess that many Afghans who were relocated may be eligible for resettlement to the United States. In the event that an applicant is not eligible for any other U.S. immigration benefit, we would coordinate with UNHCR, other international organizations, or partner governments to explore other resettlement options. Additionally, P-1 and P-2 referrals are not visas, but rather a point of access to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) once the individual has departed Afghanistan.

**Question:**

“What diplomatic efforts are being undertaken to assure that countries do not outright refuse to admit or forcibly return Afghans who have fled the country, contravening international law?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* We strongly encourage Afghanistan’s neighbors to allow entry for Afghans and to coordinate with humanitarian international organizations to provide humanitarian assistance to Afghans in need. We also particularly urge states to uphold their respective obligations to not return Afghan refugees or asylum seekers to persecution or torture, and to respect the principle of non-refoulement.

**Question:**

“What do we tell constituents who ask about what they can do to help the Afghan people in general, and if there is a way for them to sponsor an Afghan family?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The State Department has entered into a public-private partnership with Welcome.US, a project of the Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, to galvanize and channel the tremendous outpouring of support we have seen from the American public to welcome newly arriving Afghans as they build new lives in the United States. Anyone who wants to learn more can visit [www.welcome.us](http://www.welcome.us) to find out how to provide assistance to Afghan newcomers.

To learn more about becoming a community sponsor to directly support Afghan families, anyone can visit [www.welcome.us/sponsor](http://www.welcome.us/sponsor) or contact their nearest resettlement agency affiliate office to find out how to participate in community sponsorship programs offered by resettlement agencies.

**Question:**

“How is the U.S. ensuring that its own foreign policy decisions and diplomatic efforts are directly informed by diverse Afghan human rights defenders and their representative organizations, including women, youth, and LGBTQI+ populations?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The Biden administration has made it clear that human rights are a priority in U.S. foreign policy and will seek to work closely with all human rights defenders and their organizations in seeking to improve respect for such rights. The President recently appointed Jessica Stern the new Department of State Special Envoy to Advance the Human Rights of LGBTQI+ Persons, and I have announced the upcoming appointment of a Senior Official for Afghan Women and Girls to oversee the Administration’s efforts to protect women, girls and members of minority groups in Afghanistan. We know that the meaningful participation and contribution of women, in all their diversity, to public life is vital to a country’s stability, security, and prosperity, and to ensuring its gains reach all members of society – including in Afghanistan.

**Question:**

“The looming economic crisis in Afghanistan will disproportionately affect a very young labor force, which may serve as a driver of extremism recruitment. How will the Administration ensure that youth have a viable alternative, which will in turn, help them push back against Taliban rollback for recent democratic and human rights gains?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* We continue to monitor the situation in Afghanistan closely and will assess opportunities to resume efforts to build resilience against violent extremism among vulnerable segments of the Afghan population when appropriate.

**Question:**

“Many young people face increased threats, risks, and challenges for continuing their peacebuilding and democracy work. How is the Administration prioritizing young people in their human rights response in Afghanistan?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* On September 13, the United States announced nearly \$64 million in new humanitarian assistance to the people affected by the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. This new funding will support the work of the United Nations, as well as International NGO actors – and will not go to the Taliban. This funding brings total U.S. humanitarian aid in Afghanistan and for Afghan refugees in the region to nearly \$4 billion since 2002. We also

provided assurances that these funds will also address the protection concerns of women, children, and minorities, including by helping more children – including girls – go back to school. This additional funding means the United States has provided nearly \$330 million in assistance to the Afghan people this fiscal year.

**Questions for the Record from Representative Chrissy Houlahan**  
**“Afghanistan 2001 – 2021: Evaluating the Withdrawal and U.S. Policies Part I”**  
**House Foreign Affairs Committee**  
**Monday, September 13, 2021**

**Question:**

“How is the U.S. holding the Taliban accountable to ensure the full, equal and meaningful participation of women in decision making, both nationally and internationally in line with the U.S. Women, Peace and Security Strategy, the WPS implementation plans, and UN Security Council resolutions on women, peace and security? How is the U.S. ensuring that its own foreign policy decisions and diplomatic efforts are directly informed by diverse Afghan women human rights defenders and their representative organizations?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* We have been clear about our intention to work alongside the international community to support the gains that recognized the human rights and fundamental freedoms of women, girls, journalists, human rights defenders, persons with disabilities, members of the LGBTQI+ community, and members of minority groups over the past 20 years. Also, we have been working with the international community to set very clear expectations of the Taliban moving forward. We are committed to continuing to do so. Our foreign policy priorities and diplomatic outreach will continue to include various forms of engagement, including consultations, with civil society organizations focused on supporting Afghan women as well as peace and security efforts.

**Question:**

“We remain concerned about reports that female humanitarian workers are not receiving the same access and level of mobility as their male counterparts. Women’s full participation in humanitarian interventions is critical to identifying the priorities and needs of women and girls; mitigating risks of GBV and providing safe, culturally sensitive support to survivors; providing essential health care such as sexual and reproductive health services; and meeting women’s and girls’ specific needs related to education, WASH, food security, and livelihoods. What is the Administration doing to ensure that female humanitarian workers have safe, equal, and unrestricted access to perform humanitarian work?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The United States will work with the international community to help ensure that the Taliban follow through on their counterterrorism commitments, allow for safe passage for all those who wish to leave Afghanistan, and advance unhindered humanitarian access, freedom of movement for aid workers of all genders, and the safety and security of humanitarian staff. The overall security situation remains fluid. The Taliban have reiterated their desire for humanitarian operations to resume and the United States is continuing to provide humanitarian

assistance and push for the full participation of female aid workers throughout Afghanistan. We continue to monitor security risks.

**Question:**

“One in five women report experiencing sexual violence in humanitarian emergencies. The insecurity of the crisis in Afghanistan, coupled with displacement and disruption of family units, puts women and girls at high risk for sexual exploitation, early and forced marriage, human trafficking, and domestic violence. Programs like Safe from the Start (State/USAID) are designed to ensure that GBV is addressed at the onset of humanitarian emergencies. How will the USG use initiatives like Safe from the Start to ensure that GBV incidents do not increase in Afghanistan? What actions will the USG take?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The Biden-Harris Administration has made it clear that human rights are at the center of our foreign policy. The Department will appoint a Senior Official for Afghan Women and Girls. We are also exploring possibilities for continuing support for Afghan women and girls who have survived or are at risk of experiencing gender-based violence. We know that the meaningful participation and contribution of women, in all their diversity, to public life is vital to a country’s stability, security, and prosperity, and to ensuring its gains reach all members of society – including in Afghanistan.

**Question:**

“Improving access to quality education, especially for girls, has been a key objective for U.S. foreign assistance in Afghanistan, and our investment has contributed to significant progress for Afghan children and youth. Will the United States continue to support education in Afghanistan to protect these gains and prevent backsliding, especially for Afghan women and girls? Furthermore, will the administration expand the license to operate humanitarian programs in Afghanistan to allow for continued education assistance?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* We have been clear on our intention to work alongside the international community to preserve the gains over the past 20 years that increased the rights of women and girls. We are deeply worried about Afghan women and girls, particularly their rights to education, work, and freedom of movement. We call on those in positions of power and authority across Afghanistan to guarantee protection of Afghan women’s and girls’ human rights and freedoms.

**Questions for the Record from Representative Sara Jacobs**  
**“Afghanistan 2001 – 2021: Evaluating the Withdrawal and U.S. Policies Part I”**  
**House Foreign Affairs Committee**  
**Monday, September 13, 2021**

**Question:**

“On September 1st, I, along with Senator Merkley and 32 other colleagues, sent a letter to your Administration urging Treasury to issue an OFAC general license to allow the delivery of humanitarian assistance. I look forward to working with the Administration on this – we need to make sure the 18 million Afghans that are in need are provided support as soon as possible. Can you provide an update on a response to this and on a decision to grant this license?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* On September 24, OFAC issued two general licenses (GLs) authorizing the U.S. government, certain international organizations (including the UN, including its specialized agencies such as the World Bank), and NGOs, and those acting on their behalf, to continue humanitarian assistance and other activities that support basic human needs in Afghanistan as well as the export to Afghanistan of critical food and medicine. These licenses and corresponding FAQs facilitate U.S. persons and non-U.S. persons – including NGOs and foreign financial institutions – to continue to support critical and life-saving activities like the delivery of food, shelter, medicine, medical services (including COVID-19-assistance) to the Afghan people. This follows past precedent in which the United States has taken steps to address urgent humanitarian needs in areas where sanctioned entities and individuals are active, such as in Yemen. The State Department fully supports continued humanitarian assistance and other activities that support basic human needs in Afghanistan as well as the export to Afghanistan of critical food supplies and medicine.

**Question:**

“It’s clear that the challenges faced during the withdrawal and evacuation process were a reflection of policy failures not just over the past few months, but the past twenty years. I know the Department is still absorbing the lessons of the past two decades, and I look forward to working with State as it looks to address these lessons learned. Following up on lessons learned from my colleague Mr. Cicilline on lessons learned from our 20-year involvement, what specific recommendations from SIGAR does the Administration plan on applying going forward as we conduct peacebuilding and development in all the countries we work in, not just in the ones where we are militarily involved? How will you actually make sure there is a strategy for our engagements going forward with realistic goals and space to course correct?”

- We always knew corruption was a problem in Afghanistan. Why was the State Department unable to address this issue over 20 years? What lessons can be applied moving forward as State continues to try and promote good governance programs across the globe?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* Since its establishment in 2008, SIGAR insights have helped shape Department policies. Most notably, the creation of the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations at State and the Bureau of Conflict Prevention and Stabilization at USAID in 2011 reflect SIGAR's "lesson-learned" that the Department and USAID needed professional centers of expertise in conflict mitigation and reconstruction. More recently, many of SIGAR's insights are captured in the findings and implementation of the Stabilization Assistance Review and, most notably, the bipartisan Global Fragility Act, which provide rigor as to both where we engage and how, with stronger analysis and planning, and more innovative diplomacy and development activities.

The Department of State is a global leader in providing governance and rule of law program assistance across the world. The U.S. presence in Afghanistan ushered in an era of unprecedented growth and stability including the expansion of rights of women, children, and members of minority groups. Despite these gains, corruption remained a significant challenge that impeded U.S. efforts over the past two decades. U.S. foreign assistance programs helped build capacity within Afghan government entities working to arrest, prosecute, and incarcerate officials who engaged in corruption. Too often, however, those in positions of power were not held accountable by local forces. Going forward, as we consider U.S. support for anti-corruption efforts in other countries, more attention should be focused on whether governments have the political will and capacity to pursue high level instances of corruption.

**Question:**

"Many of my colleagues have already raised issues they have had in helping SIV applicants leave the country and you yourself have pointed out the trouble the program was in after the Trump Administration. I wanted to drill down on a specific question though, that I know casework staff all across the country are very focused on.

- What efforts is the State Department, USAID, or Department of Defense taking to ensure those who are having trouble finding former employers and supervisors are still able to apply for SIV status and what steps are being taken to ensure the safety of these applicants while they wait for their applications are adjudicated?
- And how is the State Department working with caseworkers in Congress to coordinate this effort? Are caseworkers going to get any guidance from State in order to help SIVs beyond mere form letters? Will the 500 case officers currently assigned to help AmCits, which you mentioned earlier, also eventually be assigned to help SIVs?"

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* We continue to fulfill our pledge to U.S. citizens and their families, Lawful Permanent Residents, our Afghan allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans. We will be relentless in helping them depart Afghanistan, if and when they choose to do so. The Department of State continues to process SIV applications at all stages of the process, as feasible. Several recent efforts to decrease processing time include quintupling (since May

2021) the staff who process Chief of Mission (COM) approval applications, the elimination of the COM Committee review step from the COM approval application process, the waiver of the requirement for a medical examination for SIV applicants in Afghanistan, and the issuance of foil-less visas to applicants who have completed consular interviews in Kabul prior to the suspension of operations of Embassy Kabul but whose administrative processing concluded after that suspension. We refer you to the Department of Defense and USAID related to their assistance with verifying employment records for SIV applicants employed either directly with the U.S. military or with DoD and USAID contractors.

The Department of State strives to provide Congressional caseworkers with current guidance and information that will assist their efforts to support their individual constituents. The Bureau of Consular Affairs provided a training for congressional caseworkers on September

15, 2021 to share best practices when managing Afghanistan case referrals. We are also considering all options to ensure the efficient processing of Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applications. Operation Allies Refuge successfully relocated nearly 2,000 Afghan SIV applicants prior to the Taliban's advance on Kabul. At this time, the Department is evaluating next steps in assisting SIV applicants located in Afghanistan and in third countries. We will continue our efforts to facilitate the safe and orderly travel of U.S. citizens, LPRs, our Afghan allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans who wish to leave Afghanistan. This commitment has no expiration date.

**Question:**

"On August 29, the U.S. military launched a hellfire missile against a vehicle that was believed to have contained explosives and posed an "imminent threat" to troops at HKIA. Reports suggest 10 civilians, including the intended target – Zemari Ahmadi – died in the strike. General Mark Milley called this a "righteous strike" that foiled an ISIS attack. However, we're now seeing multiple media investigations that seem to suggest otherwise. Mr. Secretary, can you provide a status update on investigations of this attack currently underway? If investigations find that the civilians who died in this strike were victims of war crimes or crimes against humanity, what recourse do they have to seek justice under international law?"

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* I understand that U.S. Central Command's investigation into the August 29 airstrike concluded that the strike – conducted to prevent what was believed to be an imminent attack on Hamid Karzai International Airport – was in fact a tragic mistake. I also understand that U.S. Central Command is exploring the possibility of ex gratia payments and that accountability issues may be considered. As Secretary of Defense Austin has said, no military works harder than ours to avoid civilian casualties and the U.S. military will endeavor to learn from this horrible mistake. I would refer any questions regarding the investigation to the Department of Defense.

**Question:**

“How will the State Department work with caseworkers in Congress to better coordinate specific cases moving forward in a more standardized and streamlined process? Are caseworkers going to get any guidance from State to help SIVs beyond mere form letters? Will the 500 case officers currently assigned to help American Citizens, which you mentioned earlier, also eventually be assigned to help SIVs?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The Department of State strives to provide Congressional caseworkers with current guidance and information that will assist their efforts to support their individual constituents. We are considering all options to ensure the efficient processing of Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applications. Operation Allies Refuge successfully relocated nearly 2,000 Afghan Special Immigrant Visa applicants prior to the Taliban’s advance on Kabul. At this time, the Department is evaluating next steps in assisting SIV applicants located in Afghanistan and in third countries.

We continue to fulfill our pledge to U.S. citizens and their families, Lawful Permanent Residents (LPR), our Afghan allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans. We will be relentless in helping them depart Afghanistan, if and when they choose to do so. And we will continue our efforts to facilitate the safe and orderly travel of U.S. citizens, LPRs, our Afghan allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans. This commitment has no expiration date.

**Question:**

“I want to talk about some of the challenges that have contributed to failed US policy in Afghanistan. It is increasingly difficult for diplomats to make do their work 'outside the wire' and really get out and engage with actors outside the capital. I, as well as Murphy and Risch in the Senate, are focused on addressing this problem and broader risk aversion at the State department. Will you commit today to work with me and my office on this issue? How do you think this problem impacted the challenges in Afghanistan?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* The Department must balance the essential need to protect our people with the need to engage our partners around the world to advance U.S. interests. Department leadership acknowledges that our national security mission entails diverse types of risk and is committed to managing it appropriately. The Department goes to great lengths to facilitate diplomacy in challenging and often dangerous places, including Afghanistan. While the perception exists that our diplomats are unable to get “outside the wire,” our diplomats requested nearly 10,000 off- compound travel movements in CY2020 at High Threat/High Risk posts, requiring security support, and DS data shows that over 96 percent of those movement requests were approved.

**Question:**

“What is the plan, concretely, to move SIV holders out of Afghanistan and bring them to the United States? Given the lack of an American Embassy in Kabul anymore, what specific steps is the State Department taking to help move SIVs with completed paperwork?”

**Answer:**

*Secretary Blinken:* We continue to fulfill our pledge to U.S. citizens, LPRs, our Afghan allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans. We will be relentless in helping them depart Afghanistan, if and when they choose to do so. And we will continue our efforts to facilitate the safe and orderly travel of U.S. citizens, LPRs, our Afghan allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans who wish to leave Afghanistan. Because there is an ongoing terrorist threat to operations of this nature, we will not be sharing details of these efforts before people are safely out of the country.

We are continuing to process SIV applications at every stage of the SIV process, including by transferring cases to other U.S. embassies and consulates around the world where applicants are able to appear. We know it is currently extremely difficult for Afghans to obtain a visa to a third country or to find a way to enter a third country, but we are developing processing alternatives so that we can continue to deliver these important consular services for the people of Afghanistan. We are also continuing to press the Taliban to live up to their commitment of free passage for those who wish to leave the country. We are doing this in our direct and pragmatic engagement with the Taliban and in tandem with our allies and partners around the world.