

**EXAMINING THE U.S. WITHDRAWAL
FROM AFGHANISTAN**

HEARING

BEFORE THE

**COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS
UNITED STATES SENATE**

ONE HUNDRED SEVENTEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

—————
SEPTEMBER 14, 2021
—————

Printed for the use of the Committee on Foreign Relations



Available via <http://www.govinfo.gov>

U.S. GOVERNMENT PUBLISHING OFFICE

WASHINGTON : 2022

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

ROBERT MENENDEZ, *New Jersey, Chairman*

BENJAMIN L. CARDIN, Maryland	JAMES E. RISCH, Idaho
JEANNE SHAHEEN, New Hampshire	MARCO RUBIO, Florida
CHRISTOPHER A. COONS, Delaware	RON JOHNSON, Wisconsin
CHRISTOPHER MURPHY, Connecticut	MITT ROMNEY, Utah
TIM KAINE, Virginia	ROB PORTMAN, Ohio
EDWARD J. MARKEY, Massachusetts	RAND PAUL, Kentucky
JEFF MERKLEY, Oregon	TODD YOUNG, Indiana
CORY A. BOOKER, New Jersey	JOHN BARRASSO, Wyoming
BRIAN SCHATZ, Hawaii	TED CRUZ, Texas
CHRIS VAN HOLLEN, Maryland	MIKE ROUNDS, South Dakota
	BILL HAGERTY, Tennessee

JESSICA LEWIS, *Staff Director*

CHRISTOPHER M. SOCHA, *Republican Staff Director*

JOHN DUTTON, *Chief Clerk*

C O N T E N T S

	Page
Menendez, Hon. Robert, U.S. Senator From New Jersey	1
Risch, Hon. James E., U.S. Senator From Idaho	4
Blinken, Hon. Antony J., Secretary of State, U.S. Department of State, Wash- ington, DC	8
Prepared Statement	13

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

U.S. Afghan Women’s Council Call to Action Statement, Dated September 9, 2021	70
Afghanistan OFAC General License Letter, Dated September 2, 2021	77
Statement on Afghanistan From Recently Exiled Afghan Women Leaders and Human Rights Defenders	82
Responses of U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Questions Submitted by Senator Robert Menendez	83
Responses of U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Questions Submitted by Senator James E. Risch	94
Responses of U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Questions Submitted by Senator Benjamin L. Cardin	125
Responses of U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Questions Submitted by Senator Jeanne Shaheen	127
Responses of U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Questions Submitted by Senator Tim Kaine	130
Responses of U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Questions Submitted by Senator Edward J. Markey	130
Responses of U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Questions Submitted by Senator Cory Booker	132
Responses of U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Questions Submitted by Senator Marco Rubio	133
Responses of U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Questions Submitted by Senator Ron Johnson	139
Responses of U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Questions Submitted by Senator Mitt Romney	145
Responses of U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Questions Submitted by Senator Rob Portman	149
Responses of U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Questions Submitted by Senator Todd Young	151
Responses of U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Questions Submitted by Senator John Barrasso	152
Responses of U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Questions Submitted by Senator Ted Cruz	159

EXAMINING THE U.S. WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 14, 2021

U.S. SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS,
Washington, DC.

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:04 a.m., in room SD-106, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Robert Menendez, chairman of the committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Menendez [presiding], Cardin, Shaheen, Coons, Murphy, Kaine, Markey, Merkley, Booker, Schatz, Van Hollen, Risch, Rubio, Johnson, Romney, Portman, Paul, Barrasso, Cruz, Rounds, and Hagerty.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. ROBERT MENENDEZ, U.S. SENATOR FROM NEW JERSEY

The CHAIRMAN. This hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee will come to order.

Secretary Blinken, thank you for joining us today.

Last week, the *New York Times* reported on a local Afghan reporter who goes by the name of Nemat. He was covering a demonstration by several women protesting against the Taliban. He was arrested. His camera was confiscated.

Nemat said, "I told them I was a journalist and showed them my ID card, but they accused me of organizing the protests. They took me into a room, tied my hands with a scarf, and started beating me with a cable."

The horror he experienced is hard to fathom. He described a demonstrator covered in blood after being severely beaten and saw Taliban militants abusing prisoners. One of Nemat's colleagues said, "They were mocking us and saying, 'You want freedom? What freedom?'"

This is not the Taliban of 2001. This happened last week. Amid the extensive oversight work planned in Afghanistan, we must not lose sight of people like Nemat and the courageous women who continue to protest in the streets, calling for freedom in the face of violence and threats. The repression of the Afghan people is happening in real time, and the world must bear witness and hold the Taliban accountable.

Let me turn to the focus of today's hearing. Mr. Secretary, the execution of the U.S. withdrawal was clearly and fatally flawed. This committee expects to receive a full explanation of the Administration's decisions on Afghanistan since coming into office last January. There has to be accountability.

We will have other hearings to develop a set of lessons learned over the course of the war, to understand the many mistakes made over the course of 20 years. The diversion of attention and resources when the Bush administration decided to invade Iraq despite its irrelevance to the 9/11 attacks, the double-dealing by Pakistan in providing a safe haven to the Taliban, and the list goes on.

We need to understand why successive administrations made so many of the same mistakes repeatedly. Perhaps most urgently, we need to understand why the Afghan Government and military collapsed so precipitously. This rapid collapse laid bare a fundamental fact, that successive administrations lied to the Congress over the years about the durability of the Afghan military and governing institutions, and we need to understand why.

The chaos of last August is due in large part to the February 2020 surrender deal negotiated by President Trump, a deal that was clearly built on a set of lies. A deal that led to the release of 5,000 hardened Taliban fighters, boosting the militant group on the battlefield this summer.

We know now that the Taliban had no intention of pursuing a political path and peace deal with the Afghan Government. It had no intention of pursuing a democratic path. It had no intention of breaking ties with Al Qaeda and it clearly had no intention of allowing women to have their rightful seat at the table and to participate fully in society.

To demand the Taliban abide by its commitments now and expect a different result I think is somewhat absurd. The Taliban rules Afghanistan, so we will have to deal with it in some form, but let us not kid ourselves. There is no such thing as a reformed Taliban. This group is woefully stuck in the 14th century with no will to come out. Their concept of political representation and legitimacy is based squarely on the use of violent force and intimidation.

The Administration says that we should judge the Taliban by their actions, and I agree. Their actions since taking over Afghanistan have been pretty horrifying. Beating women activists, murdering ethnic and religious minorities such as the Hazara, separating classrooms by gender, shutting down local media, refusal to break with Al Qaeda, appointing the head of a foreign terrorist organization as designated by our Government from the Haqqani Network to lead the Ministry of Interior, and the list goes on.

With this in mind, the United States and the United Nations should maintain existing sanctions on the Taliban. The U.S. should reimpose those sanctions that were waived during the negotiations process, and the U.S. should consider new measures to impose higher costs on the group and its leaders while ensuring that life-saving humanitarian aid is able to assist those most vulnerable to hunger, disease, and disaster.

Nor should any country be in a rush to unilaterally recognize this regime. At a minimum, the following criteria must be met before recognition is even considered. Absolute repudiation by the Taliban of all cross-border terrorism, including Al Qaeda and associated groups. Equality of rights for girls and women. Protection of minority, ethnic, and religious groups. Commitment to democratic elections and ending all narcotics-related activity.

So, yes, the Taliban now run Afghanistan, but that does not mean we ever accept their behavior. I supported the decision to eventually withdraw our military from Afghanistan. I have long maintained, however, that how the United States left mattered. Doing the right thing in the wrong way can end up being the wrong thing. To get this right, the Biden administration needed to answer two fundamental questions. First, would the withdrawal leave a durable political arrangement in its wake? Second, would the U.S. and our allies maintain an ability to collect intelligence, conduct counterterrorism operations in a region still rife with groups, including ISIS-K, seeking to do us harm?

I believe the U.S. clearly fell short on the first measure, and time will tell on the second. The prospects do not look promising. So let me start with some framing questions about the Biden administration's Afghanistan decision-making.

First, upon coming into office, how did the Biden administration assess the impact on the ground of President Trump's flawed deal with the Taliban? Did the Administration attempt to negotiate better terms with the Taliban upon coming into office?

Second, did the President's April withdrawal announcement set in motion any explicit contingency planning in the event that the Taliban rapidly took over the country? What was the plan to evacuate all Americans? What was the plan to evacuate SIVs, P1s, P2s, and other at-risk groups? What was the plan to evacuate staff and those affiliated with Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, Voice of America, the National Endowment for Democracy, and other U.S.-funded organizations?

President Trump, with Stephen Miller, intentionally blocked SIVs from being processed, which I think is a barbaric and cruel decision which likely resulted in death for some U.S. partners. How did the Biden administration specifically accelerate processing SIVs upon coming into office?

Third, what was the plan to avoid or deal with a refugee and humanitarian crisis? I expect you will address some of these issues in your opening remarks.

Let me applaud the efforts of the personnel on the ground from the Departments of State and Defense who worked under horrific circumstances. Their actions in evacuating over 120,000 individuals were nothing short of heroic, and these personnel deserve answers. The American public deserves answers. The Afghan people certainly deserve answers.

So let me close with three points. First, while communication from the Administration has been frequent throughout this crisis, information from State, the Pentagon, and the White House has often been vague or contradictory. This was obviously a fluid and difficult situation. Frustration among many Members was high, and this has to improve.

To put this in context, Member frustration came on top of years of stonewalling by the Trump administration and its refusal to engage the Senate on the Taliban negotiations. This is one of the examples of why I have been trying to pursue on the CASE Act to understand what the written agreements are, that come between an Administration and others. Maybe if we had seen all of the elements of it, we would have been poised in a better position.

Second, I am very disappointed that Secretary Austin declined our request to testify today. A full accounting of the U.S. response to this crisis is not complete without the Pentagon, especially when it comes to understanding the complete collapse of the U.S.-trained and funded Afghan military.

His decision not to appear before the committee will affect my personal judgment on Department of Defense nominees. I expect the Secretary will avail himself to the committee in the near future, and if he does not, I may consider the use of committee subpoena power to compel him and others over the course of these last 20 years to testify.

Third, I implore the Administration to remain focused on Afghanistan. It is critically important that the world bear witness and take action when possible in response to Taliban abuses. Your visit, Mr. Secretary, to Qatar and Germany sent the right message, and I strongly urge sustained attention to Afghanistan in the months and years to come.

I also urge the Administration to strengthen its resolve and efforts to secure the relocation of our civil society partners now at grave risk who were left behind in Afghanistan. They include heroic individuals working for organizations on the frontlines of U.S. efforts to strengthen democracy and human rights, including the rights of Afghan women and girls.

Finally, I know that Senator Young is not with us today. He is home in Indiana attending the funeral of Marine Corporal Humberto Sanchez. Corporal Sanchez was among those killed in the horrendous terror attack on August 26 at the Kabul airport.

I would like to suggest that we have a moment of silence and pay our respects to all those brave American service members who were killed or injured on that day and that we also honor the thousands of American service members, Afghan soldiers, and civilians who were casualties of this 20-year war. Please join me in a moment of silence.

[Moment of silence.]

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

With that, let me turn to the distinguished ranking member, Senator Risch, for his opening remarks.

**STATEMENT OF HON. JAMES E. RISCH,
U.S. SENATOR FROM IDAHO**

Senator RISCH. Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman.

Secretary Blinken, good morning, and welcome back to our committee. You are doing the right thing testifying here today, and I thank you.

However, like the chairman, I am disappointed that some of your colleagues have declined to testify, particularly Secretary Austin. There are questions that we really need to have answered, and it is disheartening that they declined to testify. The debacle in Afghanistan is an interagency failure, and the fact that you are the only one stepping up is disheartening.

I agree with the chairman that the withdrawal was a dismal failure. One of the things we need to get to the bottom to is, who is responsible for this? Who made the decisions? There is real questions right now as to who is making the decisions.

We know for a fact that the President of the United States is somewhat disadvantaged here in that someone is calling the shots. He cannot even speak without someone in the White House censoring it or signing off on it. As recently as yesterday, in mid-sentence he was cut off by someone in the White House who makes the decision that the President of the United States is not speaking correctly.

So I would like to know who this person is. This is a puppeteer act, if you would, and we need to know who is in charge and who is making these decisions. The only way we are going to get that is when we have people like you come in and answer questions. When we get to questions, I am going to have more questions for you in that regard.

While I supported a responsible end to the war in Afghanistan, no American thinks we should have left this way. America cannot end wars simply by walking away. It is naive to assume our enemies will lay down their arms, leave us alone, and suddenly enshrine human rights if we go home. Indeed, there is a fierce battle of ideas and ambitions on the world stage, and the U.S. cannot remain neutral.

However, President Biden presented the American people with a false choice in Afghanistan, and the rushed and embarrassing retreat is a stain on America's credibility that will have implications for years to come. There were other options that could have protected our national security interests, allowed for a more measured reduction in force, and preserved American credibility.

I feel this Administration is trying to blame the prior Administration. Contrary to some that have said that the prior Administration started this, is responsible, that is simply not true. The prior Administration, when they took steps toward withdrawing from Afghanistan, entered into an agreement that had very, very specific conditions. I was privy to those. So I have personal knowledge of this.

The February 2020 agreement was contingent, contingent upon the Taliban reducing violence, meeting counterterrorism commitments, and engaging in substantive talks with the Afghan Government. These were all very important, and most importantly, most importantly, it was telegraphed to the Taliban that failure to meet their commitments would be met with grave, grave circumstances for them. The Taliban failed to meet any of these commitments, and yet, yet this Administration turned the country over to them.

President Biden chose to withdraw from Afghanistan without conditions and without prudent planning and obviously without, most important, telegraphing to the Taliban that they would enforce the conditions that the Taliban had agreed to. It did not happen. It was a strategic unforced error, and he did this against the advice of the commanders on the ground.

One of the most embarrassing things I thought was the strike that was made—and obviously, we cannot talk about what we know from an intelligence standpoint—but the kinetic strike that was made after the Taliban entered the country. This de minimis strike had dire consequences for civilians, but not for the Taliban.

These are facts. The President's withdrawal led to a Taliban offensive to topple the democratically elected government, slammed

the door on any chance for a final peace agreement, reversed the hard-earned rights of Afghan women and minorities, and will result in a safe haven for terrorists, many of whom wish to attack the United States.

The Biden administration left Afghanistan in total disarray and single-handedly created a humanitarian crisis with thousands of refugees and internally displaced Afghans in need of immediate emergency assistance.

Secretary Blinken, you characterized the evacuation as an extraordinary effort. You have touted over 124,000 evacuees. However, we abandoned the people we prioritized for departure. The Department's efforts were plagued by lack of basic planning, a failure to identify Americans, a failure to energize the SIV process months in advance, ignoring repeated congressional offers to help, and a failure to recognize the Taliban for what it is, a terrorist organization.

The numbers are telling. You evacuated 6,040 Americans and say only a couple of hundred remain. Your own department told this committee in July that there were 10,000 to 15,000 Americans in Afghanistan. There is a huge difference between 6,000 and 15,000. What happened to these other Americans?

The situation with the Special Immigrant Visa evacuations is even more disturbing. Not counting the SIVs that arrived before Kabul's fall, you evacuated 705 of roughly 20,000 principal SIV applicants. What happened to these people?

This committee reached out to the Department in April, May, and June to help expedite SIV processing. We asked what additional authorities or resources you needed. For months, we received contradictory responses or no responses at all.

I will take a minute here to defend the State Department. One of the biggest problems to helping process SIVs was the enormous failure of the Department of Defense to provide the records needed to validate the Afghans who bravely helped our forces. The fact that DoD did not keep accurate records is irresponsible and a slap in the face to those who fought alongside of us. Obviously, we want to talk to Secretary Austin about this.

Despite the enormous efforts of our troops and diplomats on the ground, the preventable tragedy that unfolded at the airport in Kabul was a disaster of leadership and of the Administration's own making. Not only were you unable to ensure that Americans had access to the airport, many were turned away repeatedly after braving Taliban checkpoints. Americans outside of Kabul had absolutely no chance of evacuation.

Green card holders and SIVs should have been prioritized for access to the airport as well, but there was no mechanism to get inside. It was an informal network of Americans that helped get Americans and Afghans around the bureaucratic wall the Administration set up at the airport. It should not have come to that.

The Administration patting itself on the back for this evacuation is like an arsonist taking credit for saving people from the burning building he just set on fire. We know the U.S. military and our diplomats can do so much more than they did, if only their political bosses had gotten out of the way.

Now we have an untold number of Americans, U.S. contractors, and SIVs still in Afghanistan. Despite repeated assurances that you will get them out, you have been unable to do so. Planes are stranded in Northern Afghanistan. Our Voice of America employees and female Afghan students on scholarships have been abandoned, and our SIV applicants are in hiding as Taliban death squads hunt them down.

You said you would have mechanisms for continued evacuations after 31 August. Where is your plan? I have not seen it. I don't know that I have even talked to anyone who has seen it.

What I have seen is a rebuke from our European allies. They begged us for help, but where we were not helping our own citizens, how could we help them? Instead, we had to rely on the generosity of partners like Qatar.

What we have all heard and read is that the United States is no longer a reliable ally. And frankly, the way this evacuation was conducted, I cannot blame them. For years, despite strains in our relations with Europe and other allies, everyone knew the United States was the competent and capable partner. They trusted us to be the steady hand at the wheel that could navigate out of any difficult situation.

That confidence has been shattered. Now across the globe, allies doubt our resolve, and our competitors like China and Russia see weakness and think they can exploit this situation. The Biden administration alone is responsible for this debacle and its consequences.

Going forward, the challenges become even harder to resolve. U.S. actions must rebuild our credibility and re-establish deterrence. The U.S. will need more proactive policies on counterterrorism and security around the globe to discourage our competitors.

Over the weekend, we marked the 20th anniversary of September 11, but we have yet to receive details about how the Administration's so-called "over the horizon" counterterrorism plan will succeed. The Taliban's takeover destroyed the basis of that strategy, and despite repeated requests from the Hill, we have yet to receive a single piece of information about the Administration's revised counterterrorism plan.

Meanwhile, the Taliban continues its relationship with Al Qaeda, and the new interior minister has a \$10 million U.S. bounty on his head for killing Americans. Any hope that the Taliban will protect American security is a fatally flawed assumption. You must redouble efforts with Afghanistan's neighbors to reach CT agreements and preserve disappearing intelligence networks.

Additionally, any country that offered support to the Taliban in their recent offensive should risk a strategic downgrade in their relationship with the United States. We also must understand Pakistan's role in this entire matter, as the chairman has alluded to. This is a difficult, but important situation.

I also remain concerned that the Administration is rushing to normalize ties with the Taliban Government. This must not occur without extensive congressional consultations. Your notification that you intended to restart foreign assistance is deeply, deeply concerning. I suspect there are other members of this committee

that are going to speak to that. That is going to be a heavy lift for you.

On the security front, the United States spent over \$80 billion on Afghan security forces. Many of these funds bypassed the oversight of the State Department and this committee. We now see the consequences of a Department of Defense that operates security cooperation on its own. The Taliban is now one of the best-armed terrorist organizations on the planet.

We have sent repeated requests for the Administration's plan to address the captured equipment. We have yet to receive any response. As Secretary, I would hope you would demand that all DoD assistance programs once again require State Department concurrence.

In closing, I would like to speak directly to our diplomats, our men and women in uniform, our Gold Star families, our humanitarian workers, and our veterans. On behalf of the American people, I would like to say thank you. The ineptitude of this Administration does not tarnish your service. What you did mattered.

You served nobly. You stood on the wall and prevented a terrorist attack against the United States for over 20 years at enormous cost to you and your families. America will always be indebted to you.

Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Risch.

Mr. Secretary. The Secretary has agreed to stay with us so each member has an opportunity to ask their questions. As such and because of the nature of the subject matter, I have agreed that the Secretary has an extended opening statement.

With that, Mr. Secretary, you are recognized.

STATEMENT OF HON. ANTONY J. BLINKEN, SECRETARY OF STATE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, WASHINGTON, DC

Secretary BLINKEN. Mr. Chairman, thank you very much. Ranking Member Risch, thank you very much. To all members, I appreciate the opportunity to be with all of you today to discuss our policy on Afghanistan, including where we are, how we got here, 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 here in this room for then-Senator Biden just 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 nearly 3,000 men, women, and children who lost their lives, we are reminded of why we went to Afghanistan in the first place, to bring justice to those who attacked us and to ensure it would never happen again. We achieved those objectives a long time 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, 2,461 American lives lost, 20,000 injuries, \$2 trillion 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. forces from Afghanistan by May 1 of this year. As part of that agreement, 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 some of the major roads connecting the cities. By January of 2021, the Taliban was in its strongest military position since 9/11, and we had the smallest number of U.S. forces in Afghanistan 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 to 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, hundreds of billions of dollars in support, equipment, training did not suffice, why would another year, another 5, another 10?

Conversely, there is nothing that strategic competitors like China and Russia or adversaries like Iran and North Korea would have liked more than for the United States to re-up 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 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, as well as 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, or generations. Deciding whether or not to leave the place that 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 en-

acted by Congress involving multiple agencies and a backlog of more than 17,000 SIV applicants.

There had not been a single SIV applicant interview in Kabul in 9 months, going back to March of 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 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, doubling the number of SIV adjudicators in Kabul in our embassy there. Even as many embassy personnel began to return, 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, especially this committee—Senator Shaheen and others—by May, we had reduced the average processing time for Special Immigrant Visas by more than 1 year. Even amid a COVID surge in Kabul, we continued to issue visas. 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 effort 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 the government forces in Kabul would collapse while U.S. forces remained.

They were focused on what would happen after the United States withdrew, from September onward. 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 standby by President Biden, was able to secure the airport and start the evacuation within 72 hours. Yes, that evacuation 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, off to the United States or to transit locations that our diplomats had arranged or negotiated in multiple countries. Our consular team worked 24/7 to reach out to Americans who could still be in country, making 55,000 phone calls, sending 33,000 emails by August 31, and they are still at it.

In the midst of this heroic effort, an ISIS-K attack killed 13 service members who were working the gates at HKIA, wounded 20 others, killed and wounded scores of Afghans. Our service members gave their lives so that others can continue to live theirs. In

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

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. As the 9/11 report suggested, it is essential that we accelerate the appointment process for national security officials since a catastrophic attack could occur with little or no notice.

Today, there are nearly 80 State Department nominees pending before the Senate. Nearly two dozen have already been voted out of this committee on a strong bipartisan basis and simply await a vote in the Senate. For our national security, I respectfully urge the Senate and this committee to move as swiftly as possible to consider and confirm all pending nominees and to address what is a significant disruption in our national security policymaking.

Now let me briefly outline what the State Department has done in the last couple of weeks and where we are going in the weeks ahead. First, as you know, 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 done the same thing. They have joined us there in Doha.

Second, we have continued our relentless efforts to help any remaining Americans, as well as Afghans and citizens of allied and partner nations, leave Afghanistan if they choose. Last week, 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, half a dozen American citizens, a dozen permanent residents of the United States, have also left Afghanistan via overland routes with our assistance.

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 precluded traveling last week.

We will continue to help Americans and Afghans to whom we have a special commitment depart Afghanistan if they choose, 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, Syria, Venezuela, Yemen, Somalia. There is no deadline to this effort.

Third, we are focused on counterterrorism. 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 that we will rely on them.

We will maintain a vigilant effort to monitor threats, robust counterterrorism capabilities in the region to neutralize those threats, if necessary, and 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; to make good on its counterterrorism commitments; to uphold the basic rights of the Afghan people, including women, girls, and minorities; to name a broadly representative permanent government; to forswear reprisals. The legitimacy and support that it seeks from the international community will depend entirely on its conduct.

We have 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. Last week, I led a ministerial meeting of 22 countries, plus NATO, the EU, the United Nations, to align our efforts.

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 U.N. agencies.

Yesterday, we announced the United States has provided nearly \$64 million in new humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan to meet critical health and nutrition needs, to address the protection concerns of women and 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 time at the Dulles Expo Center, where more than 45,000 Afghans have been processed after arriving in the United States. It is remarkable to see what our diplomats, our military, employees from many 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 of people. They are arranging medical care, including the delivery of babies. They are reuniting families that were separated, caring for unaccompanied minors. It is an extraordinary interagency effort, a powerful testament to the skill, the dedication, the humanity of our people.

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

With that, I thank the members of this committee and look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Secretary Blinken follows:]

Prepared Statement of Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken

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 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 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, 2,461 American lives lost, 20,000 injuries, and \$2 trillion 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.

There’s 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, or 5, or 10, make a difference?

Conversely, there is nothing that strategic competitors like China and Russia—or adversaries like Iran and North Korea—would have liked more than for the United States to re-up 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 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 9 months, going back to March of 2020. The program was basically in a dead stall.

Within 2 weeks of taking office, we restarted the SIV interview process in Kabul. On February 4, 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. They were focused on what would happen after the United States withdrew, from September onward. 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 as the 9/11 report suggested, it is essential that we accelerate the process for national security appointments since a catastrophic attack could occur with little or no notice. Yet today, there are nearly 80 State Department nominees pending before the Senate. Nearly 20 have already been voted out of the Committee on a strong bipartisan basis and simply await a vote in the Senate. Yesterday’s voice vote to confirm three of them was greatly, greatly appreciated, and was a demonstration of how quickly the Senate can move when the need is great and the bipartisan will is there. For our national security, I respectfully urge the Senate and this Committee to move swiftly to consider and confirm all pending nominees and to address what is a significant disruption in our national security policymaking.

Let me briefly outline what the State Department has done in the past 2 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 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 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 U.N., 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 U.N. agencies.

Yesterday, 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.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. Secretary.

Let me first begin by asking unanimous consent to enter into the hearing record a letter by the U.S.-Afghan Women’s Council calling on the Biden administration to take immediate action at the United Nations to protect Afghan civilians, particularly women and girls.

Without objection, it is so ordered.

[EDITOR'S NOTE.—The information referred to above can be found in the "Additional Material Submitted for the Record" section at the end of this hearing.]

The CHAIRMAN. Let us start a series of 7-minute rounds. I am going to hold the time tight so that every member can get their opportunity, and I will start off by making sure that I do not exceed my 7 minutes.

So prior to the final flight out, we heard from both American citizens and Afghan partners seeking to access the airport they were either not being allowed through the gates, being sent back home, or simply abandoned. While we understand and appreciate the security issues that were at play, it is confounding that such a chaotic process arose to begin with.

So when did the Administration begin to plan for a worst-case scenario contingency?

Secretary BLINKEN. In the spring and summer.

The CHAIRMAN. In the spring and summer of this year?

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes. Multiple interagency meetings, exercises, looking at the different contingencies.

The CHAIRMAN. So what was the specific planning put into the likely scenario that American citizens were going to have to evacuate under hostile conditions?

Secretary BLINKEN. Well, planning went to a number of things, including the ability to move our embassy quickly, as we did in 48 hours, including the effort to make sure that we could control the airport, bring flights in and evacuate people out.

One of the things that happened, as you know, Mr. Chairman, is that the situation outside the airport became incredibly chaotic, with thousands of people massing at the airport, massing at the gates of the airport, and that created, among other things, a very, very challenging situation.

The CHAIRMAN. Should we not have started earlier so there would not have been a bigger surge on the SIV issue? I recognize, and I think it is only fair to put in context, that your own testimony suggested that there was a 17,000 SIV backlog. Nine months had passed by without a single interview. So, obviously, you inherited a significant backlog. How many SIVs were awarded during the Trump administration?

Secretary BLINKEN. I do not have the numbers in front of me, but I think over the course of the Administration, there must have been several thousand issued.

The CHAIRMAN. Okay. So the question is then should we not have surged more significantly? I know you said you put up to 50 individuals, but knowing that you were preparing for a contingency of the worst-case scenario, should not back in March there have been a more significant surge to process SIVs and determine the entire universe of who needed to be taken out?

Secretary BLINKEN. Well, I believe we did surge those resources. As I said, we quadrupled the number of people in Washington doing processing of SIVs, and this is at a critical stage in the processing, as I think many members know. The most important stage in many ways is the so-called Chief of Mission approval. That is the stage at which SIV applicants are actually deemed eligible under the criteria established by Congress for the program.

By the way, those who apply, those who actually get Chief of Mission approval, the washout rate is about 40 percent historically. That is because it turns out that many people who apply do not qualify under the criteria set by Congress, or they are unable to get the documentation—I think this was alluded to prove that they had worked faithfully and loyally for the United States.

There are some situations where people were committing fraud in order to get into the program, maybe for understandable reasons, but the point is we have a very lengthy process, 14 steps, multiple agencies involved. We worked to try to streamline that. I think there is more work that we would like to do going forward to do that, but the bottom line is we did significantly surge our resources to that, particularly to the Chief of Mission approval process, quadrupling them.

Ultimately, we went from 10 to 50 to now, I believe, 61 or 62 working on that stage of things. We doubled the resources we had in Kabul, all in an effort to expedite. We did. We went from 100 visas a week to 1,000 visas a week. What was not anticipated was the collapse in 11 days of the Afghan Government and the Afghan military.

The CHAIRMAN. Let me ask you this. There have been numerous press reports over the past week about a new or refined process for the State Department to lead efforts in coordination with the Department of Defense to work with outside groups to evacuate American citizens and Afghan allies left behind in Afghanistan. Can you tell us exactly what these new U.S. Government-led efforts are? How coordination with outside groups and individuals is being handled? By who? What is the nature of the State-DoD cooperation? Give us a sense of that.

Secretary BLINKEN. Sure. We have within the Department, led by our former Ambassador to Afghanistan John Bass, who went back to Kabul to the airport to help lead the evacuation efforts, he is leading an effort to manage, coordinate, all of the ongoing efforts to bring people who wish to leave Afghanistan out. That includes, among other things, a coordination with the many outside groups, as well as Members of Congress, who are working themselves heroically to help in this effort.

I met, myself, with about 75 veteran's organizations a couple of weeks ago, given the extraordinary efforts that veterans, either individually or as groups, are doing to help. We want to make sure that we are as coordinated as we possibly can be on these efforts to make sure that we know who is doing what, what assistance we can provide, and to make sure that we are working together going forward.

We have many other people working on this task force. Some dedicated to American citizens, others focused on SIVs and other Afghans at risk. Others focused on coordinating with different groups, including Members of Congress.

The CHAIRMAN. Let me give you, in my final minute, I would like to give you an opportunity to set the record straight on one point. Several commentators have suggested that had the Department moved forward with the Crisis Contingency and Response Bureau proposed by the Trump administration as it was walking out the

door, it would have been able to respond better to the Afghan situation.

It is my understanding that that bureau had not been stood up yet when you decided to curtail the proposal nor, as proposed, did it actually add any additional resources or capabilities to those that State already had. It was a bureaucratic movement not creating or getting rid of actual capabilities, just a new organizational chart. In that bureaucratic result, potentially creating damage to the Department's operations, not solving them. Is that a fair statement?

Secretary BLINKEN. That is a fair statement, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Okay. If it is not the CCR, then what is the answer?

Secretary BLINKEN. Well, here again, to your point, with regard to the CCR, whether it became a bureau or not, there was no change in the assets that we already had at hand to work on these efforts. The focus of this group, either in its existing organizational structure or had it become a bureau, which, among other things, it did not because there were congressional holds across the aisle on this effort.

The previous Administration, nonetheless, went through and tried to move it forward. We decided that we needed to review it. We did the review. As you described very—very accurately, we found that this would add no assets to what we already had at hand. It would simply create a different bureaucratic structure.

Having said that, again, this is something designed primarily for individual extractions, medical emergencies. These men and women who are part of our operational medical unit are remarkable and do incredible work, but not the kind of work that would have been applicable to the large evacuation that we had to conduct in Afghanistan.

Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Risch.

Senator RISCH. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Secretary, I can tell you, I have listened to you and a handful of other people try to put the best face on this possible. I can tell you that the temperature of the American people is not there with you and that I am not talking from a partisan basis. This goes both ways.

There is not enough lipstick in the world to put on this pig to make it look any different than what it actually is. The American people want to know who is responsible for this. So let us start with this. Who is responsible? Who made the decisions on this? Was it the President of the United States?

Secretary BLINKEN. Ultimately, the President makes the decisions. That is correct.

Senator RISCH. Did he in this case?

Secretary BLINKEN. As in every case, ultimately, decisions that can only be decided by the President are decided by the President.

Senator RISCH. Well—

Secretary BLINKEN. Now, of course, to be specific, Senator, there are hundreds, thousands of decisions every single day that go into a situation as complex as this one. The big strategic decisions, those are decided by the President. The tactical operational deci-

sions are made by different agencies, agency heads, and agency officials.

Senator RISCH. Well, I am more interested in the top decision-making. Look, we have all seen this. We saw it as recently as yesterday. Somebody in the White House has authority to press the button and stop the President, cut off the President's speaking ability and sound. Who is that person?

Secretary BLINKEN. I think anyone who knows the President, including members of this committee, knows that he speaks very clearly and very deliberately for himself. No one else does.

Senator RISCH. Well, are you saying that there is no one in the White House that can cut him off? Because yesterday that happened, and it has happened a number of times before that. It has been widely reported that somebody has the ability to push the button and cut off his sound and stop him from speaking. Who is that person?

Secretary BLINKEN. There is no such person. Again, the President speaks for himself, makes all of the strategic decisions informed by the best advice that he can get from the people around him.

Senator RISCH. So are you unaware that this is actually happening? Because it happened yesterday at the Interagency Fire Center. It was widely reported. The media has reported on it, and it is not the first time it has happened. It has happened several times.

Are you telling this committee that this does not happen? That there is no one in the White House who pushes the button and cuts him off in mid-sentence?

Secretary BLINKEN. That is correct.

Senator RISCH. So this did not happen yesterday nor on the other occasions where the media showed the American people that his sentence was cut off in mid-sentence?

Secretary BLINKEN. No.

Senator RISCH. Are you saying that did not happen?

Secretary BLINKEN. Senator, I really do not know what you are referring to. All I can tell you is having worked with the President for now 20 years, both here on this committee and in over the last 9 months at the White House, the President very much speaks for himself.

Senator RISCH. Well, let us take a different attack. He does speak for himself, but what happens when somebody does not want him speaking? You are telling us you do not know anything about this that somebody cuts him off in mid-sentence? Is that what you are trying to tell this committee? Because everybody here has seen it.

Secretary BLINKEN. Senator, I am telling you based on my own experience with the President over the last 20 years, anyone who tried to stop him from saying what he wanted to say, speaking his mind, would probably not be long for their job.

Senator RISCH. Let us turn to the dissent cable that you received in July. Are you willing to give a copy of this dissent cable that you got from two dozen diplomats regarding the imminent catastrophic collapse in Afghanistan, are you willing to give a copy of that to this committee?

Secretary BLINKEN. Senator, this dissent channel is something that I place tremendous value and importance on. It is a way for people in the State Department to speak the truth, as they see it, to power. These cables, I have read every single one of them, of the dissent channel cables that we have gotten during this Administration. I have responded to every single one. I factored what I read and heard into my thinking and into my actions.

The legitimacy of the channel, the ability for people to be able to, with confidence, share their thoughts, share their views, even when they run counter to what their seniors have said or the policies being prescribed, it is vitally important that we protect that channel, protect its integrity. It is designed by its very regulations only to be shared with senior officials in the Department.

What I do not want to see is some kind of chilling effect going forward that says to those who would think of writing a cable in the future that, oh, this will, get out widely, be distributed in ways that would have that chilling effect.

Senator RISCH. Do you admit that you received a dissent cable in July signed by two dozens diplomats that warned about the imminent catastrophic collapse that was coming in Afghanistan?

Secretary BLINKEN. Senator, I certainly received this cable in mid-July. I read it. I responded to it. I factored its contents into my thinking.

What the cable said broadly was two things. It did not suggest that the government and security forces were going to collapse prior to our departure. It did express real concerns about the durability of that government force after our departure, and it focused on the efforts that we were making, particularly on the SIV front, to try to expedite moving them out.

In fact, a number of the recommendations, the very good recommendations it made were already entrained. Others were not, but one of the ones that was entrained was the establishment of Operation Allies Refuge. We received the cable on July 13. That operation was actually put into force on July 14. It had already been planned for some time, and this was an effort to expedite the identification and relocation of SIVs, actually putting them on planes, which, as you know, is not part of the program. Actually relocating them and working to establish transit sites so that we could put them there while we finished processing them.

Senator RISCH. Well, you see that is the problem with us not having access to that cable. You are telling us that, but we have been told by others that it was significantly different than what you are saying. Also we really would like to see the response to that because I think history is going to be interested in that particular cable and your response to it.

I will save my next question for the next round. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Senator Cardin, I have asked Senator Cardin to, in addition to his questions, preside for a few minutes since I have a hearing that I have to just go to.

Thank you.

Senator CARDIN [presiding]. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Secretary Blinken, thank you so much for being with us today. Thank you during the Afghan evacuations for almost the daily

briefings you had for all members of the United States Senate and keeping us totally informed as to the events unfolding.

Now I contrast that to what happened during the Trump years, where we were not kept informed at all about the negotiations between the Trump administration and the Taliban, that we had no briefings or information at all in regards to the summit meetings between the United States and North Korea, or the United States and Russia. Where our committee could not conduct the oversight that is so important, as you have pointed out, working with the executive branch in a check and balance for the unity of our country.

So I thank you very much for the way that you have kept us engaged and informed as decisions have been made.

As you pointed out, the Biden administration was dealt a very difficult hand on the withdrawal from Afghanistan. We all recognize we needed to withdraw. The options were extremely limited.

The mistakes made by previous administrations, we have talked about it. I think we need to understand that many of us did not support the 2002 campaign to go into Iraq. One of those reasons was that we wanted to complete the mission in Afghanistan when we had a chance to do it when the Taliban was diminished after our military came in, after the attack on our country.

Instead, we went into Iraq, which was not engaged in the 9/11 activities, and we never finished Afghanistan, a mistake made by the Bush administration.

Now we have already talked about the Trump administration and setting a deadline and releasing prisoners and moving forward with the reduction of troops when there was really very little options that the Administration had. It does not negate the information that was made available to you about the strength of the Afghan security forces and the Ghani administration's will to stick with it in Afghanistan.

I think many of us are interested in knowing how intelligence got that so wrong, and the contingency plans are ones that we really do want to review because it seems to us there had to be better ways to secure passage into the airport than what ultimately happened. Considering the hand that you were dealt, considering the crisis that developed, evacuating 124,000 was a miraculous task. So we congratulate all that were involved in the evacuation of so many people under such a short period of time under such difficult circumstances.

I want to get to where we are today. During this process, the State Department was very open to all Members of Congress—Democrats, Republicans—as we filtered information in to you about vulnerable people in an effort to get them out of Afghanistan. Today, our offices are still being deluged by requests to help people that are in Afghanistan. NGOs are working very aggressively.

Can you share with us the process that you are using in order to filter information about Americans that are still in Afghanistan who want to leave, those that apply for SIV status, and those Afghans that are at risk? How do we transmit that information, and what process is in place so that we can try to get these people out of Afghanistan?

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes, thank you, Senator.

As I noted, we have established a task force focused entirely on relocation to help those who wish to leave Afghanistan, whether there be any remaining American citizens, whether it is SIV applicants, whether it is Afghans at-risk, whether it is the nationals of our partner countries, get out. That involves a number of things.

It involves, for the American citizens, case management teams. Five hundred individuals whose task is to be in constant contact with any remaining American citizens who wish to leave, and that is what they are doing.

It also includes, together with our Legislative Affairs Office, being in constant contact with you, as well as with outside groups who have identified and are trying to help people who seek to leave. This here is the sum total of cases brought to us by members of this committee, just this committee, that all of you or many of you have been working, and we are deeply grateful for those efforts, for this information. It ensures that when you send us the information, we put it into our database if it is not already there. We make sure that we are able to track it. We make sure we are able to coordinate with you.

I recognize that especially in the early going, during the evacuation itself, some of the feedback was lacking. We were trying to do all of this in real time, making sure that we took in the information that you were providing and acting on it. In some cases, we did not get back to people to say here is what we have done, and we have been working to make sure that we get back to everyone. I think we have 26,000 inquiries from Congress. We have responded to 21,000 or 22,000 of them.

Senator CARDIN. So we still have the categories of reporters that work for us that are still in Afghanistan. We have women that were officials in Afghanistan that are at risk. We have NGOs that worked with us in Afghanistan, their employees that are at risk.

Secretary BLINKEN. That is right.

Senator CARDIN. So you are saying we still have an opportunity to work with you to get that information to the sources that you are using to try to arrange for their exit from Afghanistan?

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes, absolutely. We very much invite that, and we want to make sure that we have as best possible a unified, coordinated list so that we know what everyone is working on, and we can track and we can help. Or we can take on depending on the—

Senator CARDIN. Can I get your best guess on the numbers? At one point when we first started, we thought there might be somewhere around a little less than 100,000 of U.S. citizens, SIVs, and Afghans at-risk that wanted to leave. Obviously, that number was low. We have already evacuated over 124,000.

Do we know how many U.S. citizens are in Afghanistan that want to exit today? How many are in SIV status that want to exit? How many Afghans at-risk we want to help?

Secretary BLINKEN. On the American citizens who wish to leave, the number is about 100, and it is very hard to give a real-time number at any given moment because it is very fluid, by which I mean this. Some people—and we are in direct contact with this group.

Some, for very understandable reasons, are changing their mind from day-to-day about whether or not they want to leave. Others continue, even now, to raise their hands and say I am an American citizen in Afghanistan, someone who had not identified themselves before. Again, I think, as all of you know very, very well, we do not require, as a country, our citizens to register or identify themselves to our embassies in any country in the world when they travel there or if they reside there.

Senator CARDIN. Do you have the numbers for SIV and for—

Secretary BLINKEN. So the SIV numbers, that we are tabulating right now because we are trying to account for everyone who has come in. Some people remain in transit countries. Other people are now in the United States.

We are putting all of those numbers together to determine—but the overwhelming majority of Afghans who have come out of Afghanistan, thanks to our evacuation efforts, are in one way or another Afghans at-risk. Some will be SIV applicants. Others will be P1 or P2 applicants. Others will be in none of those categories, but Afghans at-risk. We are breaking down all of those numbers, and we should have a breakdown for you in the next couple of weeks.

Senator CARDIN. Thank you. I look forward to seeing that.

Senator Rubio.

Senator RUBIO. Thank you.

Mr. Secretary, in your statement, I think that the most troubling thing is the following quote from you. “Even the most pessimistic assessment did not predict the government forces in Kabul would collapse while U.S. forces remained.” I back that up by saying you also cite General Milley, who said there was no indication that there would be a rapid collapse of the Afghan army and government.

For much of last year, I was the acting chairman of intelligence. I am now the vice chairman of intelligence. I have been tracking this very, very closely. Just going back to the beginning of this year, obviously, I cannot quote the titles of the pieces, but let me suffice it to say that there are numerous pieces that would be categorized as, “It is going to hit the fan.”

Let us just for a moment put that aside, okay? Because I think any analysis of those pieces would have led anyone to that conclusion. Putting that aside for a moment, we had every reason to believe and to plan for the rapid collapse of the Afghan military and the Afghan Government.

At the beginning of 2020, by all admissions, we had already really bad status quo in Afghanistan. Okay, we had a small footprint, but we had a strong commitment to air support, and that sustained the Afghan security force’s ability to resist the Taliban. The security forces of Afghanistan were suffering 10,000 casualties a year. The Taliban was suffering casualties, too, but they enjoyed safe haven in Pakistan. They were able to go there to rest, to refit, to train, to recruit.

So, in summary, even before the withdrawal, we had a terrible status quo. The security forces, a small number of U.S. forces continued to die. We had U.S. losses as well. I want to mention that, but the Afghan Government was still fractious and corrupt, and the Taliban had an unchallenged safe haven in Pakistan.

Or put another way, and paraphrasing your own words from your opening statement, if after 20 years and hundreds of billions of dollars in support, equipment, and training, there is not enough for the Afghan Government or the Afghan security forces to become more resilient or self-sustaining, what did we think was going to happen as that support began to be removed?

What did we think was going to happen when that terrible status quo was changed? It does not take some exquisite piece of intelligence or some brilliant analysis to conclude that if you radically change an already bad status quo, by removing U.S. and NATO forces, by ending enablers and air support, the status quo was going to collapse in favor of the Taliban.

This is not an argument in favor of staying. I think that ship has sailed, okay? Because I know a lot of time has been spent on justifying the withdrawal. We are not debating the withdrawal. What I am arguing is we had a terrible status quo as is. By your own admission, the Afghan Government, even after billions of dollars and 20 years, was not self-sustaining, was not resilient. We should have known that as we began to draw down support we were going to see the potential for a collapse, and that is what all these pieces pointed to as well.

So it is concerning that no one saw all of this and concluded that there was no evidence or no reason to believe that there could be a rapid collapse. More to that point, we began to see clear signs weeks ago that this is where it was headed. Without air strikes, the Taliban now began to mass and maneuver, going from intimidating these small Afghan outposts to actually getting them into quitting. We were seeing Afghan outposts begin to quit.

The Taliban could now—they went from surrounding these small provincial capitals to surrounding major cities, with 5,000 to 8,000 Taliban fighters. This is weeks before. By the way, this is at the same time as, I believe, on July 8 President Biden was still giving this naive optimistic prediction about the fighting capabilities of the Afghan forces and so forth.

We could see them meticulously focused on the north. You could see that they were methodically and carefully splintering the sporadic remains of any sort of resistance. Weeks before the fall of Kabul, you could see the Taliban was on the verge, was headed towards doing something they had not done before. They were going to isolate Kabul from the north, cutting off all their supply routes.

So we knew weeks before that we were headed for a Taliban control of the north, all the traditional routes of Taliban encroachment on Kabul were nearly sealed, the south and the east. Kabul faced the prospect of no fuel. The Afghan Government faced the prospect of being unable to mount any viable opposition and sustained defense. What did we think was going to happen? All of those things were in place at the time.

I think the most concerning part of it is that if we did not have an analysis that looked at all this, this was not a failure of intelligence. This was a failure of policy and planning. We had the wrong people analyzing this. Someone did not see this. Either someone did not see this or someone did not want to see this because we had established this, we wanted to be out by September

11 so that we could have some ceremony arguing that we got and pulled out of Afghanistan on the anniversary of 9/11.

The fact of the matter is where it leaves us now, on top of all the other things that have been mentioned here, from a geopolitical perspective, is not a good place. I think China and Russia and Iran, they look at this botched withdrawal, and what they see is incompetence that they think they might be able to exploit, may lead to miscalculation.

I think the Europeans, our allies, who had very little say, if any, or control certainly over the timing and the execution of all this, they are now, number one, have to be wondering about our reliability, the credibility of our defense agreements with them. They also have to be really, really upset at the prospects of a massive refugee crisis landing right on their borders here very soon.

India, and I know that there was an announcement today there will be a meeting of the Quad fairly soon, which is a good development, except that in the Pacific region, if you are India, you are looking at this and saying if the United States allowed Pakistan to unravel their standing—the Pakistani role in all this, and I think multiple administrations are guilty of ignoring it. The Pakistani role in enabling the Taliban is ultimately a victory for those pro-Taliban hardliners in the Pakistani Government. They have to be looking at this and saying if the United States could have a third-rate power like Pakistan unravel its aims, what chance do they have of confronting China?

So I think this leaves us in a terrible situation. I go back to the initial point. I do not know how it is possible if, in fact, the people in charge of our foreign policy did not see all of these factors and conclude that there was a very real possibility of a very rapid collapse, then we have got the wrong people making military and diplomacy decisions in our government.

Secretary BLINKEN. Senator, I am happy to respond briefly in the time that we have. As you know from your own expertise and leadership on these matters, there are constant assessments being done. In this particular case, assessments being done of the resilience of Afghan security forces, of the Afghan Government, and different scenarios established, from worst case to best case to everything in between.

Ultimately, the preponderance of the intelligence and assessments land someplace, and there are always going to be voices, and critically important that we listen to all of them, who may be talking about exclusively the worst case, some best case, some in-between. Here is what I can say in this setting, and we can take this up as well in other settings.

Back in February, the overall assessment of the community was that after a complete U.S. military withdrawal, that could potentially in the worst-case scenario lead to the Taliban capturing Kabul within a year or two. So that is back in February, and that was more or less where things stood in the winter and into the spring.

You are exactly right that the situation was deteriorating as the Taliban continued to make progress on the ground throughout the summer. In July, the IC indicated that it was more likely than not that the Taliban would take over by the end of the year, the end

of this year. That said, we, the intelligence community, did not say that the country-wide collapse of all meaningful resistance would be likely to occur in a matter of days.

You referenced Chairman Milley, as I did earlier. Nothing that he saw, that I saw, that we saw, suggested that this government and the security force would collapse in a matter of 11 days.

You are right that I think we need to look back at all of this because, to your point, we collectively over 20 years invested extraordinary amounts in those security forces and in that government. Hundreds of billions of dollars, equipment, training, advice, support. Based on that, as well as based on what we were looking at real time, again, we did not see this collapse in a matter of 11 days.

It is important that we go back and look at all of this.

Senator CARDIN. The time has expired.

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you.

Senator CARDIN. Senator Shaheen.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, Secretary Blinken, for appearing before the committee today.

I appreciate and share the frustration of my colleagues over the challenges with the evacuation, over the situation of Special Immigrant Visa applicants, and the Taliban's treatment of women and girls and other minorities. I also agree with your assessment and that that has been given by several others that where we were when we got to that evacuation was because of the failure of both Democratic and Republican administrations.

I want to know where that outrage was when year after year for 10 years, starting with Senator McCain, I and others in the Senate tried to get more Special Immigrant Visa applicants through the process so that they could leave Afghanistan, leave the threat, and come to the United States. There were a few Republicans in the Senate who blocked us year after year from getting more SIV applicants to the United States.

I want to know where that outrage was during the negotiations by the Trump administration and former Secretary Pompeo, when they were giving away the rights of women and girls and when Secretary Pompeo came before this committee and blew off questions about what they were doing to pressure the Taliban to have women at the negotiating table for that peace treaty.

So I think there is a lot of regret and a lot of recriminations to go around, and the important thing for us to do now is to figure out how we can work together to address those people who still need to be evacuated from Afghanistan and also to ensure that we can do everything possible with the international community to help protect the human rights of the women and girls who remain in the country and those minorities.

So, Mr. Secretary, that is where I am going to put my effort. I do think we need an accounting. That is important for history and for us going forward, but let us stop with the hypocrisy about who is to blame. There are a lot of people to blame, and we all share in it.

Now, Mr. Secretary, as you know, I was one of those who was opposed to our withdrawing from Afghanistan. I am not going to

revisit that, but a lot of my concerns were around the rights of women and girls if Afghanistan fell into the hands of the Taliban.

So I want to ask you now, and you have been very specific on briefing calls that you share the concern, and I recognize that you believe it is a priority for this Administration to do what you can to protect the rights of women and girls. So can you talk specifically about what steps the Department is taking to provide for the safety of women and girls and how we are trying to rally the international community behind that effort?

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes. Thank you, Senator.

Let me just start by thanking you personally for your leadership for a long time now on these issues, both on the SIVs and the work that we have actually been able to do to try to improve the program, but more work needs to be done, as well, of course, as on women and girls. From advancing women, peace, and security and that agenda to ensuring that there is an equal playing field for women and girls, you have made a huge difference.

I have to say over the last 20 years, we have made a difference, collectively, in Afghanistan. Possibly the biggest difference we made was for women and girls. Access to education, access to healthcare, access to work and opportunity. All of that was as a result of many of the efforts that we made and that this Congress made and supported, including with very, very significant assistance.

This is hard. I was in Kabul after the President announced his decision. I met with women leaders from the then-parliament, NGOs, a lawyer, human rights defenders, listened and heard from them about their concerns about the future. Just the past couple of weeks when I was out in Doha and then in Ramstein, I talked to young women and girls who we had evacuated and heard from them, both their gratitude for having been evacuated, but also their deep concerns, more than deep concerns about the future for the women and girls who remain in Afghanistan.

So, with that bearing in mind, we have done a few things, and this is where we really want to work closely with you and with every member. One, we have worked to rally the international community to set very clear expectations of the Taliban going forward, to include the expectation that it will uphold the basic rights of women and girls, as well as minorities.

That is visible in the statement that more than 100 countries have signed at our initiative. It is also in a U.N. Security Council resolution that we initiated and got passed. I know people say, oh, it is a statement or a Security Council resolution, it does not matter. Well, in the case of the Security Council resolution, just to cite one example, there are significant sanctions from the United Nations on the Taliban. There are travel restrictions on the Taliban. The idea that if the Taliban is in violation of the Security Council resolution that we established, it will get any relief just on that alone, the U.N. sanctions or travel restrictions, I think that is pretty clear that that will not happen. That is just one point of leverage.

We have been working to make sure that the international community speaks with one voice and acts together, including on this. That is one.

Second, we want to make sure that assistance continues to flow. Humanitarian assistance, including assistance that is directed at the special needs of women and girls. We are doing that consistent with our sanctions, and we are able to do that by working through NGOs and the U.N. agencies.

Now I do not want to sugarcoat this because we know that while the Taliban seeks and will probably support and protect basic humanitarian assistance through these agencies like for food and medicine, it may be a different story when it comes to things that are directed specifically at women and girls. So we are going to be very focused on that and trying to make sure that that assistance can go through, that it is monitored effectively, including by the agencies doing it. I had spent some time talking with the head of the United Nations effort on this in terms of having a clear monitoring mechanisms for this and to carry that forward.

Next, we will soon appoint, at my direction, a senior official responsible for focusing and marshaling all of our efforts on support for women, girls, and minorities in Afghanistan. I think it is very important that we have a focal point in the U.S. Government at the State Department whose responsibility is to carry forward this agenda, working closely with you in the weeks and months ahead.

Senator SHAHEEN. Well, thank you very much. I am out of time, but can you share with us who that official is as soon as they are appointed?

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes, of course.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you.

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you, Senator.

The CHAIRMAN [presiding]. Senator Johnson.

Senator JOHNSON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Secretary, if I were just to read your testimony, not having watched any news, I would literally think this was a smashing success, but I do read the news, as most Americans do, and we realize this was a complete debacle. I think what concerns me the most among many things is that detachment from reality. It is the same denial of reality, for example, on the border. A self-inflicted wound. A crisis created by President Biden's policies that have completely thrown open our borders, and yet the Administration denies that we have a problem at the border.

I have got a number of questions. First of all, approximately, what is the dollar value of the equipment that has been left behind that now the Taliban controls? What is the dollar value of that?

Secretary BLINKEN. Senator, I believe the equipment provided over the last 20—well, little less than 20 years, 15 years, is about \$80 billion. Of that equipment that remains, as you know, it was given—some of it was handed over to the Afghan security forces—

Senator JOHNSON. I understand.

Secretary BLINKEN. —and of course, some of that is now in the hands of the Taliban.

Senator JOHNSON. So I was also struck by your comment that in your testimony that even the most pessimistic assessment did not predict the government would collapse as quickly as it did. You just in your testimony said that the realistic predictions before the com-

plete withdrawal was that it was going to collapse by the end of this year.

So the Administration continued with their plans of withdrawal, of evacuation, of surrender, knowing the Taliban would be in control of \$80 billion worth of sophisticated equipment at the end of that. Correct? I mean, did that ever—

Secretary BLINKEN. That—

Senator JOHNSON. Did that discussion ever come up in terms of maybe that would not be a good idea, leaving all that equipment behind as we bug out of Afghanistan?

Secretary BLINKEN. That assessment came in July. Much of the equipment—and again, I will defer to my colleagues at the Pentagon, who are more expert in this than I am. Much of that equipment was made inoperable. Other pieces of equipment will become inoperable because there is no ability on the part of the Taliban to maintain it. None of it, to the best of my knowledge, poses a strategic threat to us or to any of Afghanistan's neighbors. What we are looking at are—

Senator JOHNSON. Okay. So we have an oversight letter. We would like response on that.

Let us just quick talk about the decision to close down Bagram. I mean, again, the President says this was unanimously decided by the military. Is it not true that the President decided what the troop level would be, a very minimal troop level? The President decided that we would keep the embassy open, and it had to be protected. He forced the military's hands, right?

In the end, it was his decision. It was not the military's decision to close Bagram.

Secretary BLINKEN. The President makes the strategic decisions. When it comes to the actual drawdown, the retrograde, to use the technical language, those were decisions made by his military commanders. He sought their best advice, and that is what was carried out, including the timing of the decision to leave—

Senator JOHNSON. Okay. Another troubling piece of your testimony. You said when the President announced the withdrawal, NATO immediately and unanimously embraced it. Josep Borrell, the Foreign Affairs Chief for the European Union, his statement on the surrender is that it is "a catastrophe for the Afghan people, for Western values and credibility, and for the developing of international relations."

The *Wall Street Journal* summarizes it quite nicely in their piece, just the title, "How Biden Broke NATO: The Chaotic Afghan Withdrawal Has Shocked and Angered U.S. Allies." Again, that is detachment from reality that our NATO allies are onboard with this thing. They are not.

Secretary BLINKEN. Senator—

Senator JOHNSON. That is not what we are hearing.

Secretary BLINKEN. Senator, I went to NATO well before the President's decision, along with Secretary of Defense Austin, and spent the day with all of our NATO allies listening to them, their views, their prescriptions, their ideas for what we should do moving forward in Afghanistan. I shared some of our initial thinking at that point.

We factored in everything we heard from our allies into our own decision-making process. When the President made——

Senator JOHNSON. Just like you planned for——

Secretary BLINKEN. When the President made the——

Senator JOHNSON. Just like you planned for every contingency. Okay, I got it.

Secretary BLINKEN. If I could continue?

Senator JOHNSON. Now, listen, it is bureaucratic-speak. I have some questions. So, again, my concern is detachment from reality. As we surrendered, as we are evacuating, as we are bugging out, we are hearing all these soothing comments from the Administration. This is almost like a well-oiled machine here. We have got flights just leaving and 124,000 people being evacuated.

We heard something completely different. So tell me what is wrong about what I had heard. First of all, prior to the Taliban providing perimeter security, there was no security, and basically, tens of thousands of the Afghanis flooded into the Kabul airport. Correct?

Secretary BLINKEN. There was perimeter security around the airport established by our——

Senator JOHNSON. You had—we literally had tens of thousands of people.

Secretary BLINKEN. We did not——

Senator JOHNSON. We did not know who these people were. It was not like people we invited in that were Special Immigrant Visa holders. Correct?

Secretary BLINKEN. We controlled the airport. We did not control the city. We controlled the airport. Sorry for speaking over you.

Senator JOHNSON. Again, so we had tens of thousands of people in Kabul airport. The reports we were getting on the ground is many had no form of ID whatsoever. When I went to Fort McCoy, I asked the commanding general—again, all the—every contingency planned for. I asked the commanding general, when did you first find out that your mission would be as an intake facility for the Afghanistan refugees? He said 10 days ago.

I asked the commanding general. I asked the representative for the Department of State, as well as from Department of Homeland Security. Do we know that every refugee that you have received so far—and there was only 1,000 at that point in time—but do we know that they at least have some form of ID? We did not.

We are hearing all these assurances that we are getting biometrically screened, a 14-step plan. I asked the head of Northern Command, he was at Fort McCoy, describe those steps to me, and what are we screening them against? I mean, are ISIS terrorists? Are Al Qaeda terrorists? Have we biometrically screened them in the past that we can compare them to a database?

What is that 14-step process in detail? Not just 14 steps. Tell me, describe to us in detail how are we keeping this nation safe from such a chaotic situation.

Secretary BLINKEN. So, Senator, the 14-step process refers specifically to the Special Immigrant Visa applicants, and there is a lengthy process——

Senator JOHNSON. So how about for the other 124,000 people?

Secretary BLINKEN. So, yes. So to come to your point, Senator, a couple of things. We arranged, as you know, transit countries so that any Afghan coming out of Afghanistan would initially go to a transit country where we could initiate the screening, the vetting, and the background checks. We surged Customs and Border Protection officials to those transit points, as well, of course, as other security law enforcement agencies to do these checks with biometric, biographic, other information that we have.

Then as people are cleared in these transit points, they then come into the United States, but they are not being resettled immediately. They are going, once they land at Dulles or in Philadelphia, they are then being sent to military bases, where the checks continue and are completed.

Senator JOHNSON. Again, what checks? We need specifically what the checks are going to be.

The CHAIRMAN. The time of the Senator has expired. I am sure you can follow up for the rest of your questions.

Senator Coons.

Senator COONS. Thank you, Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, for this hearing. Thank you, Secretary Blinken, for your service and your testimony today.

We have, I am sure, lots of opportunities to look backwards at the 20 years of our engagement in Afghanistan and at decisions. I had hoped this committee would rise above the temptations of partisan politics and use this hearing to consider the urgent questions still before us, and I hope we will get a few minutes to focus on this, Mr. Secretary.

How do we get the remaining American citizens, legal permanent residents, and those Afghans who served alongside us or worked with and for us and who are most at risk out of Afghanistan? How do we make sure Afghanistan does not become a safe haven for terrorists again and deal with the Taliban? What leverage do we have in doing so and to also make sure humanitarian aid gets into Afghanistan? Most urgently, how do we support and resettle those Afghan refugees whom we have evacuated to third countries and that much smaller population that has reached the United States?

So let me just start with my thanks to the State Department, to the employees in Kabul and Qatar, and the DC-based task force that has worked with the evacuation repatriation of Americans and Afghans, and to the many Delawareans and Americans whom I have heard from. Former military folks who served in Afghanistan, former diplomats, and development professionals eager to help.

I look forward to continuing to coordinate with you and with the agencies of our Government, advocacy groups, and other partners on resettlement efforts. I am glad that the former Governor of Delaware, Jack Markell, has been asked to step forward and help coordinate this resettlement effort.

I was encouraged today to see *Welcome.US* launch, a broad, multi-faith, bipartisan national organization, co-chaired by three former Presidents—Bush, Obama, and Clinton—and dozens and dozens of faith groups and nonprofits to welcome Afghans to the United States.

So let me just start with a question about visa status. Senator Sullivan and I wrote a bipartisan letter in mid-August, urging ex-

panded eligibility for the SIV program. I am interested in how you are working to expand eligibility under the existing visa programs to include family members and to support those the U.S. Government supported and worked alongside, but who were not direct employees?

I want to start, if I could, Mr. Secretary, by asking you just “yes” or “no” questions about three groups that other Senators have mentioned.

Secretary BLINKEN. Sure.

Senator COONS. There is about 550 employees and family members from Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, who were not evacuated. Is the Department prioritizing their evacuation?

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes.

Senator COONS. The Department committed to evacuating our partners from NED, the National Endowment for Democracy, NDI, IRI. Are those also being prioritized?

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes, they are.

Senator COONS. Our partners from the American University of Afghanistan as well?

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes.

Senator COONS. So if you would take the 4 minutes we have got left and explore with me how do we ensure safe passage across land borders, whether into Tajikistan or Pakistan, safe and regular flights out of Afghanistan, whether from Mazar-i-Sharif or Kabul? How do we get documents into the hands of those who do not have identity documents, either because they were destroyed in our embassy or they destroyed them themselves out of fear of the Taliban? How do we make sure that we are providing the financial support needed for the whole group of refugees who, after thorough vetting, ultimately reached the United States?

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes, thank you very much, Senator. Those are all very important questions, and let me try to respond briefly to them, and we can take on the details after this session if need be.

First, we needed and we have established a clear expectation from the Taliban about allowing people to continue to leave the country, to include American citizens, green card holders, Afghans who are properly documented with a visa, including specifically those who worked in some capacity for the United States.

Not only do we have that understanding in public statements by the Taliban, of course, it is built into everything we have done with a large coalition of countries in terms of setting an expectation and making very clear that the failure to fulfill that expectation will have significant consequences, which we can get into.

Second, very important to actually make sure that there are ways to travel freely from the country. We made an intensive effort before we left to understand and share with Qatar and Turkey, the countries that stepped up to do this, what was necessary to make sure that the airport in Kabul could continue to function. Ultimately not—to have charter flights and then commercial flights going in under international civil aviation organization standards.

We did intensive work. We brought the American contractors back in the midst of the evacuation who had been running the air-

port to work that, and we handed off a very detailed plan, which is now being implemented.

Third, the land crossings. We have worked with Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan on this to make sure that as we moved people out of Afghanistan, they would facilitate their crossing into their countries. We would have consular officials surged in the necessary places to handle people coming out in that fashion.

Now, to your very important point about documentation—and this is something that maybe we can take offline—we are working on a mechanism and a means by which—and there are multiple ways of doing this, to make sure that people who do not have the necessary document, for example, a visa, from us, a physical visa, to get that to them. I prefer to go into more detail on that in another setting.

Senator COONS. Understood. If I might, just as a closing question, you were asked at the outset sort of what are the factors we weigh as we decide the future of our relationship with the Taliban? We are in this difficult situation. Many recognize the Taliban is a terrorist organization that has done horrific things within Afghanistan in the past, yet we need to have some working relationship with them to secure the safe passage out of thousands of people who we still care deeply about.

A number of American citizens with Delaware ties who I have been in contact with did not leave because their families were still in Afghanistan, and there are clear measures that they should be expected to meet that you laid out in your opening statement. What do you think will be the most important aspects of our leverage to ensure the Taliban perform in ways that we would accept, and what do you think will be the turning point at which we will make decisions with our allies to take sharper and harsher measures against the Taliban?

Secretary BLINKEN. So, simply put, the nature of the relationship that the Taliban would have with us or most other countries around the world will depend entirely on its conduct and actions, specifically with regard to freedom of travel as well as to making good on its counterterrorism commitments, upholding basic rights of the Afghan people, not engaging in reprisals, et cetera. These are the things that not only we, but countries around the world are looking at.

There is, I think, significant leverage that we and other countries hold when it comes to things that the Taliban says it wants but will not get if it does not act in a way that meets these expectations. For example, we talked a little bit before about the existing U.N. sanctions on the Taliban—these are significant—as well as travel restrictions.

There is now a new Security Council resolution that we initiated setting out the expectations for what the Taliban has to do. If it is in violation of that resolution, it is hard to see any of these U.N. sanctions being lifted, travel restrictions being lifted, and indeed, additional sanctions could well be imposed.

Similarly, the foreign reserves of Afghanistan are almost exclusively in banks here in the United States, including the Federal Reserve. Other banks, about \$9 billion. All of that has been frozen. There are significant resources as well that are in the international

financial institutions that Afghanistan normally would have access to. Those, too, have been frozen.

Over the last 20 years or so, the international community has provided about 75 percent of the Afghan Government's annual operating budget. That, too, has been frozen.

So among many things that the Taliban says it seeks, both basic legitimacy and basic support, the United States, the international community has a hand on a lot of that, much of that, most of that. So we will have to see going forward what conclusions the Taliban draws from that and what its conduct will be matching these basic expectations that we have set.

Thank you.

Senator COONS. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Romney.

Senator ROMNEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, Mr. Secretary, for taking time to answer our questions today.

I would like to associate myself with the comments that Senator Rubio made about planning for a potential immediate collapse of the Afghan Government and security forces. It seemed that as the Taliban was running the table throughout Afghanistan that the prospect of them continuing to run the table by coming into Kabul was a significant probability that should have been planned for.

In your view, Mr. Secretary, has the Taliban abandoned their sympathy and collaboration with groups like Al Qaeda and the Haqqani Network? Do they continue to have the same aim, and are they of like spirit? Or has that relationship been severed?

Secretary BLINKEN. The relationship has not been severed, and it is a very open question as to whether their views and the relationship has changed in any kind of definitive way. I think it is fair to say two things.

One, whatever the Taliban's views on Al Qaeda, they do know that the last time they harbored Al Qaeda and it engaged in an outwardly directed attack, an attack on our homeland, certain things followed, which I believe it would have an interest in not seeing repeated. So whatever their views on Al Qaeda, there is a strong disincentive built-in to allow it to engage in outwardly directed attacks, which the assessment of the intelligence community is they are not currently capable of doing.

ISIS-K, the other main group, is a different thing, as you know, because the Taliban and ISIS-K are sworn enemies. In fact, over the last 5 or 6 years since the emergence of ISIS-K, the fight has actually been between the Taliban and ISIS-K, with the Taliban taking most of the territory that ISIS-K sought to hold onto in Afghanistan. The question there, I think, is less whether they have the will to deal with ISIS-K and more whether they have the capacity.

Senator ROMNEY. Given that response, I know that previously the position of the Administration and the State Department was that the 2001 AUMF no longer played a role of significance. Given the developments in Afghanistan and the Taliban's ongoing collaboration with and sympathy with Al Qaeda and the Haqqani Network and like-minded groups, is it not appropriate for the State Department to revisit your recommendation that we abandon the 2001 AUMF?

Secretary BLINKEN. I think, Senator, we need to look to make sure that we have all the authorities that we would need for any potential contingency, including the re-emergence as a threat of Al Qaeda or the further emergence of ISIS-K as an outwardly directed threat. If we do not have those authorities, we should get them. Whether that means relooking at those authorizations or writing new ones, which I think would be the most appropriate thing to do, if necessary, we need to look at that.

Senator ROMNEY. I appreciate your willingness to change your point of view in part because of the conditions that have developed in the most recent weeks. Nothing wrong with conditions leading to a change in perspective.

I, for one, thought some years ago that we should withdraw from Afghanistan. The conditions that I saw in the ensuing years convinced me that I was wrong, and I, like Senator Shaheen, was one of those that felt that President Trump was wrong to enter into an agreement to withdraw. I thought President Biden was wrong to enter into an agreement—or to continue with that agreement to withdraw. Of course, I was appalled by the disastrous withdrawal process itself.

For us today, however, I guess I would like to focus more on the moral stain of leaving people behind and understand what we can do to make sure that we are not leaving people behind. I understand we are down to a small number of Americans. It is hard to know exactly how many are left behind.

In terms of legal permanent residents, is your priority just as high to get them out as it is to get out citizens? Or is there a different level of commitment for a legal permanent resident's return to the United States relative to a citizen?

Secretary BLINKEN. Senator, our number-one priority is American citizens, and that has, I think, long been the case. In this situation in Afghanistan, in this emergency evacuation in Afghanistan, we did everything we could as well to make sure that legal permanent residents, green card holders would also identify themselves to us. Like with American citizens, we do not know at any given time how many there are in any given country around the world, and to make available resources to help them.

Our number-one priority is any remaining American citizens who wish to leave.

Senator ROMNEY. I did not realize there is a secondary level of priority then for a legal permanent resident. If that is the case, how many of them approximately? So we do not know the exact number, but how many legal permanent residents are we convinced are still in Afghanistan?

Secretary BLINKEN. We do not have an exact number, but it is in the thousands.

Senator ROMNEY. A round number? Pardon?

Secretary BLINKEN. In the thousands.

Senator ROMNEY. In the thousands. Likewise, in terms of SIV holders or SIV applicants, or people who worked with us that have been our partners through the years, how many of them approximately are still in Afghanistan that want to come to the United States?

Secretary BLINKEN. So this is what we are doing an accounting of right now based on two things, based on the pipeline of applicants as it existed before the evacuation and then looking at those who we were able to evacuate. We do not have those numbers yet because as we have moved to evacuate people, a number of them are still at transit points around the world. Others that—

Senator ROMNEY. But it would be tens of thousands?

Secretary BLINKEN. So, realistically, two things. One, we talked about this a little bit earlier. Of the applicants in the program, and as I said, we inherited about 18,000. About half of those, and this remains more or less the case now, are at a point where it is before the Chief of Mission has given his or her approval that they are, in fact, eligible for the program.

Senator ROMNEY. I understand.

Secretary BLINKEN. So we focused on the—

Senator ROMNEY. I was looking for a number, and I guess the question I was leading to was this, which is given the fact that the SIV process was so slow and not undertaken during the Trump years in a significant way, you sped it up. That is great. Although you knew that there was no way you were going to get all these people out in time—

Secretary BLINKEN. Let me put a finer point on it.

Senator ROMNEY. —given the rapid collapse of the Afghan security forces. You said, yesterday, that you inherited a date, but in fact, you did not inherit the date. The date was May 1, and you pushed it to August 31. Why did you not push it much later so that we would have been able to process the SIV applicants, as well as those who had worked with us that had not yet applied?

I do not understand why a date was actually not inherited, and a date was not selected that would be sufficient to actually remove people from the nation in a way that would be in keeping with our moral commitment to honor our citizens, our green card holders, as well as those who have worked us over the years.

Secretary BLINKEN. Two things, if I may? First, we took some risks in terms of what the Taliban would do or not do after May 1 in pushing beyond May 1. We, of course, worked this very hard because—

Senator ROMNEY. It is a risk with other people we took.

Secretary BLINKEN. It is a risk—

Senator ROMNEY. The risk was on people we care for.

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes, just to be clear, if I could? The military told us that in order to do its retrograde, its drawdown from Afghanistan in a safe and orderly way, it needed 3 to 4 months. That is why we pushed to move beyond May 1 and to get to the end of August, early September.

Second, to your point, which is an important one and a good one, our expectation was that beyond August 31, beyond the military drawdown, the government, the security forces were going to remain in control of Kabul, of the major cities. Our embassy was fully planned to remain up and running. We were leaving about 600 military behind to make sure that we could secure the embassy so that it could continue to operate.

We had robust programming planned, to include continuing to bring out anyone who wished to leave on notably SIVs. So that was very much the plan and the expectation.

What we did not anticipate was that 11-day collapse of the government and security forces. That is what changed everything.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Senator Murphy.

Senator MURPHY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Mr. Secretary, for spending so much time with us.

I think what links our failures in Iraq and Afghanistan is that they are both fundamentally failures of hubris, believing that we can control things and influence events on the other side of the world that are beyond our control or influence. America can be a force for good in the world, but there is a limit to what we can achieve, and so there has been decades-long magical thinking with respect to what is in our control and what is outside of our control.

As it turns out, it was not within our control to be able to stand up an American-style democracy, an American-looking military in Afghanistan that was going to be able to protect the country from the Taliban, but we spent 20 years trying to achieve it.

So, Mr. Secretary, you covered some of this in your opening remarks, but I wanted to ask you a series of questions to try to level set for the committee the situation you inherited, right? What was in your control, what was outside of your control? Then to look at the events of the last 30 to 40 days with that same lens. What was in your control, what was outside of your control?

I think these are “yes” or “no” answers. Some of it you covered in your testimony, but I think it is important to get it on the record.

So, Mr. Secretary, if President Biden had chosen to breach the agreement that President Trump had signed with the Taliban, would the Taliban have restarted attacks against U.S. troops and bases?

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes.

Senator MURPHY. As you said in your opening testimony, by the time the Administration took office, the Taliban was on the outskirts of several provincial capitals. If President Biden had chosen to breach the agreement between President Trump and the Taliban, would the Taliban have begun offensives on these urban centers?

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes.

Senator MURPHY. So if the Taliban had begun a siege on these cities and resumed attacks on U.S. troops, would 2,500 troops have been enough to keep the country from falling to the Taliban?

Secretary BLINKEN. No.

Senator MURPHY. Would double that number have been enough? Do we know how big our force would have had to have gotten?

Secretary BLINKEN. I think it was the assessment of our military leaders not to put a number on it, but significant additional U.S. forces would have been required, both to protect ourselves and to prevent the onslaught from the Taliban against the provincial capitals and ultimately against Kabul.

Senator MURPHY. So it was not a decision between leaving and the status quo? This was a decision between a significant commit-

ment of new U.S. resources to the fight or the continuation of a withdrawal plan?

Secretary BLINKEN. That is correct.

Senator MURPHY. Okay. Let us talk about the last month. So once the Afghan Government and military disintegrate all at once, it seems to me it was pretty predictable and understandable that there would be panic on the ground amongst the Afghan people. So could it be expected that a few thousand U.S. troops and diplomats on the ground at the time would have been able to prevent this panic?

Secretary BLINKEN. No.

Senator MURPHY. Much has been made about these dramatic, heartbreaking scenes at the airport. Were 2,500 or 5,000 troops enough to stop the Afghan people from rushing to the airport? It created this security nightmare for you, but was there any way for the limited number of personnel that were there to prevent individuals from rushing to the airport?

Secretary BLINKEN. No. They could control the airport, as we did. They could establish a basic immediate perimeter around the airport, as we did, but they could not control what happened beyond that perimeter.

Senator MURPHY. So let us talk about that perimeter. Others say, well we should have controlled a bigger perimeter. We should have taken back over parts of Kabul to secure the passage of Americans and Afghans to the airport. I mean, let us say you had quadrupled the number of troops you had there. Let us say you had 10,000 troops there.

Without the Afghan military or a functioning government, would that have been enough to retake Kabul, to be able to secure the passage of everyone to the airport?

Secretary BLINKEN. I do not want to profess to be a military expert. So I would really defer to my colleagues at the Pentagon on that, but I can say that I think—safely say that it would have taken a substantial number of forces to try to retake the city or establish a much broader perimeter. Of course, if that was ultimately opposed by the Taliban, in a sense it would have defeated the purpose because anyone outside that perimeter would not have been allowed to get through it to come to the airport, among other things.

Senator MURPHY. Right. So once the Afghan military collapses, it disintegrates, we do not have enough troops to retake Kabul. We are in the position of having to rely on the Taliban, or at least communicate with the Taliban, to make sure that we get individuals to the airport?

Secretary BLINKEN. That is correct.

Senator MURPHY. Okay. I just think this is important to put on the record in a clear and concise way because we have to have a reckoning in this country about what we can accomplish and what we cannot accomplish. It is extraordinary that this Administration got 130,000 people out of Afghanistan, given those circumstances, given the situation that they inherited, that you inherited in January of this year.

My worry, Mr. Chairman, is that the malady that we suffered for the last 20 years, this idea that it was just a bad plan, that it was

the failure of execution as to why we could not succeed in Iraq or Afghanistan, is plaguing us again today. That right now we are having a conversation as if we just had a better plan, if we just executed better, we could have avoided these scenes at the airport. We could have guaranteed the easy and safe passage of everyone into that facility.

It is heartbreaking what happened. It was impossible for Americans to watch, but if we just simply leave today believing that if we had planned better, if we had better execution, we could have avoided this panic and confusion, I think we are just inviting another Iraq, another Afghanistan in the future.

Finally, Mr. Secretary, just quickly expand on your point about the message that it sends to China, this idea that the Chinese would love it if we stayed another 10 or 20 years, and why this is not a sign of weakness and, in fact, this is an ability for you and the national security infrastructure to be able to reorient resources toward fights that we actually can win?

Secretary BLINKEN. Well, I think, Senator, you have put it very well. In my assessment and the assessment of many others, as I said, there is nothing that strategic competitors like China, like Russia, or adversaries like Iran and North Korea, would like better than for us to have re-upped the war, doubled down on it, and remained bogged down in Afghanistan for another year, 5 years, 10 years, 20 years, with all of that dedication of resources, all of that energy and focus on that, as opposed to the challenges that we have to face today.

I might add, this committee has done, I think, a very good job on trying to refocus us on, notably the competition from China. So I think that would have been—doubling down on this war after 20 years, after nearly \$2 trillion, after 2,461 American lives lost, 20,000 injuries, and not to preserve the status quo that existed before May 1, that would have been one thing. To be in the situation where the war with us was restarted, the Taliban attacking our forces, attacking our partners and allies, going on an offensive across the country to retake the cities, that would have required a doubling down on the war.

The bottom line is this. We were right to end the war. We were right not to send a third generation of Americans to Afghanistan to fight and die there. I believe we were right in the extraordinary efforts that were made to make sure we could bring out as many people as possible. Now we have an obligation to make sure that we continue to do that and, of course, to guard against the re-emergence of any threats coming from Afghanistan.

Senator MURPHY. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Portman.

Senator PORTMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the fact you are having this critical hearing today.

I must say I am going to change what I was going to talk about based on the last interaction. Thank you for being here. I wish General Austin were here because Secretary Austin could answer many of the questions that just been posed.

I have a lot of respect for my colleague, Senator Murphy, as he knows, but this was not a choice between either a dangerous escalation of the war, which has just been laid out, or a precipitous,

chaotic withdrawal that embarrassed us around the globe. To say that it was not a sign of weakness the way we left, I mean, I do not know who you are talking to. If you are talking to our allies in NATO, they will say it was a sign of weakness.

If you are talking honestly to our adversaries, they will certainly say it is a sign of weakness, as will terrorist groups around the world. So I hope the lesson we learn here is not that this was the right way to leave. I hope the lesson we learn here is that there was a better way to leave. If the decision was made to pull out, it should not have been a precipitous, chaotic, and unfortunately deadly departure.

This afternoon, I will be speaking on the floor about Max Soviak. He is a Navy corpsman who was one of the 13 American soldiers, sailors, and Marines who were killed on the wall, trying to help others escape from the tyranny of the Taliban. He should never have been put in that position. It was an impossible position for our troops, for your diplomats, and the impossibility that they faced was due to our policy decisions.

There was an alternative. Bagram Air Base, I mean it was shut down in the middle of the night with no notice to anybody. It was a surprise. I have talked to people who know a lot more about the military side of this than I do who tell me that, yes, the Afghan troops were a disappointment, but that is partly because they were used to having Americans provide that close air support. If they had had that, they could have pushed back against the Taliban.

I think we will hear that from your military. I think if General Austin were here, we would hear this.

We just left, like just pulled out all the military underpinnings. So without the cover, literally, of close air support and other military support, yes, it became extremely dangerous and chaotic. We left a lot of people behind.

Senator Romney has asked you to give him some numbers, and you said you are still working on that. Here are the numbers that I have, the best that I have. As the ranking member on the Homeland Security Committee, we pushed and pushed and pushed. Eighteen thousand applicants for SIV. We got 705 out.

You said earlier the overwhelming number of people who were at risk got out. I do not think that is true.

Secretary BLINKEN. If I could, sir, just to—

Senator PORTMAN. No, let me just finish giving you the numbers that I have. We think about 30,000 at-risk Afghans were evacuated out of an estimated 60,000. That is the best numbers we can come up with because we cannot get good numbers from the Administration. That is the best estimate.

So that is true that we left people behind who had stood with us and helped us. Obviously, American citizens were left behind. Green card holders were left behind. Thousands of people who stood with us and helped us. Then let us ask about who came.

Earlier, there was discussion about what kind of vetting has taken place. The best numbers we have is that about three-quarters of the people who were evacuated were not green card holders, were not American citizens, were not SIV applicants, were not P1 or P2 visa holders. So about three-quarters of these individuals may not have qualified in this sense.

Now you say that they are being vetted. Good. They should be, and you know, nobody knows because we cannot get good information from the Department of Homeland Security, from the State Department, and others. From the start, many of us have said what we do there needs to be based on conditions on the ground.

Quite frankly, the President's decision was not based on conditions on the ground. That is why it was a disastrous withdrawal. That is why it put so many people at risk. It should have been an orderly withdrawal under the cover of superior U.S. and NATO military force. We did have 2,500 troops there, but we had 7,500 NATO troops with us, too.

Again, many of their commanders were shocked at what happened because they were surprised because there was not good coordination. There was a lack of coordination with the people who had stuck with us. I talked about Bagram. There was also a lack of integrated interagency planning. Of course, we have seen this in terms of how the chaotic withdrawal occurred.

These were preventable problems, and they put our military and your diplomats in this impossible situation. They did the best they could, and I commend them for that. In an impossible situation, it is amazing what they were able to perform. It was so rushed and so chaotic that, again, we did not get the right people out. Many who did get out seemed not to fall into any of the categories that we are concerned about.

So now what do we do? Let us look forward, as was suggested by Senator Coons, and I agree with that. You said that you do not believe that it will be a platform for terrorism going forward, that the current government, the Taliban Government has said that they will fight back against terrorists.

Do you believe that the Haqqani Network and particularly the new Secretary of the Interior who is a wanted terrorist, based on your Administration's assessment, do you believe that that is indication that they are going to fight back against terrorists?

Secretary BLINKEN. The question, Senator, from our perspective and our partners' perspective is whether the Taliban will make good on commitments to ensure that Afghanistan is not used as a place for outwardly directed terrorist attacks. They have made commitments, but we are not relying on those commitments. We are going to make sure that we have in place the ability to detect any re-emergence of that threat and to be able to do something about it if it does re-emerge, something that we can talk about in more detail in another setting.

Senator PORTMAN. Is the Haqqani Network considered a terrorist group?

Secretary BLINKEN. It is.

Senator PORTMAN. Is it true that the interior minister is a leader of the Haqqani Network?

Secretary BLINKEN. That is accurate.

Senator PORTMAN. I just think, sadly, we have shaken the foundations of a lot of our alliances, and we have work to do. I think we have demonstrated weakness and made the world more dangerous as a result.

Let me ask you about one specific question. Well, I guess my time has expired.

The CHAIRMAN. The time of the Senator has expired.

Senator PORTMAN. I will follow up with regard to some of the international financing questions in a letter we sent to Secretary Yellen from Senator Rubio and myself regarding foreign assets.

Secretary BLINKEN. Good. Thank you for that.

Senator PORTMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Senator Merkley.

Senator MERKLEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, Mr. Secretary.

I want to turn to the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan. The World Food Program observed that half the children under 5 are acutely malnourished in the country, that 14 million individuals in Afghanistan are on the brink of starvation, that 31 of 34 provinces are at risk of losing their health services entirely, and that only 1 percent of the country is vaccinated. This is a fairly accurate description of the challenge for both food and for healthcare?

Secretary BLINKEN. It is. The humanitarian situation is dire.

Senator MERKLEY. Thank you. The U.S. just participated in an international conference in which \$1.1 billion was pledged in humanitarian relief from a variety of nations, including an additional commitment by the United States.

NGOs, nongovernmental organizations, that often are essential for providing aid, are very concerned about a legal pathway to do so because in 2002, the Taliban was listed as a specially designated global terrorist organization under the International Economic Emergency Powers Act, and it does not have a humanitarian exception.

Previously, where we faced this situation in Yemen, the Treasury Department stepped in to create a legal pathway. A number of Senators have written to Secretary Yellen and with copies to you and to Samantha Powers saying let us use that same pathway here in which the Office of Foreign Asset Controls issues a general license, creating kind of legal insulation providing humanitarian assistance. Are you engaged in a conversation about how to create a legal pathway to provide humanitarian assistance?

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes, we are. We have issued one initial license, as you know. The Treasury issued about 10 days ago. We are looking at what other authorities might be needed to make sure that humanitarian assistance can flow as best possible in Afghanistan.

Senator MERKLEY. Great. Thank you. That is absolutely essential, and I think we have a significant responsibility. We have the chaos of war in combination with the pandemic and general disruption in the country, and it is a moral responsibility to provide assistance.

I am going to ask to enter into the record the letter from September 2 that the Senators and Members of House sent to the Administration.

The CHAIRMAN. Without objection.

[EDITOR'S NOTE.—The information referred to above can be found in the "Additional Material Submitted for the Record" section at the end of this hearing.]

Senator MERKLEY. Thank you.

So as provincial capitals started to fall, and we had 9 provincial capitals fall in 6 days, there was a lot of discussion about whether the Government of Afghanistan would direct a reconsolidation of forces to essentially consolidate protection of the territories still held, which was shrinking. Did the Government of Afghanistan take key strategic military decisions to consolidate its forces?

Secretary BLINKEN. It did not, and this was a source of tremendous frustration across the Administration from the President on down. As the summer went on and we saw the Taliban moving across the country, we repeatedly pressed the Afghan Government to do just what you described, which is to consolidate its forces and to defend what was essential to defend and what could be defended. Not to extend itself across the entire country, which it did not have the full capacity to do.

Unfortunately, that consolidation and the plan that we urged on them for how to effectively defend the major cities never took shape.

Senator MERKLEY. What was the response of the government or from President Ashraf Ghani about why they chose not to consolidate their forces to protect the areas they controlled?

Secretary BLINKEN. Well, at different moments, there were different responses. At some point, I think initially the response was, oh, we cannot be seen to be giving up on any part of the country. Never mind that over the last 5 or 6 years, the part of the country by population controlled by the Government of Afghanistan, if you go back to 2014, 2015, went from about 60 percent to, at the end of last year, about 48 percent.

So this was happening, to some extent, outside the cities, of course, relentlessly. Slowly, but relentlessly. Then, as we pressed and pressed and pressed on them, the response was, yes, we will do it, but they did not.

Senator MERKLEY. Well, we have seen over a number of years we had the challenge of the elections that were considered illegitimate by a portion of the country. We had Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani kind of facing off against each other and creating paralysis, great difficulty appointing key ministers to key positions.

As we analyze and try to understand the rapid collapse, was there essentially a failure to create an effective decision-making capability within the Afghanistan Government?

Secretary BLINKEN. I think there are a number of factors, and this is something that I hope we all look at, going back really over the last 20 years at various key points. Certainly, there was a lack of unity in the government. It was comprised of different groups, different factions. Despite, again, very significant efforts to get them to act in a unified way, they could not or would not.

Second, I think in terms of their effectiveness, there are obvious serious concerns that manifested themselves. Third, one of the endemic problems that we have had over the last 20 years that we have not been able to effectively address is pervasive corruption. That has so many consequences.

One of the consequences, though, is that if you are being asked to fight and put your life on the line for a government, for an institution that is corrupt, that is a pretty hard decision to make. So I think, as we saw with many Afghan forces and soldiers fighting

very, very bravely and giving their lives. Institutionally, the military collapsed in totally unanticipated ways in the course of 11 days.

I think as we go back and look, one of the things we have to look at is the impact that this pervasive corruption had in terms of giving the institution the will to fight for the country.

Senator MERKLEY. Absolutely. In those final days as the provincial capitals were falling, President Ghani refused to acknowledge that there were falling capitals. It was almost like a world in which he was disengaged. Then the finance minister resigned and said he was leaving the country for family reasons, but it was taken as a symbol of the government on the verge of collapse. Then, shortly thereafter, President Ghani fled himself. I think it was Sunday, August 15.

Did we have forewarning of this beginning of the cabinet to essentially flee the country, and how did we respond to that?

Secretary BLINKEN. We did not. On Saturday, as it happens, I spoke to President Ghani. We were working on a plan to have a transfer of power to a Taliban-led, but more broadly representative government to include many of the different actors in Afghanistan, working on that in Doha.

I was calling President Ghani to make sure that he would support that. That was critical. He told me he would, but he said if the Taliban would not go ahead with it, he would—and I am paraphrasing here—fight to the death. That was Saturday. He left Afghanistan the next day on Sunday.

Senator MERKLEY. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. For the awareness of Senators, there is a vote going on. There is a subsequent vote going on as well. It is my intention to try to continue through the process, but I just wanted to make members aware.

Senator Paul.

Senator PAUL. I have advocated for an end to the Afghan war for over a decade. I am glad it is finally over, but never in my worst nightmares could I have imagined that an Administration would leave and leave \$80 billion worth of weaponry to the Taliban, dozens of planes and helicopters, thousands of armored carriers, hundreds of thousands of automatic weapons. Worst of all, 13 of our brave young men and women.

Never in my worst nightmares did anyone conceive of such a colossal incompetence. Abandoning Bagram Air Force Base will be remembered as one of the worst military decisions in our history.

Holding no one accountable, having everyone circle the wagons and say, hey, we all agreed abandoning Bagram Air Force Base was a great idea, this is going to be remembered by the people. Holding no one accountable for letting the base go, it will be remembered.

To add insult to injury, this week you have now released \$64 million in aid to Afghanistan. Do we not have some prohibition against giving aid and comfort to the enemy?

Now the argument from the Biden administration is, oh, we are giving it to charities, and it is for the good of the people, for poor people and for women. Well, the Taliban has a history of taking this. Throughout their governance, they would take the money.

This was a big complaint we had when they were in power the last time.

They now have \$80 billion worth of weapons, 350,000 automatic weapons. Are we really naive enough to believe that we are just going to keep sending charity to Afghanistan and they are not going to interrupt it? I think that is a foolish notion.

The \$64 million, though, is the tip of the iceberg. There is still about \$10 billion out there that was designated for the Afghan Government. Can you pledge today without equivocation that the Biden administration will not release any of this money to the Taliban?

Secretary BLINKEN. Absent the Taliban making good on the commitments and expectations of the international community that I have outlined previously, that is correct.

Senator PAUL. Maybe we could deduct a few for the weapons they took?

Secretary BLINKEN. So, Senator, on the weapons, again I will defer to my colleagues at the Pentagon who are more expert in this. You are right that about \$80 billion worth of weaponry has been provided over the course of the last 15 or 16 years. Much of that, the significant weaponry—planes, helicopters—is actually inoperable, will soon become inoperable because it cannot be maintained.

In terms of the strategic threat that that weaponry poses, it does not to us or to Afghanistan—

Senator PAUL. You cannot say you are not going to give them the money. If they behave, you are going to give them the money. Why do we not subtract the \$80 billion from the \$10 billion you are going to give them? Then they are minus 70 still.

I mean, really, the fact that you are entertaining good behavior that they will get more money I think is a big mistake and a naive notion that we are going to somehow change this Stone Age philosophy by giving them more of our money. We have sunk trillions of dollars over there. This is our chance to have a peace dividend. Let us quit sending good money after bad.

The guy the Biden administration droned, was he an aid worker or an ISIS-K operative?

Secretary BLINKEN. The Administration is, of course, reviewing that strike, and I am sure that a full assessment will be forthcoming.

Senator PAUL. So you do not know if it was an aid worker or an ISIS-K operative?

Secretary BLINKEN. I cannot speak to that, and I cannot speak to that in this setting, in any event.

Senator PAUL. So you do not know or will not tell us?

Secretary BLINKEN. I do not know because we are reviewing it.

Senator PAUL. Well, see, you would think you would kind of know before you off somebody with a Predator drone whether he is an aid worker or he is an ISIS-K. See, the thing is, this is not just you. It has been going on for Administration after Administration.

The Obama administration droned hundreds and hundreds of people, and the thing is, is there is blowback to that. I mean, I do not know if it is true. I see these pictures of these beautiful chil-

dren that were killed in the attack. If that is true and not propaganda, if that is true, guess what? Maybe you have created hundreds or thousands of new potential terrorists from bombing the wrong people.

So you have got to know who you—we cannot sort of have an investigation after we kill people. We have an investigation before we kill people.

We have got plenty of bombs. We can bomb almost anything we want from anywhere in the world. Maybe we should have bombed the helicopters and the planes that we left behind. I mean, even though you said you did not know any of this and was all surprised, once they took all of our stuff, we should have said you have got 20 minutes to get out of it because we are going to blow it all up.

Then you would have sent a message of strength. Instead, we bombed somebody who we are not sure whether it was an aid worker or an ISIS–K operative. See, that is not sending a signal of strength, and in the end, there will be more blowback from it. If you killed an aid worker on accident, I mean, do you think we are better off because of that?

You really could have acted in a position of strength, but you could have made the basic, fundamental decision that really ruined the whole thing for you was a military decision to abandon Bagram Air Force Base before you left, before the Americans were out.

Anybody can argue, and you may have a point, that it happened more quickly than we thought it was going to happen. Okay, that is an honest mistake. Still a huge mistake. When people make judgment mistakes in the military, they ought to be relieved of their post.

Leaving Bagram Air Force Base I think is an unforgivable sort of mistake. It is going to be remembered in history. But if you do nothing about it, you leave all these people in place and say, oh, well, we all agreed. It is like then maybe everybody needs to go.

I mean, but really it was a terrible mistake, but releasing money to the Taliban will add insult to injury. It will be terrible for the memory of the 13 soldiers who died in the end, who were the final soldiers to die in this war, if you end up giving money to the people that had been ruining the Middle East and Afghanistan for decades.

I hope you will not release the money, and I think it would be a big mistake.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. I understand Senator Schatz is with us virtually?

Senator SCHATZ. Yes, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Before Senator Schatz begins, I am going to ask Senator Kaine to preside so I can vote and come back.

Thank you.

Senator SCHATZ. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Secretary Blinken, thank you for appearing before the committee. I want to sort of zoom out a little bit. The defense establishment, political appointees, so-called think tank experts, defense contractors are complaining loudly about tactics because it is their strategy that failed. They are complaining about how America's longest war ended because they did not want it to ever end, and

they are mad because they think we should be an occupying force indefinitely, and they know that position is untenable so they dive into tactics.

They want to talk about holding onto Bagram for longer or sending forces into Kabul. They will not acknowledge the fundamental mistake was that we invaded a country in Central Asia without a good understanding of its people, its history, or of its culture.

After 20 years, trillions of dollars spent, and training of hundreds of thousands of Afghan security forces, the Afghan Government re-installed was no more capable of being a referee in a civil war than before we invaded. That is not the fault of our service members or diplomats. It is the fault of policymakers who set unrealistic goals.

So the basic question I have for you, Mr. Secretary, is: What are the lessons of the last 20 years of war?

Secretary BLINKEN. Well, Senator, I think you actually summed it up extremely well, and I would say two things, just to put a fine point on it.

We went to Afghanistan for one reason, and that was to deal with the people who attacked us on 9/11, to bring them to justice, and to the best of our ability make sure that that would not happen again from Afghanistan. We largely succeeded in that effort a long time ago with Bin Laden being killed in 2011 and Al Qaeda, in terms of its capacity to conduct attacks on the homeland from Afghanistan, vastly degraded to the point where it is currently assessed that it does not have that capacity.

Somewhere along the way, with the best of intentions, we also sought to remake the country and, in effect, to use military force to remake another society. I think to your point and the point that Senator Murphy and others have made, whatever our intentions, that is probably something that is beyond our capacity. The net of that is that we were there for 20 years. We lost 2,461 Americans, 20,000 were injured. About \$2 trillion were spent in direct and indirect costs. That is the equivalent of about \$300 million every single day for 20 years on average.

To those who say, well, yes, but you arrived in a place where the expenditures in terms of people and resources were sustainable. Well, that is simply not the reality that we faced because, as we have discussed, given the deadline established for the removal of U.S. forces by the previous Administration, the choice we had was either to go through with that and withdraw our forces or to re-up the war, to escalate, to send in more forces, more loss of life, more loss of resources indefinitely.

To what end? To what result? In terms of having something sustainable in a government or in security forces that could protect the country and uphold basic rights. So I think those lessons are important. They are profound, and I hope that all of us together will reflect on those and other lessons that we have learned, both in what we have done tactically, including in this Administration, as well as what we have done strategically across many administrations over 20 years.

Senator SCHATZ. Thank you, Mr. Secretary.

I am worried about reports that we are seeing about acts of violence against journalists, women, and girls and the Taliban targeting minority groups like the Hazara people, groups who have a

brutal history of committing violence against them are probably going to get worse.

So what are we doing to ensure physical access for the NGOs that service these constituencies?

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you, Senator.

These reports, which I have also seen, whether in media reporting, in videos and other reports, are deeply, deeply disturbing. I think whether it is us or whether it is many other countries around the world that we have been working to organize and to focus, this, of course, violates the basic expectations that we have of a Taliban-led government in terms of its need to not abuse these rights, but to uphold them.

So we are working to make sure that we are all both speaking with one voice and acting together when it comes to using the influence and leverage we have with the Taliban to insist that it meet these expectations. Second, when it comes to humanitarian assistance and other kinds of support, besides providing that support to NGOs, to the United Nations and its agencies, we are doing whatever we can to help ensure that those agencies and those NGOs are able to operate, pressing directly and indirectly on the Taliban-led government to ensure their ability to do that and their protection.

This is very much a moving picture and something we are very focused on right now and in the days and weeks ahead.

Senator SCHATZ. One final question. I understand this is not the main thing. I understand there are people who remain in mortal danger, but from your standpoint, the Department of State, you have got to be a little worried about morale for those people who have dedicated the better part of 20 years to this effort.

So what can we do, not what can we say, but what can we do on behalf of the Foreign Service, especially at a time when we need to building back our diplomatic corps?

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes, thank you for raising that, Senator, because it is—you are exactly right, and it is very, very important to me, and it is very, very important institutionally.

I spent time with all of our returning diplomats from Afghanistan, either personally or virtually depending on where they were, and spent a lot of time listening to them, hearing them, and trying to address the concerns that they have. To your point, we have so many people who have invested their work, their careers, their lives in Afghanistan, developed relationships, a deep love for the country, and this is very challenging, painful for many of them.

Of course, those who participated in the evacuation itself who were literally at the gates at the Kabul airport side-by-side with these extraordinary men and women in uniform, doing that work, including the 13 who lost their lives who were killed in the terrorist attack. I had officers who were literally serving next to them up to a couple of hours before that attack, knew them by first name.

So the impacts, both over 20 years and more immediately, with our people who were there literally pulling people in to safety, helping to talk people in, to walk people in, officers around the Department who stood up and volunteered to help in some way. Many of them who ran into HKIA, to the airport, to help get people out.

So we are spending time talking to them, listening to them, and also providing them the support that some of them may need, including emotional support—

Senator Kaine [presiding]. Mr. Secretary, if I can ask you to sum up, we are over time, and there are still eight Senators who want to ask questions.

Secretary Blinken. Yes.

Senator Schatz. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator Kaine. Senator Barrasso. Thank you, Senator Schatz.

Senator Barrasso. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Secretary, President Biden has described the evacuation from Afghanistan as an extraordinary success. His words, “extraordinary success.” This has to be the lie of the 21st century.

It is dishonest, and if he believes it, it is delusional. America can no longer ever say we leave no American behind because Joe Biden did, and by your own testimony and your words this morning, there are still about 100 Americans trapped behind enemy lines.

We have heard a lot about the 13 U.S. service members who died a couple of weeks ago. One was Rylee McCollum of Jackson Hole, Wyoming. He was 20 years old, signed up for the Marines on his 18th birthday.

His wife Gigi, expecting a baby. The baby was delivered just yesterday, a baby girl. I stood with Rylee’s family and his then-pregnant wife on Friday in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, as his remains were brought back in a flag-draped coffin from Afghanistan. Never made it back home alive, as a result of this Administration’s failures. People in Wyoming view this as having lost one of their sons, one of their children, and it is a devastating loss. They really do believe it is the Administration who should hold the blame for what has occurred.

This withdrawal, and you have heard it from other Senators on both sides of the aisle, has been an epic failure. No planning, no strategy. It was cobbled together at the last minute, disorganized. It did not have to be this way.

I am thinking back to your confirmation hearing. I raised a number of questions and concerns about your record on foreign policy failures in Syria, in Libya, in Iran. I said these botched decisions have serious consequences. I said I believe they embolden terrorist organizations around the globe.

I said your decisions in the past have put lives of men and women who serve our nation at risk because of these failures, and I said I think it would be a grave mistake to confirm a Secretary of State who has a demonstrated track record of repeatedly making the wrong decisions when it comes to American foreign policy and national security. The actions I have seen from you over the last 7 months have proven my assessment to be correct.

The Biden administration’s missteps are numerous. Failed to start evacuation operations until the fall of Kabul in August, despite announcing the withdrawal in April. Failed to heed the warnings of a collapse of the Afghan Government and security forces in spite of warnings. Failed to prepare for a rapid Taliban takeover. Failed to adapt the politically motivated deadline for withdrawal to the situation taking place on the ground because you were so focused on the calendar on the wall.

Failed to keep Bagram Air Force Base, a place I visited about eight or nine times. The U.S. military base with two runways that could be used to help evacuate civilians. We just heard failure to prevent a vast arsenal of weapons from getting into the hands of the Taliban.

I mean, it seems the most egregious, though, that I hear about in Wyoming and people all across the country are most offended by is abandoning American citizens, as well as abandoning our allies in Afghanistan. Senator Portman went over the numbers. The Washington Post called it a “moral disaster.” I think it is a moral disgrace.

You nearly dislocated your shoulder, though, patting yourself on the back for the great job you have done. I mean, just yesterday you stated, “We did the right thing by our citizens in working feverishly to get every one of them out.”

You did not get every one of them out. You have admitted again and again we are talking about over 100 Americans. The top priority must always be getting all Americans home safely. Now with no U.S. personnel in Afghanistan, the Americans that President Biden left behind, instead of going on national TV and saying we will not take the troops out until every American is out, their options for escaping are dwindling.

So I am trying to put this all together to say how did we end up here? In April, the President made the decision to announce everyone would be out by August 31. May 8, there was a rehearsal of concept, which is a dress rehearsal for withdrawal.

I know that the National Security Council was there. The Secretary of Defense, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Secretary of Homeland Security, they were all there. My understanding is that you did not attend. Is that true?

Secretary BLINKEN. My Deputy responsible for the operation was there.

Senator BARRASSO. I know where you were. I think you should have been here instead. I understand in late June the State Department was getting nervous because the military drawdown was moving on schedule, but not the civilian drawdown. You were running behind.

I understand State Department was talking to the Defense Department to slow down the pace of military withdrawal, calling actually for “tapping the brakes” on military withdrawal. Is that not true?

Secretary BLINKEN. Senator, I am not going to get into any internal deliberations or discussions that we had. We worked on this together every step of the way.

Senator BARRASSO. In July, you got more warnings at the State Department things were getting bad. When did the State Department formally make the request to the Department of Defense for military-assisted evacuation, the noncombatant evacuation operation? Because that is a Secretary or Ambassador job.

Secretary BLINKEN. The NEO was being planned, if necessary, throughout the spring and summer. We revised the plans on a number of occasions, and ultimately, when the government and security forces unexpectedly collapsed in the 11 days, the NEO went into effect.

Senator BARRASSO. So middle of August?

Secretary BLINKEN. That is correct.

Senator BARRASSO. Why did you wait so long?

Secretary BLINKEN. Because we had a government and security forces in place that, by every estimate, would be able to protect the city, protect Kabul, protect the other provincial capitals certainly through the year.

Senator BARRASSO. So yesterday, you testified that the Taliban has been designated a terrorist organization. I want to be very clear on this because that is what you said yesterday. "The Taliban has been designated a terrorist organization."

Does this Administration believe the Taliban is a terrorist organization?

Secretary BLINKEN. It is designated under one of the designations, and any engagement that we have will be purely for the purposes of advancing our interests.

Senator BARRASSO. Under one of the designations?

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes, a specially designated terrorist—

Senator BARRASSO. When does this Administration plan to list the Taliban as a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization?

Secretary BLINKEN. A specially designated terrorist organization, that is correct.

Senator BARRASSO. You testified this morning about the SIV washout rate. I think you said about 40 percent that they do not qualify—

Secretary BLINKEN. Before the Chief of Mission approval, that is correct.

Senator BARRASSO. So what percentage of the Afghan population that left Afghanistan as part of our U.S. evacuation efforts, what percentage of those were vetted before they actually got on the airplanes?

Secretary BLINKEN. Before they got on the airplanes—

Senator BARRASSO. Yes.

Secretary BLINKEN. —to leave Kabul? Certainly not—most of them were not. That is exactly why we established transit points in countries through negotiations with those countries to make sure that before anyone came to the United States, they would be vetted by the different law enforcement and security agencies. So we established agreements with well more than a dozen countries.

Senator BARRASSO. So who were you letting on the planes? Anybody that showed up?

Secretary BLINKEN. Well, initially, as you know, there were people who managed to flood the airport. We had to do an immediate assessment of those. We had to make sure we could clear people out of the airport so that the flights could come in, go out.

No one came to the United States without being checked somewhere else first to make sure that they do not pose a security threat.

Senator BARRASSO. My time has expired. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I would just have to say I spent time overseas last week talking to our NATO allies at a security conference, as well as with NATO individuals. I will tell you, our enemies are emboldened, and our allies are enraged.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The CHAIRMAN [presiding]. Senator Booker.

Senator BOOKER. Mr. Secretary, thank you for being here, and thank you for allotting so much time and taking every single question posed to you.

I want to first maybe just pick up with what my friend and colleague asked. Could you characterize the Americans that are still there? I know there are a lot of them that did not necessarily want to come back. There is a whole array of different reasons. Could you give us a better understanding of those that have remained and what their circumstances are?

Secretary BLINKEN. Certainly. Senator, as we have noted, starting back in March, we issued 19 separate messages to any American citizen who was registered with the embassy, urging them to leave Afghanistan. To avail themselves of commercial flights that were running, offering assistance if they needed it, because we knew it was a very volatile security environment.

Especially when we went, started the ordered departure of our embassy on April 27, it is also very incumbent upon us to make sure that we are making clear to any American citizens that they should take the opportunity to leave.

By the time of the evacuation, despite these 19 separate messages, there were still somewhere around 5,000 or 6,000 American citizens left in Afghanistan. As we have noted earlier, we never know, whether it is Afghanistan or any other country around the world, at any given moment how many American citizens are there because they are not—no one is required, when you travel abroad, when you reside abroad, you are not required to register with the embassy or with anyone else.

Many people do. Many do not. We made a massive effort to try to determine how many people were there. To get to your point, the reason that despite all of these warnings, despite the environment people remained is because for virtually all of them Afghanistan was their home. They have lived there for years, for decades, for generations.

Their extended family was there, and it is the most wrenching of all decisions to have to decide whether or not to leave the place you have come to know as home.

Senator BOOKER. I wanted to ask that because I wanted to give more texture to this complex situation. This is not that there were people there—there were many people that fall into the category of not being abandoned by our country but have made the conscious choice to stay in country. Correct?

Secretary BLINKEN. That is correct.

Senator BOOKER. I have only been here 8 years, but I will say to you and your staff, you have been the most responsive State Department team that my office has dealt with. We have brought many, as you know, people to your attention, both American citizens and Afghans, who wanted to get out, have worked with us to many different degrees of success. I am grateful for that.

I have now witnessed with my senior Senator, we went to our joint base and saw the facilities being done for those who have met extreme vetting and have made it to the United States. What is going on with the 13,000 expected in New Jersey and the 65,000

to 70,000 is America at its best. I meant, for military personnel and State Department talking to me about this being some of the proudest work they have ever done, and I think Americans should be aware of that and what is going on. We are a great nation, and this is a reflection of those words on the Statue of Liberty.

I want to pick up, though, on the situation as it is. I think it was Senator Merkley who brought up the concerns about humanitarian interests, humanitarian crisis that is really boiling over there. I want to just get you to reiterate that you issued one license, but we really need more. Correct?

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes, I understand that, and that is exactly what we are looking at. We want to make sure that all the authorities exist to provide that humanitarian assistance, including by not just our own NGOs, but others as well.

Senator BOOKER. It is a strategic situation. We know we control significant resources the Afghan Government has been relying on to run basic services. This is a strategic leverage that we have over the Taliban to continue to try to pressure them into honoring human rights, honoring the rights of women, countering some of the terrorist concerns that we have, and it is very important.

However, given what we understand, without those resources there are going to be continued humanitarian suffering. As the New York Times reported, the World Food Program is estimating about 40 percent of Afghans' crops are going to be lost. There is going to be tremendous hunger as the price of wheat is expected to go up 25 percent.

The World Food Program's own food stock is expected to run out by September. So this is tremendous suffering that will come. It is going to be exacerbated by climate change. We can literally see issues of starvation hitting the general population.

I guess, if you can give me specifically what assurances has the Biden administration been able to secure from the Taliban as it is to humanitarian access, and how is the State Department working with international partners? Because it is not just our responsibility to coordinate and provide near-term and long-term assistance for those Afghans who have ended up in locations without the proper support mechanisms.

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes. First, you are exactly right I think to draw a distinction between basic humanitarian assistance to respond to what is a crisis among so many Afghan people. By the U.N.'s estimates, well over 50 percent are in need of humanitarian assistance. We have had a drought. We have had horrific economic conditions. We have had COVID, everything piling on to one of the poorest countries on Earth to begin with.

So when it comes to food, when it comes to medicine, when it comes to the basics, we, the international community, irrespective of anything else, ought to be able to provide that, provided that we can do it knowing that the assistance is going to get to the people who need it and not diverted or used in any other way.

We have longstanding mechanisms and arrangements in place, including with leading NGOs, including with the U.N. agencies to do just that, as well as very clear monitoring mechanisms to make sure even in an environment that we do not control, that assistance gets to the people who need it. I spent time with the head of the

U.N. agency responsible for that to make sure that that is what is happening.

We are coordinating with dozens of countries on this. The U.N. is playing a lead role. They just had a donor's conference to make sure that everyone else is feeding into this as well.

Senator BOOKER. I just want to end by saying thank you to many of the State Department personnel still in that region as well as here in the United States that are working through this crisis.

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Rounds I understand is with us virtually.

Senator ROUNDS. Yes, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, sir.

Secretary Blinken, thank you for your willingness to appear before the committee and to answer questions on the Afghanistan withdrawal. I understand you have been there for almost 3 hours now. I appreciate your persistence in this.

Mr. Secretary, my staff has been working very closely with yours on the issue of Afghan Special Immigration applications, or SIVs, some of which have been initiated for over 3 years. As you are aware, I sent a letter to you last week that outlines my concerns, and I spoke to Deputy Secretary McKeon 3 weeks ago.

Due to the preparation for the hearing, I received updates on three of the five SIV cases my staff has been working for months on. I sincerely appreciate the efforts of your staff to get me this information, which I provided last night to the South Dakota veterans who requested my help. For that, I want to thank you.

I would, however, like you to be aware of my concern pertaining to a key reason that has hamstrung my efforts to assist SIV applicants. This is the Department's position stated to my staff on multiple occasions that it is precluded by law from providing updates or noting any potential defects in applications.

Mr. Secretary, if true, this would prevent Members of Congress from executing oversight and constituent service responsibilities, specifically when they are advocating in support of an applicant. It would also, incidentally, violate the Department's own foreign affairs manual.

Will you commit to me today that you will review the Department's procedures and fix this unacceptable procedure?

Secretary BLINKEN. Senator, I am happy to review that. Let me say, first, thank you. Thank you for the work that you and your team and staff have done to help folks in need and to make sure that we had the information that we needed to try to be helpful and to get people out. I am really grateful for that and grateful for the work that we have been able to do together.

We will certainly review all of these procedures. There are requirements either built into the law, privacy concerns, et cetera, that may have to be addressed, but we should look at everything.

Senator ROUNDS. Well, Mr. Secretary, I think this is important enough to where we will follow up, and hopefully, within a time certain, we will be able to come up with what changes need to be made, either statutorily or within the rules process, to clarify this because this should not be that hard to be able to stay in contact and to make those communications back and forth between your Department and Members of the United States Senate.

Our adversaries, Mr. Secretary, are celebrating the departure of U.S. troops, and they most certainly are celebrating the creation of a power vacuum. Most certainly, they are also prepared to take this opportunity and use it to their advantage. China has announced last week that it will send \$31 million worth of aid to Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. There have also been reports that they are looking at Bagram Air Base for their own use.

The Russian embassy in Afghanistan has remained open, and the Ambassador met with Taliban leadership after the takeover. Pakistan is considering the Taliban Government as a partner to counter India, and the Iranian President openly called this an American military defeat and is considering working with the Taliban.

Did the Administration consider all of these foreign policy implications before such an abrupt withdrawal? If they did, does the Department have a strategy to counter our adversaries' malign influence in the region?

Secretary BLINKEN. We certainly did. We factored everything into the decisions we made, including the impact that it might have on the neighboring countries, regional countries, and others with various interests in Afghanistan.

A number of the countries that you cited have a whole series of different interests in Afghanistan, to include making sure that it is not a place for terrorism directed against them, to ensure that it is not a source of drugs flowing out into their countries, to make sure that it is not a source of potential refugees flowing out into the countries as well. So all of those things are in play, and countries are looking to take steps that they need to take to protect some of their basic interests.

At the same time, we have established across more than 100 countries and in the U.N. through a Security Council resolution basic expectations of the Taliban-led government. If those expectations are not met, and other countries are aiding and abetting so that the Taliban is able to not fulfill those expectations, there will be consequences for that, too.

Senator ROUNDS. Well, Mr. Secretary, if I could, what I am really curious about is do you have a strategy that you established? Did you have enough time before this withdrawal to actually establish a strategy, knowing that there would be a void in Afghanistan?

Secretary BLINKEN. The work that we have done to bring together across dozens of countries, very active contact groups, looking as we work together across these countries with NATO, the EU, as well as the U.N., we have a collective strategy on the way forward, and we are working that as we speak.

Senator ROUNDS. Does our country, do we have a strategy that if this has been laid out and based upon the need to move out as quickly as we did, did you have time to actually establish a strategy to take care of what will be this power void? I understand that you have been there now for almost 3 hours, but simply to say that you are working on it with our other countries seems to me, looks to me like we need our own strategy here, and it does not sound like you are in a position to share with us that that strategy actually exists today.

Secretary BLINKEN. I am happy, Senator, to follow up with you and to share both our thinking and more of our work on that. We have organized several dozens countries that are collectively working—

Senator ROUNDS. Mr. Secretary, and my time is getting—

Secretary BLINKEN. —working on and implementing a strategy both—

Senator ROUNDS. My time is getting short.

Secretary BLINKEN. Oh, I am sorry. Go ahead, Senator. Go ahead.

Senator ROUNDS. What I hope is that if you would, whether it be in a classified setting or publicly, if you could share with us in the next week to 10 days what that strategy is. If it needs to be in a classified setting, I would ask the chairman to provide us with the opportunity.

Most certainly, I think it is important that we have a strategy to combat what will be a void in Afghanistan, which is a void now and most certainly is something that we should be in better position, I believe, than what it sounds like you are able to articulate today.

Mr. Chairman, I would suspect that my time is up at this point.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Senator Markey.

Senator MARKEY. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, very much.

Thank you, Mr. Secretary. Thank you for all of your work and all of your colleagues' as well.

President Biden was right to end the United States' longest war. If leaving Afghanistan was ever going to be clean and easy, one of the President's three predecessors would have done so. If we have learned anything from our 20-year war in Afghanistan, it is that it is easier to get into a war than to get out of one.

However, given the amount of second-guessing and arm-chair quarterbacking that I have seen over the last month, I fear that we have not learned anything. We must re-imagine a national security policy that prioritizes diplomacy and stops endless, undefined military engagements before they can begin.

I want to be sure that Americans at home understand the position President Biden was placed in. President Trump's deal with the Taliban exchanged a halt in Taliban offensives against our troops for a commitment that we would leave the country by May of this year. President Trump, with the support of his national security team and many Republican Members of Congress, negotiated this deal without the participation or buy-in of the Afghan Government.

President Biden faced a choice of having to break that deal, essentially restarting the war in Afghanistan and risk increased attacks against U.S. troops or to get our troops home as promised. President Trump, of course, did not leave an actual plan to evacuate all of those who should have been taken out of Afghanistan, and President Trump's vision without a plan is and was a hallucination.

So that left it then ultimately to the Biden administration, which did its best in order to effectuate that agreement, which President Trump, in fact, made. President Biden ultimately was right to fol-

low through on that commitment to end our country's longest war, one that claimed so many military lives, so many tens of thousands of Afghan civilian lives, and saddled U.S. taxpayers with \$2 trillion worth of debt over the last two decades.

The tremendous cost of war hit home in its final chapter, as our armed forces and diplomats executed one of the largest airlifts in U.S. history. We owe them a debt of gratitude.

Yesterday, Senator Warren and I both attended the funeral service for U.S. Marine Corps Sergeant Johanny Rosario-Pichardo in Lawrence, Massachusetts. One of 13 American heroes who lost her life on August 26 in that suicide bombing, as she was guiding Afghan women and girls to safety at the Kabul airport's Abbey gate.

The work of Purple Heart recipient Sergeant Rosario and others during Operation Allies Refuge saved thousands of innocent lives, and we have to ensure that our own commitment to help the Afghan people endures past the takeoff of that last U.S. military transport plane 2 weeks ago. We honor her, and we honor all of those who gave their lives and sacrificed in Afghanistan.

Every member of this committee I think has to agree that we have to ensure that there is humanitarian aid that goes into Afghanistan to help those who are in need. We spent \$300 million every single day to conduct the war in Afghanistan, roughly equivalent to what we spent this entire year in humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan.

Mr. Secretary, I sent a letter with four of my colleagues today asking for the Administration to ensure that the money previously allocated or requested for Afghan war efforts be repurposed to assist Afghans in need. Could you give your view as to what should happen with that funding now that the defunct Afghan defense and national security forces are not there to receive this funding, in terms of ensuring that we avert further humanitarian catastrophe in Afghanistan?

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you, Senator, and I got your letter. We are looking at all of that.

We want to make sure in the first instance that we are making good on our own contributions to the humanitarian assistance that the Afghan people need. We did that again yesterday at the pledging conference organized by the United Nations. We are going to continue to look at the needs going forward and to look at what we can do effectively to make sure that assistance is getting to the people who need it, not diverted, of course, to the Taliban-led government and making sure that agencies, whether the U.N. or NGOs, can operate safely and effectively in Afghanistan.

Senator MARKEY. Thank you. As the last planes left, many international relief organizations stayed behind. We owe it to them not to create red tape and free them from the risk of sanctions. Are you working with the Treasury Department to issue a general license so that these groups' lifesaving work can continue?

Secretary BLINKEN. We are working on the necessary licensing authorities. As you know, we issued one license, the Treasury did, a couple of weeks ago. We are looking to see what additional authorities may be needed to make sure that humanitarian assistance can get in there freely.

Senator MARKEY. Thank you. I think that is very important, and I think telescoping the timeframe to get that completed is very important.

Just about every major refugee assistance group has called for lifting the level to 200,000 people as refugee admissions into our country. What is the Administration's view on that 200,000 person goal in order to ensure that we deal with the magnitude of this humanitarian crisis?

Secretary BLINKEN. Senator, as you know, we have already significantly lifted the refugee cap from its historic lows that were in place when we took office. Of course, we are assessing whether there are going to be additional needs.

Having said that, the work we are doing now to bring Afghans in need were vetted and checked into this country, including support we need from Congress on that, will not for the most part tap into the refugee cap. There are other means and mechanisms by which we are looking to bring people in to ensure, with your support, that they are given the assistance that they would get were they coming in as refugees, but not actually cutting into the existing cap or any future cap.

Senator MARKEY. Thank you, and thanks for all your great work. I just would hope the 200,000 is the goal. The resettlement agencies are pointing toward that number, and I think it is a number that we should all strive to meet in order to just be sure that these individuals not only survive, but thrive in their new environment.

Thank you, Mr. Secretary. Thanks for all your great work.

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you, Senator.

Senator Kaine [presiding]. Senator Hagerty.

Senator HAGERTY. Thank you, Senator Kaine, Ranking Member Risch, Secretary Blinken.

Secretary BLINKEN. Senator.

Senator HAGERTY. Before I start, I would just like to acknowledge a young man, Army Staff Sergeant Ryan Knauss. Ryan is a Tennessean, one of the 13 service members who lost his life at the airport in Kabul, trying to rescue and save others. My heart goes out to he and his family and the tragic loss associated with this evacuation.

Regarding this evacuation, I agree with Senator Barrasso. For President Biden to call this an extraordinary success is beyond the pale when we leave Americans, when we leave our allies, when we leave those that have helped us behind.

I have also just been over to visit with our allies in the U.K. and in NATO, and their sense of surprise and enragement is palpable. We have a very significant failure that is taking place here, a failure of global proportion. It has placed our allies in the position of questioning America's resolve, of questioning our Nation's integrity, and frankly, they put us in a situation where they are questioning whether we are a reliable partner.

Our reputation as a nation, I think, has been put at risk as a result of the failed evacuation here. Our job now is to get to the bottom of this failure as a committee, this failure that has left the world a more dangerous place for the United States, for our allies, for those that depend on us. It has also armed our enemies like

never before, and it has emboldened our strategic adversaries. There must be accountability.

Secretary Blinken, my office and other congressional offices have heard rumors regarding potential Cabinet resignations over the situation in Afghanistan. So I want to ask you, have you submitted your resignation regarding this issue?

Secretary BLINKEN. I have not.

Senator HAGERTY. The lack of accountability here, the lack of accountability in this Administration is shocking to me. I would like to turn to another question regarding the intelligence that we have relied upon.

In an internal report given to the State Department by Embassy Kabul on August 16, there was warning of a breach at the Kabul airport, and it said, "A breach cannot be fully prevented at current force levels."

Mr. Secretary, did you see that report?

Secretary BLINKEN. I am sorry. Can you tell me the date again, Senator?

Senator HAGERTY. August 16, a report given to Embassy Kabul, an internal report from Embassy Kabul to the State Department saying that a breach at the airport cannot be fully prevented at current force levels.

Secretary BLINKEN. I cannot tell you whether I saw that specific report, but that is exactly why the President had on standby 6,000 forces to be able to deploy immediately into Afghanistan, into the airport in case the airport was in jeopardy, and that is exactly what we did.

Senator HAGERTY. Well, the force levels being insufficient I think was a significant reason for concern, something that in a plan of action I think should have been accounted for certainly earlier.

Going to the NEO plan, I would like to cover that with you for a few minutes. The noncombatant evacuation operational plan for Afghanistan would be a plan on how we evacuate American civilians from a foreign country should a dangerous situation arise.

Secretary BLINKEN. That is correct.

Senator HAGERTY. Prior to turning over the Bagram Air Base on July 2, did the NEO plan to evacuate Americans have the Bagram Air Base as a critical element of its strategy?

Secretary BLINKEN. The critical element for any evacuation was actually the airport in Kabul, known as HKIA. Because, as you know, Senator, Bagram is about 40 miles from Kabul. To the extent that the population that you are seeking to evacuate is mostly in Kabul, the airport by far most convenient to them would be the airport in Kabul, HKIA.

Senator HAGERTY. A civilian airport in a neighborhood that is much more difficult to protect than an airport the size of Bagram with two runways and the ability to land and lift off, significant airlift capacity. I am frankly quite shocked that our NEO plan would have had no inclusion of the Bagram Air Base, but if I understand you correctly, it did not include Bagram?

Secretary BLINKEN. The plan focused on the airport in Kabul.

Senator HAGERTY. I wonder how the evacuation plan was updated, Mr. Secretary, as things began to change on the ground. What was the process that you deployed there?

Secretary BLINKEN. Senator, through the course of the spring and summer, we reviewed all of these plans, different contingencies, including the NEO plan. Of course, the element that no one anticipated, as we have discussed on numerous occasions, was the rapid collapse of the Afghan Government and the Afghan security forces in the space of about 11 days.

Having said that, we had plans in place to do the two critical things that we did. We were able to evacuate our embassy, all its personnel, destroy sensitive materials, and get people to the airport in 48 hours and in many cases much less than that.

Second, as I mentioned, the President ordered that there be a standby force in place to make sure that HKIA, the airport in Kabul, was secured. Planes could come in, planes could take off, and we had a secure facility. We did that in the course of about 72 hours.

Senator HAGERTY. Back to the NEO discussion. In an August 14 briefing, the Pentagon spokesman John Kirby denied that there was an NEO operation in Afghanistan at that point. But 2 days later, on the 16th, he belatedly admitted there was a NEO operation going on.

So I am curious, Mr. Secretary, what date did the Administration actually decide to execute the NEO plan, and when did they begin to actively evacuate all Americans and allies?

Secretary BLINKEN. I believe, Senator, it was triggered by the collapse of the government and the security forces.

Senator HAGERTY. Who would have made the decision to execute the NEO?

Secretary BLINKEN. Ultimately, the President would be asked for his decision, approval to do that, based on the recommendation of the different Government agencies involved.

Senator HAGERTY. Is that what happened in this case?

Secretary BLINKEN. I believe that is right. Yes, sir.

Senator HAGERTY. You know, oversight is not a simple check the box exercise. It requires getting to the bottom of what has come to be the greatest U.S. foreign policy disaster, at least in my lifetime. Mr. Chairman, we need more hearings on this Afghanistan withdrawal failure.

I would also like to say this. Leadership requires owning one's mistakes, and leadership requires introspection and a commitment to achieve what is right. What we have witnessed here has been a failure of leadership. What it is has been a press-driven spin cycle. It is one that has deflected blame, and it is one that shamed us as a nation. It is time to leave.

Secretary BLINKEN. Senator, if I could just say briefly in response?

Senator KAINE. Please be brief, if you would.

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes. I am responsible for the decisions I make. I am responsible for the actions of my Department. I am responsible for learning any lessons that flowed from those decisions or those actions, and I am also responsible to holding myself accountable to you and through you to the American people, which is exactly what I am doing here today, what I have been doing these past weeks in repeated conversations and briefings with

Members of Congress, both the Senate and the House, and what I will continue to do going forward.

We can all draw our own conclusions from that. I respect yours. I may disagree with them, but that is exactly the process that I am engaged in and that we are engaged in, and we will continue to do that going forward.

Senator HAGERTY. Well, my constituents expect that sort of accountability as well, particularly the veterans that serve in Tennessee and across the Nation that have reached out to me that are absolutely heartbroken about what has gone on. There has been loss of life. There has been loss of treasure.

We have now armed terrorists at a level that I have never expected. Our allies are more proximate to this threat than we are. They could not have been more frustrated with me when I spoke with them. They are concerned that we now have a threat level that we have never seen before, and we have got to find ways to work together with them to address that.

I will look to you for accountability on that as well as we move forward, Mr. Secretary.

Senator KAINE. Mr. Van Hollen.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Thank you, Senator.

Mr. Secretary, welcome, and I recognize what a huge undertaking it is to airlift every American out of Afghanistan and work to get some of our closest Afghan partners out of harm's way after 20 years of American presence and troops in Afghanistan.

The United States Government conducted the biggest airlift in our history, over 120,000 people. I understand and want to thank all the people who were involved in that.

That said, I really urge you to have the State Department surge more people to this process to help the remaining Americans out of Afghanistan, to help others, legal permanent residents and others. Mr. Secretary, I have with me a list of a lot of the constituent cases that are on our office. I am going to give it to you and your staff. If I could just get your commitment that you will get back to us on these cases?

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Thank you. Because we have had your help, we have one case of a 2-year-old American citizen, and we have been working with you on that. We also have cases of 15 legal permanent residents and a number of our close Afghan partners. At this point, the system at the State Department and DHS is overwhelmed. We are just getting back form responses without any feedback as to the state of the case. So I really urge you to keep at that.

I must say I guess I should not be surprised. As Senator Shaheen said, the level of hypocrisy in this room and this Congress is staggering. You know, we should have more hearings on what happened in Afghanistan, starting with the decision to divert huge amounts of U.S. troops and resources to Iraq in one of the biggest strategic blunders in modern American history, where it is a clear matter of record that Iran has been the biggest beneficiary of that decision.

Let us fast forward now to the Trump administration. I did not oppose the decision of the Trump administration to open up nego-

tiations with the Taliban. Everybody in this room, I suspect, recognized there was no military solution to this conflict, that there had to be a political solution. So I supported opening up that process.

Mr. Secretary, is it not a fact that the Trump administration asked the Pakistani Government to release three top Taliban commanders as part of that process?

Secretary BLINKEN. That is correct.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. One of them is the person who is now number two, Baradar, right?

Secretary BLINKEN. That is correct.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. He is the person everybody saw in those photos in Kabul, right?

Secretary BLINKEN. That is correct.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Right. There was another senior commander released, and they began the discussions in Doha?

Secretary BLINKEN. That is right.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. They did not include the Afghan Government, did they?

Secretary BLINKEN. That is correct.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Right. They, in fact, essentially ordered, pressured the Afghan Government to release 5,000 Taliban fighters, right?

Secretary BLINKEN. That is correct.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Many of those fighters involved in the attack on Kabul today, right?

Secretary BLINKEN. Yes.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Okay. Now let us see what the negotiation was. Here was the negotiation. I supported the beginning of it. The United States will leave by a date certain, May of this year, right?

Secretary BLINKEN. Correct.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. You cannot attack American forces, but you can attack Afghan forces with impunity, right?

Secretary BLINKEN. That is correct.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. That is right. So we pick a date, we say to the Taliban you can attack Afghan forces, and then we say, okay, now let us negotiate the future of Afghanistan. Is that not the way it was set up when you walked in?

Secretary BLINKEN. That is essentially correct, yes.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. There is a saying in Afghanistan that foreigners have the watches, we have the time. So the Trump administration, through those negotiations, set it up perfectly for the Taliban. Green light to attack the Afghan forces. No discussion going forward.

Then is it not true that the former President criticized President Biden for not pulling out our forces earlier?

Secretary BLINKEN. I believe that is accurate.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. I think he said we have got to stick to our May timetable. So President Trump, "stick to our May timetable," and by the way I am handing you negotiation where I have already said we are getting out, and I have said go ahead and attack the Afghan forces. Now we are going to talk about the future.

So that is the hand you have been dealt. Let me talk to you a little bit about the future, and I am glad you brought together the ministerial meeting with our NATO partners, with surrounding

countries. This will never work if the surrounding countries do not participate and others in the region. You had both Pakistan and India at the table, right?

Secretary BLINKEN. That is right.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Okay. Now I am very much in the mode, and I know you are, too, you watch what they do, not what they say, right?

Secretary BLINKEN. Exactly.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. The Taliban clearly have new PR people. They also recognize that their actions they have to take in order to get any kind of support whatsoever from some of the Western countries, right?

Secretary BLINKEN. That is correct.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Okay. So I have heard you testify today to some of those conditions, free and safe passage for people who want to leave, right?

Secretary BLINKEN. Right.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Okay. Access by international humanitarian organizations directly to the Afghan people, not through any Taliban, right?

Secretary BLINKEN. That is Right.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Protection of girls, women, and minorities.

Secretary BLINKEN. That is right.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. This is going to be one, obviously, we have to keep a very close eye on.

Fourth, you cannot use the territory of Afghanistan as a base for future terrorist attacks, whether it is Al Qaeda or anybody else, right?

Secretary BLINKEN. That is right.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. A more inclusive government because, right now, we have a government comprised of Taliban, including two members of the Haqqani Network, one of who is wanted for questioning and for violent activities.

So my question to you is that was a really important first step because we want everybody on the same page, meaning our close partners and surrounding countries, right?

Secretary BLINKEN. That is right.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. All right. Do you have that buy-in from all the partners around the table that we will act in unison?

Secretary BLINKEN. We do have that buy-in. We have that buy-in not only from the meetings we have. We have that buy-in in the statements that many countries have signed onto. We have that in a U.N. Security Council resolution that we initiated, and critically, we have moving forward established an ongoing group of countries and institutions that are going to work together to track this, to continue to make sure we are speaking with one voice and acting in unison.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Got it.

Secretary BLINKEN. Now there are countries that may be outliers in this effort. Some of them have been referenced to include China, to include Russia, to include Pakistan, and that is something that we are being very vigilant about as well.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Well, I know time is up, but I think a number of those countries, at least Pakistan, like India, like the

others, have an interest in preventing chaos and civil war in Afghanistan.

Secretary BLINKEN. They do.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Obviously, we asked them to release prisoners that they had locked up, Taliban prisoners. So, obviously, we have to keep an eye on the ISI, I get that. Let us all work together to achieve the goal of a stable Afghanistan that protects the rights of its people.

Thank you.

Secretary BLINKEN. Appreciate that.

The CHAIRMAN [presiding]. Thank you. Senator Cruz.

Senator CRUZ. Mr. Secretary, thank you for being here.

Secretary BLINKEN. Senator.

Senator CRUZ. President Biden and the Biden administration have presided over the worst foreign policy catastrophe in a generation. Americans across the Nation are horrified. Our servicemen and women, our active duty military are angry, they are disillusioned, and they are frustrated.

Our enemies across the globe are emboldened, which makes the world more dangerous today for America, and our allies are dispirited. Ever since the disaster began unfolding in Afghanistan, we have seen the Biden administration making political excuses. We have seen Democrats on this committee explaining at great length how everything that happened in Afghanistan is Trump's fault. It is all Trump's fault.

Mr. Secretary, Joe Biden is the President of the United States. Kamala Harris is the Vice President of the United States. You are the United States Secretary of State. Just like Jimmy Carter owns the disaster of the Iran hostage crisis, you own this.

The Biden administration caused this disaster. It was caused by two things. Number one, ideological naivete and extremism. Repeatedly, Mr. Secretary, in this hearing and also on multiple conference calls over the last month, you keep saying things like the steps the Taliban needs to take to be welcomed into the community of civilized nations.

Mr. Secretary, they do not want to be welcomed into the community of civilized nations. They are terrorists who want to murder us. This Administration does not understand that. Joe Biden does not understand that.

Sadly, that ideological extremism was combined with manifest incompetence. There were four decisions this Administration made that I think were utterly indefensible. Number one, abandoning the Bagram airfield, giving it to the Taliban. That is a decision that 100 years from now will be studied at war colleges as a colossal strategic mistake, giving up two secure airfields, necessitating an evacuation from a dense urban environment, a commercial airport, which led tragically to the suicide bombings and murders that killed 13 American servicemen and women.

Had we been evacuating from Bagram with a secure perimeter, the odds are quite high that attack either would not have happened or if it had happened, it would have been far less severe in its consequences.

Secondly, the Biden administration giving the Taliban a list of Americans and of Afghans we wanted out. Third, the decision to

leave Americans behind. Hundreds of Americans, perhaps more, perhaps thousands; thousands of green card holders; tens of thousands of Afghans who assisted the U.S. military, the Biden administration abandoned them and left them behind.

Fourth, leaving billions of dollars of American military equipment that the Taliban will now use to threaten our lives. Earlier in this hearing, you said about that equipment, “None of it poses a strategic threat to us or their neighbors.” That does not pass the laugh test. When you are looking at the Taliban potentially having 64,000 machine guns, 33 Black Hawk helicopters, 16,000 night vision goggles, we will see American blood spilled because of these colossal mistakes.

Now abandoning Bagram was not your call. It was the Pentagon’s and the White House’s ultimately. I want to ask you flat out, did the State Department give the Taliban a list or multiple lists of Americans and/or Afghans that we wanted out?

Secretary BLINKEN. Those reports and the idea that we would do anything to endanger our citizens or anyone else at a time when we were trying to save their lives is flat-out wrong. Let me—

Senator CRUZ. So I would just like a “yes” or “no,” did you give them a list?

Secretary BLINKEN. Let me be very clear, Senator, if I may, please? Thank you.

In limited instances where we were seeking to get a bus or a group of people through a checkpoint, we gave a manifest to the people at the checkpoint to demonstrate that those people were expected to—

Senator CRUZ. Roughly how many names were on the list you gave?

Secretary BLINKEN. Does not matter because they all—

Senator CRUZ. Dozens, hundreds, thousands, give us some order of magnitude.

Secretary BLINKEN. This happened in a handful of situations where to get through—

Senator CRUZ. Dozens? So is it your testimony it was not hundreds? I want to understand. Did you give them thousands of names?

Secretary BLINKEN. No, we did not.

Senator CRUZ. Okay. Hundreds?

Secretary BLINKEN. I am not going to put a number on it, but it was—again—

Senator CRUZ. Why not? This is a hearing to discover. How many names and how many of those individuals you gave the Taliban the name to have been targeted for torture or murder?

Secretary BLINKEN. Senator, by definition, these were in limited instances with a bus or a group of people to get them through a checkpoint. They got through the checkpoint.

Senator CRUZ. So not only did you fail to evacuate Americans and green card holders who were there, but you also brought in tens of thousands of Afghans who had wholly inadequate vetting, bringing many of them to the United States. One of the things that has done is that has brought in a humanitarian crisis to America.

Child marriage and domestic abuse tragically are widespread in Afghanistan. According to the World Health Organization, more

than half of the women in Afghanistan are married as child brides, and 90 percent of women are subject to domestic abuse, 90 percent.

On August 27, according to public reports, you distributed internal documentation highlighting numerous instances at intake centers of sexual abuse in which much older, grown Afghan males appeared with children, young children, claimed they were their brides, claimed they were their wives, and the document said the State Department urgently requested guidance. That was your word, "urgently."

Subsequently, the Department of Homeland Security said that it showed the desperation of families that they were willing to give little girls to grown men to be subject to sexual abuse and child wives. My question is as follows. Did you receive that urgent guidance? How many children have been subject to sexual abuse? What have you done to rescue young children from illegal and abusive relationships after being brought to America by the State Department?

Secretary BLINKEN. Across the entire Government, everyone involved in the evacuation effort, whether it is at a transit point in one of the countries that we negotiated with, whether it is here in the United States at Dulles or Philadelphia or the military bases, we have all of our officers at extreme vigilance to look for and to deal with any cases or concerns that arise—

Senator CRUZ. Did you receive the urgent guidance, and how many child brides have you seen?

Secretary BLINKEN. I do not know the specific guidance you are referring to. I am happy to look at it.

Senator CRUZ. So was there not urgency to discover if children are being abused?

Secretary BLINKEN. Absolutely. Absolutely.

The CHAIRMAN. The time of the Senator has expired.

Secretary BLINKEN. We could detect and deal with many cases, and there have been, to my knowledge, a limited number of cases where we have separated people because we were concerned that they were—

Senator CRUZ. How many?

Secretary BLINKEN. Cases I am aware of? A handful.

[Gavel sounding.]

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Kaine, you have the last word today.

Senator KAINE. Thank you, Mr. Chair and Ranking Member Risch.

Secretary Blinken, thank you for the time that you have spent with us today. It is an important hearing, and there will be many more. I am going to a second one in the Armed Services Committee in about 2 hours, and I expect over the course of the next weeks, there will be many. I am just going to really speak from the heart to kind of set out what I am thinking at a very important moment, a complicated moment.

I am the father of a Marine. I come from a state that is very, very heavily affected by the wars of the last 20 years. It was one of the States that was attacked on 9/11. In the weeks of August and early September, this is basically what I have done. I have watched Afghanistan on television. I have talked to active duty and veterans. I have talked to you and other colleagues.

I have visited the Pentagon for the Pentagon employees' commemoration of the 9/11 attack. I went to Arlington on 9/11 to go to the fire station where the relief effort was spearheaded. I have also gone to Fort Lee, as you have, to see the incredible work that is being done to help Afghans who have stood with us integrate into American life.

I have been to the Dulles Expo Center to see these families that have traveled halfway around the world, still traumatized, but looking forward to a chapter where they can be free. I have a lot of emotions. So let me just tell you what they are. They are sadness, and they are anger, and they are pride, and they are relief.

Sadness. I am saddened by the unnecessary deaths of the 3,000 or so who were killed on 9/11. I am saddened by the deaths of more than 7,000 U.S. troops. I am saddened by the deaths of more than 8,000 American contractors. I doubt there has been a war in the history of the United States where more contractors died than troops, but this global war on terror is one such war.

I am saddened at the deaths of 400,000 innocent civilians in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria. I am saddened at those who are now going to have to live under Taliban rule. I am particularly saddened for the families of the 13 troops who were killed. To lose a child in any circumstance is horrible, and war is horrible. In the last days of a war, in the last days of a war that has been declared over and is winding down, I do not know how that wound could ever heal for a parent. Yet, those 13 died to save the lives of about 120,000 people who will have the chance to live in a freer and better society because of their heroism.

I am angry. I am angry at the terrorist impulse. I was angry about it on 9/11/01, the urge to destroy with the planes flying into buildings and killing people indiscriminately—young, old, American, and other nationalities, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, no religion. That indiscriminate urge to destroy, to blow up a demolition vest at the Kabul airport and kill 13 American troops and hundreds of your own countrymen and women. For what? That angers me.

I am angered that after 20 years of American investment in an Afghan security force dramatically larger than the Taliban, dramatically better equipped than the Taliban, that security force just melted away and failed. The one thing I would be a little bit critical of you and the Administration is the same point that Senator Romney was making earlier and Senator Rubio. The notion that General Milley said that nothing I or anyone else saw indicated a collapse of this army and this government in 11 days, I just do not think that is true.

I know it was not the consensus opinion, and I know it was not the most likely possibility, but the possibility of a collapse was not zero percent, and it was not 1 percent. It probably was not 10 percent. It was probably, based on what we have been hearing in this committee and others have, too, that was always a fairly—it was a possibility that had to be grappled with.

I guess one of the questions that I will get into over coming weeks is if the Administration really said nobody could see this coming, then that probably suggests that the contingency planning

for something that was a real possibility was not all that it should have been.

My anger at the collapse of the security force, we have got to get into it, and we have to decide did we train them wrong? Did our equipping them lead to corruption? Were they good fighters that lacked confidence in their own military and civilian leadership? Did we want things for Afghans that the Afghan leadership did not want for themselves?

We had good intentions about what we might have wanted in Afghanistan, but let us face it. We cannot get 30 percent of Americans to get a vaccine. We cannot get 30 percent of Americans to acknowledge the results of a presidential election. Do we really think that we can determine what the culture of another country should be?

I am proud. I am proud of those who served in so many different ways, from first responders who ran into the buildings on 9/11, to this generation of Americans, many of whom did not come from military families necessarily, but who volunteered to serve.

Not just serve once or twice, but this is the only generation, I believe, of the American military that has seen five, six, seven, eight, nine deployments again and again and again. Injured, wounded, carrying some invisible scars that will affect the rest of their life. I am proud of their service.

I am proud of the country and my Virginians for what they are doing in welcoming Afghans here. The outreach from Virginians to my office, from our Vietnamese community, we want to help Afghans settle. From churches, where do we donate? How do we give to resettlement agencies?

When I visited Fort Lee and Dulles, to hear the Afghans express their appreciation to the United States and, even in the midst of their trauma and their anxiety about the next chapter, to be excited about the opportunity to live in a place not under Taliban rule and have an opportunity for better lives for their children, I am proud that even amidst all of the challenge that is the way they look at us.

I am proud of the military who are there who say I have been deployed five times. This mission is the most important mission I will ever undertake.

The last thing—and Mr. Chair, if you might indulge me because I may go another 30 seconds past—I am relieved. No one has said this yet. I am relieved that a child born at Inova Fairfax today is not born into a nation at war. Some will challenge my characterization because the world is a dangerous place, and American troops are deployed all over the world. There is risks, and there is threats, but we have been a nation at permanent war for 20 years.

We were never supposed to be that nation, never. Never. We were never supposed to be that nation. I heard a college student at George Washington say recently, “I know nothing of war”—because with an all-volunteer army, she does not have to—“but all I know is war.” “All I know is war.”

President Biden had the courage to say this Nation is not a nation that should be permanently at war. It is going to take a while for people to wrap their head around the notion that though there are serious threats for us everywhere, we are not a nation now that

is at war, ground wars in the Middle East. It is going to take people a while to get used to it.

Some people will resist it. Some people will want to say, no, we have got to be on the front edge of our feet and be on permanent war footing at all moments for now into infinity. I am relieved. I am relieved that for the first time in 20 years, children being born in this country today are not being born into a nation at war.

I yield back, Mr. Chair.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Let me move and place into today's hearing record a statement on Afghanistan from recently exiled Afghan women leaders and human rights defenders that urges the United States to continue to support women's groups across Afghanistan as central drivers of change.

[EDITOR'S NOTE.—The information referred to above can be found in the "Additional Material Submitted for the Record" section at the end of this hearing.]

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Secretary, thank you for your testimony. You have been here over 3 and a half hours. I think every member of the committee was present and had an opportunity to ask questions, and you give substantive answers.

I will just close by saying while the focus today has been the present Administration's decisions, this is going back 20 years. As someone who sat here as a staff director of this committee, as someone who was at the NSC at one time, as someone who was an Assistant Deputy Secretary and now the Secretary, I think you might join me in saying that over the last 20 years at different times, Congress has been misled.

Assessments were definitely overly rosy, to say the best. If we are not to repeat the past, we need to learn from it, and that is what the committee's ultimate pursuit will be.

The record of this hearing will remain open until the close of business on Thursday. With the thanks and respect of the committee for your participation, this hearing is adjourned.

Secretary BLINKEN. Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 1:35 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

U.S. AFGHAN WOMEN'S COUNCIL CALL TO ACTION STATEMENT,
DATED SEPTEMBER 9, 2021



September 9, 2021

President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
The White House, Office of the President
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20500

Vice President Kamala Harris
The White House, Office of the Vice President
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20500

Secretary Antony Blinken
United States Department of State
2201 C Street NW, Washington, DC 20520

Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield
United States Mission to the United Nations
799 United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017

Administrator Samantha Power
U.S. Agency for International Development
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20004

Dear President Biden, Vice President Harris, Secretary Blinken, Ambassador
Thomas-Greenfield, and Administrator Power:

We are writing with an urgent request from the members of the U.S.-Afghan Women's Council regarding the dire situation that is unfolding in Afghanistan before our eyes. With the formal withdrawal of U.S. forces on August 30th, we are witnessing the rapid collapse of Afghanistan under the rule of the Taliban as the security and humanitarian situation continues to deteriorate on a massive scale, greatly imperiling Afghan women and girls, who have made tremendous gains over the past 20 years.

We call on the United States to take immediate action at the United Nations working with its multilateral partners to protect Afghan civilians, particularly women and girls, who are very vulnerable and lack the protective mechanisms that were previously in place. Already there are

stories of Afghan women and former U.S. allies being threatened, beaten and executed in the wake of U.S. and NATO forces leaving Afghanistan.

Our immediate concerns are the following critical areas:

- 1) The United States must work with its UN and multilateral partners to ensure the unimpeded flow of aid into Afghanistan through a humanitarian corridor.
 - Food security supply chains must be sustained and supported through international assistance.
 - Safe delivery of medicines and vaccines to treat COVID-19 and disease must be ensured to all—women, men, girls and boys.
- 2) The United States must urge the UN to negotiate the creation of and enforce a humanitarian corridor from Afghanistan to its neighboring countries.
 - Humanitarian organizations and staff require a safe and protected land corridor to deliver aid into the country and address the crisis.
 - Concurrently, Afghans must be provided a safe land corridor to seek refuge.
- 3) The United States must work with the UN and international partners to ensure that rights of Afghan women and girls are protected and that they can safely voice their concerns without reprisal.
 - Ensure protection from human rights violations and physical harm.
 - Humanitarian assistance must be provided equally to Afghan women and men, girls and boys.
- 4) The United States and its UN partners must sustain the financing of Afghanistan markets and development through a functioning banking and financial system.
 - Urgent action is required to prevent the collapse of the Afghan economy and supply chains.
 - Non-governmental organizations must be allowed to access the funds necessary to support basic humanitarian programs, including health and education systems, women's empowerment and related programming.
- 5) The United States should urge the UNHCR and all host countries to immediately deem all Afghans abroad as refugees and provide them expedited assistance.

As Secretary Antony Blinken stated in his [August 30th remarks](#), “The Taliban seeks international legitimacy and support. Our message is: any legitimacy and any support will have to be earned. The Taliban can do that by meeting commitments and obligations – on freedom of travel; respecting the basic rights of the Afghan people, including women and minorities; upholding its commitments on counterterrorism; not carrying out reprisal violence against those who choose to stay in Afghanistan; and forming an inclusive government that can meet the needs and reflect the aspirations of the Afghan people.”

The members of the U.S.-Afghan Women’s Council urgently call upon the U.S. Government, the United Nations Security Council, and international aid partners to work together to ensure that humanitarian assistance, food, medicine, and financial aid are delivered quickly and efficiently to the many millions in need in Afghanistan and those Afghans who have taken refuge in host countries. We have no time to waste to avert a massive humanitarian disaster.

Signed,



Mrs. Laura Bush
Honorary Co-Chair
U.S.-Afghan Women's Council



Secretary Hillary Rodham Clinton
Honorary Co-Chair
U.S.-Afghan Women's Council



John DeGioia
Co-Chair,
U.S.-Afghan Women's Council
President, Georgetown University

Additional signatories below.

CC:

Senator Bob Menendez, Chairman, Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Senator James Risch, Ranking Member, Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Senator Jeanne Shaheen, Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Representative Gregory Meeks, Chairman, House Foreign Affairs Committee
Representative Michael McCaul, Ranking Member, House Foreign Affairs Committee
Representative Lois Frankel, Co-Chair, Women, Peace, and Security Caucus
Representative Michael McCaul, Co-Chair, Women, Peace, and Security Caucus

Additional Signatories:**Council current and former leadership:**

Phyllis R. Magrab, Ph.D.
 Director of the Georgetown University Center for the Child and Human Development
 U.S.-Afghan Women's Council Vice Chair

Ambassador Kelley E. Currie
 Former Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues (2020-2021); U.S.-Afghan Women's Council
 Co-Chair Emeritus

Ambassador Paula Dobriansky
 Senior Fellow, Harvard University Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs; former Under
 Secretary of State for Global Affairs (2001-2009); U.S.-Afghan Women's Council Founding Co-Chair

Ambassador Melanne Verweir
 Executive Director, Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security; former
 Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues (2009-2013); U.S.-Afghan Women's Council
 Co-Chair Emeritus

Ruth Bennett
 Retired U.S. Diplomat
 Former Executive Director U.S.-Afghan Women's Council

Kate Friedrich
 Vice President, Government Affairs, Thomson Reuters
 Former Executive Director U.S.-Afghan Women's Council (Department of State)

Additional Member Signatories:

Mozhgan Wafiq Alokozai
 Founder and CEO of Eagle Online Academy

Mariam Atash, Esq., Managing Attorney, Prime Counsel, PLLC
 President, Nooristan Foundation

Ambassador Barbara Barrett
 25th Secretary of the U.S. Air Force

Irina Bokova
 Former Director-General of UNESCO

Jan Underwood Bradley
 Co-Founder, Secretary, and Treasurer, The Lamia Afghan Foundation (LAF)

John A. Bradley
 Lieutenant General, U.S. Air Force (Retired), President & CEO, The Lamia Afghan Foundation

Rev. Kathleen Card
Pastor, Peterborough United Methodist Church

Leslie Genier Cunningham
Board Member, Aschiana Foundation and Women for Afghan Women

Connie K. Duckworth
Social Entrepreneur

Stephanie Foster
Partner, Smash Strategies

Dana H. Freyer
Co-Founder and Former Chair, Global Partnership for Afghanistan

Jeffrey Grieco
President and CEO, Afghan-American Chamber of Commerce

Peter H. Grossman, MD
Director of the Grossman Burn Centers; Co-founder of the Grossman Burn Foundation

Rebecca Gray Grossman
Chair and Co-founder of the Grossman Burn Foundation

Sultana Hakimi
Wife of the former Afghan Ambassador to the United States

Nadia Hashimi, MD
Physician, Author, Board Member of Afghan-American Foundation

Jane Horton
Former Senior Advisor, Office of the Secretary of Defense

Ambassador Karen Hughes
Former Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs

Palwasha Kakar
Interim Director for the Religion and Inclusive Societies Program at the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP)

Jill Iscol, EdD
President, IF Hummingbird Foundation, Author of Hearts on Fire

Ambassador Said T. Jawad
Former Afghan Ambassador to the United States; Founder, Foundation for Afghanistan

Shamim Jawad
Founder and President, Ayenda Foundation

Holly A. Kuzmich
Executive Director, George W. Bush Institute

Anita McBride
Executive-in-Residence, School of Public Affairs, American University, Washington, DC.

Timothy McBride
Co-Founder and Co-Chair, Ayenda Foundation; Senior Vice President for Global Government Relations
at Raytheon Technologies

Pat Mitchell
Managing Partner, Connected Women Leaders

Lael Mohib
Country Director and Founder, Enabled Children

Najia Nasim
Executive Director, Women for Afghan Women

Terry Neese
Founder & CEO, Institute for Economic Empowerment of Women

Khorshied Nusratty
Voices on the Rise: Afghan Women Making the News, Curator
Principal Communications Advisor at Gallup

Ilaha Eli Omar
Humanitarian

Annie Pforzheimer
Former Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Afghanistan; CSIS

Charlotte (Charlie) Ponticelli
Former Senior Coordinator for International Women's Issues, U.S. Department of State

Alia Rasouly, MS, MPH
Founder and Executive Director, WISE Afghanistan

Diana Rowan Rockefeller
Philanthropist

Nilofar Sakhi
Director of Policy and Diplomacy at McColm & Company

Leslie Schweitzer
Chair, Friends of American University of Afghanistan (AUAF)

Zolaykha Sherzad
Founder, Zarif Design

Ambassador Steven Steiner
Retired Foreign Service Officer, Board Member of Friends of the American University of Afghanistan
and Initiative to Educate Afghan Women

Hodei Sultan

Tina Tchen

Lawyer, Activist; Former Chief of Staff to First Lady Michelle Obama and Former Executive Director of the White House Council on Women and Girls

Manizha Wafeq

Co-Founder and President, Afghan Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industry

Heidi A. Waldorf, M.D.

President, Waldorf Dermatology Aesthetics

Sherrie Westin

President, Sesame Workshop

Mama C. Whittington

Retired Philanthropist

Christian Wistehuff

Executive Director, Initiative to Education Afghan Women (IEAW)

AFGHANISTAN OFAC GENERAL LICENSE LETTER,
DATED SEPTEMBER 2, 2021**Congress of the United States**
Washington, DC 20515

September 2, 2021

The Honorable Janet Yellen
Secretary of the Treasury
U.S. Department of the Treasury
1500 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20220

Dear Secretary Yellen:

Now that the ground operation to evacuate people from Afghanistan has come to a close, the United States must set our sights on the humanitarian catastrophe confronting those who have been tragically left behind, including women, LGBTQ+ persons, ethnic and religious minorities, and those allied with the United States. Even before the recent violence, the number of Afghans in need of humanitarian assistance had nearly doubled since last year, reaching 18.4 million people — or about half the population. More than five million people were experiencing emergency levels of hunger, while nearly half of all children under five were expected to be acutely malnourished this year. With the chaos of the past few weeks, which has led to mass displacement, these numbers will undoubtedly increase.

It is imperative for the United States to continue its support of humanitarian assistance to Afghans in need, and ensure non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have the legal protections necessary to operate in an increasingly difficult environment. The United States has a long track record, and an established process, under Presidents from both parties, of allowing NGOs to provide life-saving humanitarian assistance to people who are suffering under regimes that we oppose, even alongside existing sanctions regimes.

The Taliban has been a Specially Designated Global Terrorist Group (SDGT) since 2002. Now, with the Taliban consolidating power, the legal restrictions that accompany this designation are having a chilling effect on the humanitarian sector and may significantly impede the delivery of vital life-saving aid in Afghanistan during this critical time. And while we appreciate the initial step of issuing a specific license, this narrow authorization remains insufficient for all international NGOs, including U.S.-based organizations, and local Afghan organizations that provide essential humanitarian assistance to continue doing so.

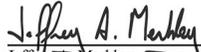
That is why we urge you to direct the Treasury Department to issue a general license through the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) for the current counter-terrorism sanctions against the Taliban under Executive Order 13224, as amended, and modeled after those general licenses provided for NGOs operating in the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. We understand that this model offers both precedent and applicable language that can be utilized to assist NGOs in their efforts to provide critical aid in Afghanistan. A broad general license specifically tailored to the

Afghanistan context should include exceptions based on close consultations with the NGO community – consultations that should commence immediately.

In order for funds to be transferred into Afghanistan for NGOs, we additionally ask that you provide necessary protections and public guidance for financial institutions so that they do not opt out of working in Afghanistan out of an abundance of caution. In addition, we recommend the establishment of a safe payment channel into Afghanistan exclusively for NGOs to access cash given the precarious banking situation.

The United States has a moral obligation to continue the life-saving assistance it has long provided to the people of Afghanistan. The Taliban may quickly become an obstacle to the provision of humanitarian aid. United States policies should not become an additional obstacle. We urge you to take this important step to ensure the continued delivery of this aid. Thank you for your urgent attention to this matter.

Sincerely,


Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator

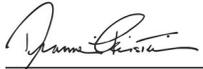

Sara Jacobs
Member of Congress


Cory A. Booker
United States Senator


Karen Bass
Member of Congress


Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator


Suzanne Bonamici
Member of Congress



Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator



Cori Bush
Member of Congress



Martin Heinrich
United States Senator



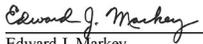
Joaquin Castro
Member of Congress



Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator



David N. Cicilline
Member of Congress



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Gerald E. Connolly
Member of Congress



Christopher S. Murphy
United States Senator



Jim Costa
Member of Congress


Alex Padilla
United States Senator


Jesús G. "Chuy" Garcia
Member of Congress


Bernard Sanders
United States Senator

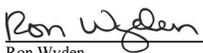

Jahana Hayes
Member of Congress

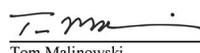

Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator


Chrissy Houlahan
Member of Congress

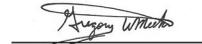

Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator


Ted Lieu
Member of Congress


Ron Wyden
United States Senator


Tom Malinowski
Member of Congress

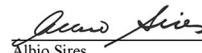

James P. McGovern
Member of Congress


Gregory W. Meeks
Member of Congress


Ilhan Omar
Member of Congress


Jamie Raskin
Member of Congress


Brad Sherman
Member of Congress


Albio Sires
Member of Congress


Norma J. Torres
Member of Congress


Juan Vargas
Member of Congress

CC:

Antony Blinken, Secretary
U.S. Department of State

Samantha Power, Administrator
United States Agency for International Development

Jake Sullivan, National Security Advisor

STATEMENT ON AFGHANISTAN FROM RECENTLY EXILED AFGHAN WOMEN LEADERS
AND HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Secretary Blinken and Members of Congress:

With the fall of the Afghan Government, it has been a blow to many of our achievements of the last 20 years that have been gained with your government's support. In the last few weeks since being overtaken by the Taliban, it is evident that the peace process has been a fallacy that had no guarantee of securing what the United States and people of Afghanistan invested in over the last two decades.

Many of us women activists have been working for an inclusive and just peace for years. We repeatedly warned the United States Government and the international community that if the withdrawal was not managed responsibly, and if the peace process was not Afghan-centric, it would be a disastrous failure.

We were incredibly disappointed with the peace process that your government facilitated, especially when the talks in Istanbul were supposed to happen but then the announcement of the non-conditional troop withdrawal effectively ended them before they could begin. We do understand the United States spent 20 years in Afghanistan as its longest war, however a few months more where your troops were not involved in combat would have at least helped with reaching an acceptable political settlement that would have allowed some level of inclusivity.

Today the Taliban Government is run by unqualified fighters and by Pakistani proxy. Women are nowhere in the new structure of government and women's activities and freedoms are being limited in health and education in 7 out of 34 provinces. The media is strictly under scrutiny and minorities have been marginalized in the disorganized new government structure. Protests have been met with brutality, with women protestors arrested and tortured badly. Many people were massacred in Panjsher, and elsewhere in Afghanistan.

Some of us have made it to the United States through the parole process and with the support of U.S. women's rights groups and political leaders. This journey started under extremely difficult conditions, and we still don't know when it will end. We women leaders and activists have been mixed with U.S. trained Afghan troops and other groups. The entire evacuation process was gravely mismanaged for women. Even those who had U.S. visas were denied safe entry into the airport as timely information was not communicated with relevant troops managing the airport gates. Worst of all, not all of our friends made it out with us. At the airport gates we faced gun fire from both Taliban and U.S. troops, tear gas, and a suicide bomb attack. Many people died trying to escape a regime that they don't believe in.

The Taliban has proven to be an extreme regime lacking law and order, essentially being run by several groups of outlaws. They are now targeting activists, former government employees, and women Members of Parliament, and entering their homes, taking their cars, and collecting any means of security that they possessed in the past. Even NGO offices run by women have been shut down and their valuables, such as cars, have been taken from them.

While we are disheartened by the way things evolved on the ground, the United States still has an opportunity to support the Afghan people. We women leaders of Afghanistan call on the U.S. Government to provide a humanitarian response to the double catastrophe of the Taliban regime and the drought and famine that are causing suffering across the country. *Beyond humanitarian assistance, we call on the U.S. to support women's groups across Afghanistan as the real drivers of change. Women should be given any and all political support to help ensure their safety as they continue their life saving work on behalf of thousands of women across the country.*

We also call on the United States to include a more responsible team in the peace process and help end the current catastrophe before it engulfs everyone in the country and region. Particular pressure should be maintained and increased on Pakistan for supporting the Taliban and offering safe haven to ISIS.

Today Al-Qaida, ISIS, the Haqqani network, and other terrorist groups are in Afghanistan enjoying safe sanctuary. This is a threat to the U.S. and the world that needs to be contained through a revised strategy in Afghanistan and the region. Just like all other strategies, women should be at the center if there is to be a guarantee for a safe and balanced Afghanistan. As we have been saying all along, our rights are not separate from peace and security, but are necessary for peace and security to be achieved.

RESPONSES OF U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE ANTONY BLINKEN TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR ROBERT MENEDEZ

Question. In August, my staff reached out to the State Department regarding the family of Sharif Azizi who interpreted for U.S. forces in Afghanistan and resides in the United States as an SIV. We have received credible reports the Taliban are actively hunting for members of his family, who remain unable to leave Afghanistan. On August 29, a rocket hit about 300 yards away from where they were hiding. The family is now trying to cross into Pakistan. We've asked your office to get him an expedited travel document so he can travel to Pakistan and escort his family from the border to U.S. Embassy Islamabad. I have one simple ask: can you please work with me to get this individual an expedited travel document ASAP and ensure that State is prepared to process the family's application, if they can safely cross the border?

Answer. We continue to fulfill our pledge to U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents, 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 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.

Question. The Taliban continue to imprison Mark Frerichs, (Free-ricks) an American contractor. He should have been on that plane to Qatar last week along with other Americans inside the country. What steps are you taking to secure his release?

Answer. The Taliban have claimed they are holding U.S. Navy veteran Mark Frerichs. As the Taliban seek legitimacy, they cannot continue to hold an American hostage. We continue to raise the need for Mark's immediate release and safe return with the Taliban at every possible opportunity. The Taliban must immediately release him. We have been clear that any legitimacy and any 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. We have received credible reports that there were 1,200 students, faculty and staff from the American University of Afghanistan mobilized and ready to depart well before the August 31 deadline—all with the proper paperwork. The Taliban gave assurances that they would let the convoy through the airport but reversed themselves on August 27, apparently citing a decision from Washington that AUAF evacuees were no longer a priority. Nearly half of the 1,000 students are women, and about 200 Afghan women were handpicked by the State Department and given full-ride scholarships. Now the campus is under the control of the Haqqanis. 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, who are desperate to evacuate, leave Afghanistan?

Answer. The United States will continue to support equal access to education in Afghanistan, and we are exploring options regarding our support for the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF) and its students under current circumstances. We are aware that AUAF is also exploring options, including the possibility of remote learning. We would refer you to AUAF leadership for details. The Department continues to explore options for those students who wish to depart Afghanistan, and we continue to advocate for the full resumption of commercial flights out of Kabul International Airport.

Question. It is my understanding that a number of Afghan passports and documents associated with visa applications were destroyed by embassy staff when the embassy closed down, resulting in a number of Afghans now lacking the documents that they would need in order to meet Taliban document demands in order to be able to leave the country. While I understand the security concerns in not wanting to leave those materials behind, this again strikes me as indicative of the lack of planning and preparation made for the collapse of Afghanistan and our hasty exit. I also understand we don't even know the number, let alone the identities, of Afghans who we've stranded in this way. Can you explain to us what happened with this incident, why, and where it leaves our Afghan partners?

Answer. It is standard operating procedure during an emergency drawdown to mitigate risk by reducing the amount of sensitive material remaining. U.S. Embassy

Kabul's drawdown was conducted in accordance with this procedure. For Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) recipients traveling to the United States under U.S. Government care, we collaborated with the Department of Homeland Security to provide electronic proof of recent visa issuance. While we are currently unable to provide consular services for visa applicants in Afghanistan, we will continue to process SIV applications at every stage of the process, including by transferring cases to other U.S. embassies and consulates around the world where applicants are able to appear.

We are developing processing alternatives so we can continue to deliver consular services for Afghans. In tandem with our allies and partners, we continue to press the Taliban to live up to their public commitment of free passage for those who wish to leave the country.

Question. Prior to the final flight out, we heard from both American citizens and Afghan partners seeking to access the airport but were either not being allowed through the gates, being sent back home, or simply abandoned with no guidance. While we understand and appreciate the security issues that were at play, it is confounding that such a chaotic process arose to begin with. It speaks to the failure to plan and resource to get this withdrawal right. Or it speaks to a failure of implementation. Why was the Administration unable to implement clear and concise plans to wind down our presence in Afghanistan?

Answer. The safety and security of U.S. citizens and our personnel is a top priority for the Department. A major component of executing contingency plans is adjusting to the situation on the ground as the operating environment warrants. The U.S. embassy was able to safely relocate personnel to the Chief of Mission facilities at the Kabul International Airport (KIA) on August 15 and 16, 2021. The security situation was dynamic and required the U.S. military to send additional troops to secure the perimeter of KIA. The embassy released 15 consular messages to the public between August 15 and August 31, 2021, to provide the latest information to U.S. citizens on the evacuation operations. Through a coordinated effort, the United States and partners evacuated and relocated more than 124,000 civilians from Afghanistan, including nearly 6,000 U.S. citizens, in the midst of a pandemic and in the face of grave and growing security threats. I defer to the Department of Defense on any questions related to the withdrawal of U.S. military personnel.

Question. Precisely when did the Administration begin to plan for a worst case scenario contingency?

Answer. The Department of State engaged in contingency planning for a range of scenarios starting in January 2019. The planning scenarios were based on a range of potential security conditions on the ground and a declining level of mission functions. The scenarios assumed reduced embassy footprints while maintaining core mission functions under various scenarios. Planning continued following the change in administration in January 2021.

Question. Why didn't we have the security, personnel for processing, and airlift capabilities in place for what was a very predictable set of circumstances?

Answer. The U.S. Embassy was able to safely relocate personnel to the Chief of Mission facilities at the Kabul International Airport (KIA) August 15–16, 2021. The security situation was dynamic and required the U.S. military to send additional troops to secure the perimeter of KIA and the Department to send in additional logistics and consular personnel. Through a coordinated effort, the United States and partners evacuated and relocated more than 124,000 civilians from Afghanistan, including nearly 6,000 U.S. citizens, in the midst of a pandemic and in the face of grave and growing security threats.

Question. What was the specific planning put into the likely scenario that American citizens were going to have to evacuate under hostile conditions?

Answer. The safety and security of U.S. citizens, U.S. Government personnel, and their dependents is the highest Department priority. All embassies and consulates around the world prepare detailed Emergency Action Plans that include sections related to Department of Defense support to assist with crises abroad. U.S. Embassy Kabul completed an annual Crisis Management Exercise in December 2020 to prepare for a potential large-scale evacuation. U.S. Embassy Kabul and various Department offices participated with interagency partners in evacuation 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. In your remarks on August 30, you said the United States will continue to work with Afghans at risk who want to leave. How do you define an “Afghan at risk” and how many Afghans in that category remain in Afghanistan?

Answer. The United States will work vigorously with the international community to explore all options to support members of vulnerable populations in Afghanistan, including—but not limited to—women, children, persons with disabilities, members of the LGBTQI+ community, members of minority groups, journalists, and other at-risk populations. We are continuing to examine all available avenues for protection for this population. 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, they may face significant challenges fleeing to safety. We strongly encourage countries in the region and those that border Afghanistan to allow entry for Afghans and coordinate with international organizations and other humanitarian partners to provide humanitarian assistance to Afghans in need.

Question. What role did individual vulnerability based on religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.—factors beyond U.S. affiliation or NGO affiliation—play in prioritizing evacuations? If at all, when in the planning process did this consideration arise? How many resources did the Department devote to this line of effort?

Answer. The Department of State’s priority is supporting departures of U.S. citizens and Lawful Permanent Residents and their immediate families. The Department of State is also committed to providing assistance to Special Immigrant Visa applicants and vulnerable Afghans, including refugees and asylum seekers, internally displaced Afghans, victims of conflict, women, children, journalists, persons with disabilities, members of ethnic and/or religious minority groups, and other at-risk populations. The Department of State 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 others to facilitate the departure of those who wish to leave Afghanistan.

Question. Of those identified by the State Department as “most vulnerable” Afghans, including activists, journalists, and human rights defenders, how many were evacuated by the U.S. or with U.S. facilitation? How many of these were implementers of USG democracy and human rights programs? What is your plan to assist them?

Answer. The United States will work vigorously with the international community to explore all options to support vulnerable populations in Afghanistan, including—but not limited to—women, children, persons with disabilities, members of the LGBTQI+ community, members of minority groups, journalists, and other at-risk populations. We are continuing to examine all available avenues for protection for this population.

Question. How and when did you brief NGOs regarding requirements for facilitating charters how did you share the information those NGOs needed to facilitate safe passage of their employees through Kabul and into the airport? During the approximately 2 weeks of evacuation operations following the fall of Kabul, how did you prioritize private charter requests and the entry of their manifested passengers to the Kabul airport? What efforts did your Department take to facilitate access to the airport for those assigned seats on charter aircraft that had been given landing clearance?

Answer. During the operations in August led by the Department of Defense (DoD), the Department of State had a dedicated team liaising across State and with DoD to coordinate information and communications with private charter operators. Guidance provided by the DoD was communicated as inquiries were received by the Department of State, and planning and arrangements were further facilitated by the assigned case manager for each private charter inquiry that was received. Airport access for those manifested for private charter flights was coordinated with security at the airport in Kabul, and the Department of State case managers worked with private charter operators to facilitate this access as conditions allowed.

Question. To what do you attribute claims that your Department gave no clear guidance to anybody other than those with U.S. visas or passports to enter the airport?

Answer. The Department of State provided regular notifications and security alerts on our public website prior to the suspension of operations of the U.S. embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan, on August 31, 2021. These notifications are available for review here: <https://af.usembassy.gov/news-events/>.

Question. How is the Administration coordinating with the NGO coalition and private entities still conducting time-sensitive private evacuation efforts out of Afghanistan? In particular, how is the Administration supporting efforts to facilitate civilian evacuation flights, including with regard to landing rights at destination locations and travel to and capacity at lily-pad location?

Answer. 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. We have been evaluating requests for assistance on a case-by-case basis to support privately organized flights. This support involves reviewing 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 permanent resettlement in the United States.

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 DoD and other partners to facilitate the departure of those who wish to leave Afghanistan, including U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents, our Afghans allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans.

Question. I applaud the Administration's decision to appoint Governor Markell and Mr. Robert Fenton as senior officials responsible for addressing the resettlement of Afghans in the United States. Who is the corresponding lead official at the Department of State responsible for addressing the evacuation of and support to those Afghans at risk who remain left behind in Afghanistan or are now in third countries? What planning has been done to help all of these people who remain left behind?

Answer. 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 with other partners to facilitate freedom of movement for those who wish to leave Afghanistan, including U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents, our Afghans allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans. The United States will work vigorously with the international community to explore all options to support vulnerable populations in Afghanistan.

Question. More than 3,200 Afghans are part of the United Nations' presence in Afghanistan, almost all of whom were left behind during the evacuation and remain trapped there. The Taliban have been very clear about how they view any Afghan who has worked with the international community, and as such these women and men—and their families—face much the same threat as those who worked with the United States. While the U.N.'s humanitarian presence in Afghanistan is critical, a great many of these Afghans are not directly involved in humanitarian aid delivery or other urgent life-saving work. Certainly the international community shares a profound responsibility for their safety. What is being done to help get them and their families to safety? Which countries are offering them visas? What options are available to provide them safe passage out of Afghanistan?

Answer. The Department of State is working with U.N. leadership to consolidate lists of Afghan national staff who are known to a U.S. Government agency and are at risk and have referred them to the Priority 1 (P-1) refugee program for access to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). Individuals referred to the USRAP can begin processing their case once in a third country where refugee processing is possible. We consider the U.N.'s work in Afghanistan more critical than ever, particularly for its human rights reporting, humanitarian assistance coordination, and other key roles crucial for peace and stability in Afghanistan. The United States is carefully tracking allegations of violence or intimidation against U.N. staff and are engaging with U.N. leadership to improve security provisions for those at risk. We have also emphasized and have called on the Taliban leadership to ensure that Taliban members at all levels comply with obligations under international humanitarian law and take every action to respect the independence and neutrality of the U.N. system and all its staff operating in Afghanistan.

Question. How many locally employed staff remain to be evacuated?

Answer. Eleven out of 689 Embassy Kabul locally employed staff were unable or chose not to travel by August 30, 2021, of which 7 have requested assistance departing Afghanistan.

Question. Embassy Kabul drew down during the pandemic and consular activity dramatically decreased. There was a particular decrease in the processing of non-

immigrant visas. Did the Department shift resources to SIV and other Afghanistan-related immigration cases? If so, how? Why did the Department not waive in person interviews for processing given the pandemic?

Answer. Due to the pandemic, U.S. Embassy Kabul adjusted its consular operations to conform with prioritization guidelines issued by the Department of State. The prioritization plan focuses on the provision of services to U.S. citizens, and then, as feasible, visa processing including immigrant visa processing.

The Department temporarily extended the validity of certain immigrant visa applications, thus reducing repeat in-person appearances, for individuals who had been interviewed and signed their immigrant visa applications under oath before a consular officer, but whose visa applications have not been approved within 1 year of the oath. U.S. law requires immigrant visa applicants to appear personally before a consular officer to take an oath and execute their visa application biometrically, in addition to submitting to the collection of biometric information for security vetting.

Question. How many SIV applicants and their families were killed while waiting for their cases to be approved?

Answer. The Department of State expresses its sincere condolences for the loss of life of any Afghan at risk, including Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants and their family members. However, the Department does not have information on the numbers of SIV applicants and family members who may have died.

Question. Why were SIV approvals not significantly ramped up following the Biden's April withdrawal announcement? Why didn't the Administration start in April to evacuate SIVs to Guam or third countries and then start the lengthy visa approval process?

Answer. Efforts to decrease processing time include quintupling (since May 2021) the staff who process Chief of Mission (COM) approval applications, doubling the number of adjudicators at Embassy Kabul, waiving the requirement for a medical examination for Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants in Afghanistan, and issuing foil-less visas to applicants who have completed consular interviews and administrative processing. These efforts led to a significant increase in COM approvals and visa issuances since the resumption of visa interviews in February 2021. In the third quarter of FY 2021 (April 1 to June 30), the Department issued SIVs to 615 Afghan principal applicants and 1,975 derivative family members. This is approximately three times the number of visas issued in previous quarters.

On July 19, the Department of State activated the Afghanistan Coordination Task Force. The task force consists of experts from the Departments of State, Defense, Homeland Security, and Health and Human Services. From July 30 through August 15, 2021, 10 flights arrived at Dulles under Operation Allies Refuge carrying a total of 1,962 SIV applicants and family members.

We continue to prioritize processing for qualified Afghan SIV applicants. Although SIV applicants will not be able to complete a visa interview or other visa processing in Afghanistan, we are expediting continuing SIV processing at all other stages of the process 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.

Question. What were the average processing days for SIVs in May 2021? How did that compare to January 2021?

Answer. In January 2021, average processing time was 996 days while in June 2021, it had decreased to 665 days. Since February 2021, there has been a whole-of-government effort to decrease the processing time for SIVs at every step of the process. These numbers do not tell the whole story, as our reporting calculates only the cases completed in a given quarter. Therefore, completing long outstanding cases in a particular quarter results in higher average processing times.

Question. What has been done to assist Afghans who had been approved for visas including non-SIV immigrant visas-but could not obtain them because of the precipitous collapse of the Government? Can they have their visas issued by U.S. Embassies in another country?

Answer. Consular staff at U.S. embassies and consulates worldwide have assisted with adjudication of Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applications; Consulate General Guangzhou has processed visa applications since late August for 1,398 Afghan individuals who completed consular interviews and administrative processing. 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 dif-

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 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 ourselves in our direct and pragmatic communications to the Taliban on this national security concern and national priority. We're also doing this in tandem with our allies and partners around the world. Immigrant visa applicants may request to have their cases transferred to another immigrant visa processing post for interview and processing. Several posts, including Islamabad, Ankara, Frankfurt, New Delhi, and Warsaw, have issued Afghan SIVs since the suspension of operations in Kabul.

Question. What has the Department of State communicated to U.S. embassies and consulates around the world about providing consular services to Afghan P2 applicants? What are the Administration's plans to process Afghans in third countries? If they must complete processing in a third country, how will the Administration ensure that they have access to basic services while awaiting processing?

Answer. For P1 and P2-referred individuals who are in a third country and have contacted PRM, their case 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 U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (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, though it might take some time for a team to deploy to a particular location 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 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.

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. 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 countries in the region and those that border Afghanistan 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.

Question. Secretary Blinken has repeatedly said that the Taliban must allow those Afghan nationals who want to leave and have valid travel documents to do so yet many of these journalists and those who worked for U.S.-funded projects have no such documents or onward visas. Why has the State Department not issued travel documents or verification letters to those Afghans who are eligible for Special Immigrant Visas or P2 visas?

Answer. Travelers do not require a letter from the State Department or any other U.S. Government entity to leave Afghanistan. As operations at U.S. Embassy Kabul have been suspended, Afghans eligible and referred to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program must be outside of Afghanistan in a third country for their cases to be processed. 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, and like many refugees, may face significant challenges fleeing to safety. We strongly encourage countries in the region and those that border Afghanistan to allow entry for Afghans and coordinate with international organizations to provide humanitarian assistance to Afghans in need.

Question. What exact assurances have you obtained from the Taliban about their commitment to let such individuals leave Afghanistan?

Answer. The evacuation and relocation effort has been a monumental task. The Taliban publicly committed to allowing safe passage for U.S. and other foreign nationals as well as Afghans with travel documents. We continue to hold the Taliban to this public commitment.

Question. The recently announced U.S. Refugee Admissions Program Priority 2 Designation for Afghan Nationals requires that applicants be located outside the U.S. for their applications to begin processing. However, many eligible applicants were brought to the U.S. directly, by the U.S. Government, in recognition of the dangerous situation they faced in Afghanistan. As a result, they are not able to have their P-2 applications processed. This unnecessary bureaucratic obstacle will limit them to applying for asylum in the U.S., which was not specifically designed for their situations and can quickly become overburdened. These journalists have past and current employers willing to sponsor their P-2 applications. Will the Administration modify the P-2 program to allow for processing while in the U.S.?

Answer. The Department continues to evaluate all options related to the protection of Afghan nationals at risk, particularly those affiliated with the United States.

On September 30, President Biden signed into law the Afghanistan Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2022, which allows for relocated Afghan nationals to receive domestic refugee benefits in the United States and contains a provision requiring United States Citizenship and Immigration Services to expeditiously adjudicate asylum applications filed by certain Afghan nationals described in the Act.

Question. The U.S. announced that a number of countries have pledged to accept and have taken in at-risk Afghans. How are you working with these governments to relocate Afghans who are still in need of evacuation? And how are you working with these governments to help those who managed to flee but have limited legal status in their current countries of relocation?

Answer. The United States is working vigorously with the international community to explore all options to support vulnerable populations in Afghanistan. We strongly encourage countries in the region and those that border Afghanistan to allow entry for Afghans and coordinate with international organizations and other humanitarian partners 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. The U.S. itself accepted many at-risk Afghans at its military base in Doha. How long will those individuals be allowed to stay in Doha? What is the State Department doing to process or refer those individuals to third countries? Do you have a process in place?

Answer. The Government of Qatar agreed to allow thousands of Afghans at risk to transit through Qatar as part of Operation Allies Refuge. The majority of them are already in the United States and are being processed for parole at domestic bases. Remaining Afghans are housed at Qatar-based U.S. facilities while they are being vetted and prepared for onward travel to the United States. The U.S. Government and the Government of Qatar are discussing arrangements to use a facility to transit smaller numbers of Afghans-at-risk over the coming months.

Question. Do you support the application of the Priority 2 designation for Afghan religious minorities, namely Sikhs, Hindus, Christians, and Jews?

Answer. The United States continues to advocate for the protection of the rights of all Afghans. The United States will work vigorously with the international community and civil society partners to explore all options to ensure that vulnerable individuals, including members of Afghan religious minority groups, have equal access to protection, including refugee resettlement in the United States and other countries.

By law, religion is one of the five grounds of persecution that is part of establishing refugee status in the United States together with race, nationality, membership in a particular social group, and political opinion. Many of the most vulnerable refugee applicants have suffered religious persecution. Increasing the resettlement ceiling to 125,000 in FY 2022 increases the ability of the United States to resettle those facing persecution based on religion, including members of Afghan religious minority groups.

Question. How should Afghans fleeing Taliban persecution but still stuck in Afghanistan apply for humanitarian parole? Does the Department expect them to simply use the global process via Form I-131?

Answer. United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) is the agency that adjudicates Form I-131 and grants parole. Afghans-at-risk within Afghanistan may file a request for humanitarian parole or have someone file on their behalf. However, because the U.S. Embassy in Kabul has suspended operations and consular services are not available in Afghanistan, Afghans-at-risk may need to travel to a third country for processing before USCIS approves their humanitarian parole. I defer to USCIS for further information on the parole process for Afghans-at-risk.

Question. What is the current status of airports in Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif? Is the Administration working to coordinate evacuations from these airports with evacuees, outside groups, and/or third countries? If so, for what categories of at-risk Afghans?

Answer. Taliban leaders currently have control over the airports in Kabul and Mazar-e-Sharif. Commercial airlines have been operating some relief and charter flights via the airport in Kabul. I defer to the airlines for details of their operations.

We recognize the need for international flights to resume regular operations and urge the Taliban to work expeditiously with the Qatari and Turkish authorities to ensure this is done quickly, but also safely and securely. Qatar and Turkey share our view that there is an urgent need for humanitarian aid and safe travel. I defer to them for details of their presence and support in Afghanistan going forward.

We will continue to engage diplomatically to resolve any issues and to hold the Taliban to their public pledge to let people with valid travel documents freely depart Afghanistan. We have reiterated this point to the Taliban.

Question. Media reports state Turkish private security companies are guarding HKIA. Can you confirm if those reports are true? How many Turkish private security personnel are at HKIA?

Answer. There have been some private charter flights operated by commercial carriers via the airport in Kabul. We refer you to the airlines for details of their operations, including how visual flight rules currently in effect at all Afghan airports limit their ability to operate flights into and out of Afghanistan. We recognize the need for international flights to resume regular operations and urge the Taliban to work expeditiously with the Qatari and Turkish authorities to ensure this is done quickly, but also safely and securely. Qatar and Turkey share our view that there is an urgent need for humanitarian aid and safe travel. I defer to them for details of their presence and support in Afghanistan going forward.

Question. Throughout August, press freedom organizations including the Committee to Protect Journalists regularly shared with various State Department staff lists of at-risk journalists who needed evacuation from the country including their biographical and contact information. Three questions: How many of these individuals were contacted by the State Department? Was this list ever shared with other governments who offered to help? How many of these individuals were evacuated by the U.S.?

Answer. The evacuation and relocation effort has been a monumental task and the U.S. Government understands the need to coordinate across agencies, as we have done, but 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 DoD and other partners to facilitate freedom of movement for those who wish to leave Afghanistan, including U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs), our Afghans allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans. The initial priority was and is on supporting departures of U.S. citizens and LPRs and their immediate families. We are not in a position to detail our involvement with any specific groups at this time.

Question. On August 31, the U.S. left behind thousands of Afghan journalists who risked their lives to help cover the war and inform the public over the last 20 years. Because of their work and public profile, these journalists are now at heightened risk of Taliban violence. What is the State Department doing to negotiate a path for these vulnerable Afghans seeking to leave Afghanistan? Are you pursuing a diplomatic solution brokered by the U.S. to ensure the protection of these individuals in the country and allow for a pathway for them to leave safely?

Answer. The Department of State continues 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, per-

sons with disabilities, members of ethnic and/or religious minority groups, and other at-risk populations. 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 partners and others to facilitate the departure of those who wish to leave Afghanistan.

Question. What is the status of the P2 visa program for journalists and those who worked for U.S.-funded humanitarian projects?

Answer. The Department continues to receive and process P-2 referrals to the U.S. Refugee Admission Program (USRAP) from U.S. Government employers and qualifying media and non-governmental organizations. A P-2 referral is separate from the visa process. After 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 may contact PRM to begin processing their case. Individuals should follow the guidelines on wrapsnet.org to contact PRM. At that point, PRM will assign the case to a PRM-funded overseas Resettlement Support Center for processing. Please note a P-2 referral enables applicants to access the USRAP and is not a visa category.

Question. If P2 applicants are not provided with direct entry into the refugee processing system, where do you expect them to go while their applications are pending given that they are being told it could take 1-2 years for their applications to be adjudicated?

Answer. Individuals with urgent protection needs should follow procedures to register for international protection and assistance with the government of the country they are in. They may also register and seek assistance from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. We are working with international humanitarian partners and other governments to seek ways to ensure those with protection concerns are able to receive the support they need while they await U.S. Refugee Admissions Program processing.

Question. We have received reports of P2 applicants who are stranded outside of Afghanistan in countries that will not allow them to stay for more than a limited period. What is the Department doing to assist P2 applicants facing such a situation?

Answer. We strongly encourage countries in the region and those that border Afghanistan to allow entry for Afghans and coordinate with international organizations and other humanitarian partners 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.

Question. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Journalists and Staff: Media reports have indicated that as many as 550 congressionally funded journalists and their families working for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Voice of America remain in Afghanistan after the U.S. withdrawal. The reports indicate that in the final days of the evacuation, these journalists were designated as locally employed staff of Embassy Kabul. Is that correct?

Answer. As of September 1, approximately 124,000 people were relocated out of Afghanistan with U.S. support. At the time of the August operations, these Afghans included people who worked as staff of the U.S. Embassy in Kabul and their families, those who served as translators and interpreters for our Government, and other at-risk Afghans. Since August 31, we have worked closely with the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM) to evacuate USAGM-affiliated employees and family members. We remain in close contact with USAGM regarding USAGM, RFE/RL, and VOA staff who remain in Afghanistan. Our USAGM colleagues will not be forgotten and continuing to relocate them is among our top priorities.

Question. Other than these journalists, how many locally employed staff of Embassy Kabul remain to be evacuated?

Answer. Eleven out of 689 Embassy Kabul locally employed staff were unable or unwilling to travel on August 30, 2021, of which seven have requested assistance to depart Afghanistan.

Question. What steps are being taken to evacuate these journalists?

Answer. The State Department has established a team, led by the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts, to coordinate across government agencies and with advo-

cacy groups, nongovernmental organizations, and others. The team is working closely with DoD and other partners to facilitate onward travel for those who wish to leave Afghanistan, including U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs), our Afghans allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans. The initial priority is on supporting departures of U.S. citizens and LPRs and their immediate families. We are not in a position to detail our involvement with any specific groups at this time.

Question. Can you commit to us they will be given the opportunity to depart Afghanistan and brought to the United States?

Answer. 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 with other partners to facilitate onward travel for those who wish to leave Afghanistan, including U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs), our Afghans allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans. The initial priority is on supporting departures of U.S. citizens and LPRs and their immediate families. We are not in a position to detail our involvement with any specific groups at this time.

Admission into the United States, as well as the granting of humanitarian parole or significant public benefit parole, is overseen by the Department of Homeland Security.

Question. We remain concerned about reports that female humanitarian workers in Afghanistan are not receiving the same level of access and mobility as their male counterparts. Women's full participation in humanitarian interventions is critical to identifying the priorities and needs of women and girls. Without female staff, humanitarians simply cannot deliver programs at scale for women and girls, particularly health and protection services for victims of violence. How is the United States supporting humanitarians' efforts to secure commitments from the Taliban for a principled response, including the ability for women to work in the humanitarian response? What is the Administration doing to ensure that female humanitarian workers have safe, equal, and unrestricted access to perform humanitarian work?

Answer. The United States is working with the international community to ensure that the Taliban follow through on their public commitments to allow unhindered humanitarian access, including freedom of movement for aid workers of all genders in Afghanistan. The Taliban has publicly reiterated their desire for humanitarian operations to resume, and we will continue to advocate at the highest levels for unimpeded humanitarian access and delivery, particularly for female staff and beneficiaries. We are coordinating with international partners, U.N. agencies, and NGOs on the way forward to deliver humanitarian assistance with independence, impartiality, and neutrality; this coordination includes ensuring the safety and security of female staff, and provision of assistance to all Afghans who need it.

Question. How will the Administration continue to support women's rights programs in Afghanistan, particularly programs related to gender-based violence, girls' education, and sexual and reproductive health? At a time when support for Afghan women's rights organizations is most needed, what is the Administration doing to ensure they have the funding/resources and other support to continue operating?

Answer. The United States remains committed to providing humanitarian assistance to women and girls in Afghanistan, such as child protection, psychosocial support, and sexual and reproductive health services. These programs hinge on female aid workers, and we are collaborating with fellow donors and the humanitarian response community to advocate for safe, unhindered access for all humanitarian personnel.

We will be very focused on monitoring this assistance to ensure it is not diverted and reaches those most in need. In addition, as I noted in my testimony, the Department of State will be appointing a senior official who will coordinate the USC's effort to support women in Afghanistan.

Question. We understand that the Department of the Treasury issued a Specific License for USAID and the Department of State—and their partner organizations—to deliver humanitarian programming in Afghanistan on August 25. This unfortunately may not be an adequate safeguard for humanitarian organizations operating in Afghanistan—including those operating with the funding of other governments as well as local organizations. It also does not cover private financial and commercial institutions, which we note have scaled back or completely curtailed operations in Afghanistan for fear of running afoul of sanctions. What further steps—including general licenses—is the Administration considering to ensure a sufficient number of

humanitarian organizations and financial entities are able to operate in Afghanistan?

Answer. On August 25, the U.S. Department of the Treasury (“Treasury”) did issue a specific license authorizing transactions necessary to provisions by U.S. Government implementers of humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan. This allows the U.S. Government and its implementing partners to continue to support critical and life-saving humanitarian assistance such as the delivery of food, shelter, certain health services, and to provide other critical humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people. On September 24, Treasury also issued two general licenses authorizing the U.S. Government, certain international organizations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and those acting on their behalf to engage in transactions that are ordinarily incident and necessary to providing humanitarian assistance and engaging in other activities to support the basic needs in Afghanistan during this critical time. Treasury also issued answers to frequently asked questions providing further clarity on the scope of the general licenses and guidance for non-U.S. persons, including NGOs and foreign financial institutions, explaining that such persons generally do not risk exposure to U.S. sanctions for engaging in, or facilitating transactions or payments for, activities authorized for U.S. persons under these general licenses. The State Department remains committed to supporting the people of Afghanistan.

Question. The U.N. has estimated as many as half a million Afghans may flee the country by the end of this year in a worst case scenario. Afghanistan’s neighbors have expressed varying levels of willingness to allow Afghans to cross their borders. Lessons from other mass displacements—from Syria, Venezuela and elsewhere—have shown closed borders do not stop refugee crises, but instead push people to take more dangerous, informal routes that put them at greater risk of human trafficking, recruitment by armed groups, and exploitation and abuse, particularly for women and girls. What is the U.S. strategy to ensure a regional response that welcomes these populations?

Answer. The United States engages in humanitarian diplomacy with the countries in the region and those that border Afghanistan to advocate for continued humanitarian assistance to Afghans in need, including coordination between our partners at UNHCR, other international organizations, NGOs, and host governments to monitor and respond to refugee outflows in the region. The United States is working with its partners to review and strengthen humanitarian preparedness and priority interventions in the region in the event of new refugee outflows from Afghanistan. We will encourage continued coordination between host governments and humanitarian organizations to monitor and respond to the protection and assistance needs of displaced Afghans in the region.

Question. Afghanistan’s growing humanitarian emergency threatens to generate new refugee flows and to foster conditions in which ISIS-K could regenerate. Demining groups are some of the very few humanitarian organizations continuing to operate in Afghanistan. Given the numerous IEDs and explosives remaining from the final phase of fighting, their work is needed more than ever. Will you commit to increasing U.S. support for this vital work that will create safe conditions for refugees to return home and provide employment for young Afghans who might otherwise turn to radical movements, such as ISIS-K?

Answer. We must remain vigilant and monitor threats, especially any reemergence of externally directed plotting, and address them swiftly when they arise. As President Biden has made clear, the United States will maintain robust counterterrorism capabilities in the region to neutralize any threats, and we will not hesitate to use those capabilities if we have to do so. We have made clear our expectation that the Afghan people deserve an inclusive government, which is essential for stability.

Question. The withdrawal has already had an extremely negative impact on women leaders, parliamentarians, activists, and human rights defenders, many of whom have already been targeted and killed. Women and girls from all walks of life across the country are facing dangerous forms of oppression and roll backs of their rights. However, as we have already seen during ongoing protests, most of which have been met with brutal violence, they are courageously standing up to the Taliban and demanding their rights be protected. How does the U.S. Government plan on supporting women in this current situation? Does the Administration commit to continued funding for women’s groups, including those working to promote human rights and protect women and girls from gender-based violence? How does the Administration plan to continue implementing the Women, Peace, and Security

Act and Strategy in Afghanistan? Does the Administration commit to providing visas for high-risk women who are seeking to evacuate the country?

Answer. The United States is committed to supporting the rights of all Afghans, especially women and girls, and the gains they have achieved in the past 20 years through our diplomatic engagement and humanitarian assistance. Along with the international community, we have made it very clear that the legitimacy and support that the Taliban seek from the international community will depend on their conduct, especially how they treat women and girls.

Question. What process has the Department put in place for Afghan students who have received acceptance from U.S. higher education institutions to apply for student visas? What guidance have you developed to communicate to these students and the higher education institutions issuing acceptances?

Answer. We continue to fulfill our pledge to U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents, 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. This effort has no expiration date.

Afghan nonimmigrant visa applicants, including students, may request an appointment at any visa processing post. They should request an appointment by following the instructions available on each post's website. 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.

Question. On August 19, Amnesty International reported that Taliban fighters murdered nine ethnic Hazara men in Ghazni province between July 4 and 6. "Six of the men were shot and three were tortured to death, including one man who was strangled with his own scarf and had his arm muscles sliced off," Amnesty reported. On September 13, the BBC reported that 20 civilians were killed in the Panjshir Valley. How do you assess the risk of ethnic cleansing of ethnic and religious minorities in Afghanistan? Have you received other reports of attacks against ethnic and religious minorities? Is the State Department prioritizing prevention of ethnic cleansing in its talks with the Taliban?

Answer. The Department of State is concerned about any credible reports of attacks on Afghans because of their ethnic or religious background. We continue to hold the Taliban to their public commitments, which include ensuring the safety of all Afghans and not engaging in retaliatory attacks. We have communicated this concern to the Taliban, and we will continue to press them to investigate any incidents and to bring perpetrators to justice. We also continue to press the Taliban to adhere to their public commitment to form an inclusive government, including one that includes representation from members of ethnic and religious minority groups.

Question. Both Afghanistan and Pakistan remain Major Non-NATO Allies even after the Taliban took Kabul with the public cheerleading of the Pakistani Government. Do you think both Afghanistan and Pakistan should remain Major Non-NATO Allies with all the benefits afforded to countries on that list?

Answer. 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 evacuation of persons of interest to the United States. We are currently reviewing Afghanistan's Major Non-NATO Allies designation.

RESPONSES OF U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE ANTONY BLINKEN TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR JAMES E. RISCH

Question. The Biden administration has stressed its commitment to holding the Taliban to the counter commitments it made under the February 29 Agreement. Despite promises to break with al Qaeda, the Taliban remains ideologically aligned with the group. According to a June 2020 United Nations report, "The senior leadership of Al-Qaida remains present in Afghanistan, as well as hundreds of armed operatives, Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent, and groups of foreign terrorist fighters aligned with the Taliban." What are your views of the relationship between the Taliban and al Qaeda and impacts on U.S. CT interests?

Answer. 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 also 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."

Such statements, and the Taliban's cooperation seeking to prevent an ISIS-K attack at the Hamid Karzai International Airport, reflect the Taliban's aim of demonstrating they are adhering to their counterterrorism commitments under the U.S.-Taliban Agreement. The United States continues to call on the Taliban to fulfill their commitments, which include preventing terrorist groups or individuals from training, fundraising, and recruiting, and not hosting them.

Question. What tools does State have at its disposal to ensure the Taliban complies with its CT commitments? How specifically will the Department hold the Taliban to account if they fail to fulfill the CT pledges?

Answer. The United States Government continues to call on the Taliban to fulfill their commitments, which include preventing terrorist groups or individuals from training, fundraising, and recruiting, and not hosting them. The Taliban are aware that we are closely monitoring their actions to counter terrorist activity and that we remain ready to take unilateral actions as needed to address U.S. national security concerns.

Question. How does the new interim government impact your assessment of the Taliban's willingness to prevent terrorist organizations from freely operating in Afghanistan?

Answer. Speaking to the BBC on September 29, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah 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. Such statements and the Taliban's cooperation seeking to prevent an ISIS-K attack at the Hamid Karzai International Airport reflect the Taliban's aim of demonstrating they are adhering to their counterterrorism commitments under the U.S.-Taliban Agreement. The United States Government continues to call on the Taliban to fulfill their commitments, which include preventing terrorist groups or individuals from training, fundraising, and recruiting, and not hosting them.

Question. The Administration's over-the-horizon counterterrorism plan was contingent on a semi-permissive security environment and a willing Afghan partner on the ground. The Taliban takeover has transitioned Afghanistan to a non-permissive environment without a suitable CT partner. What is the status of diplomatic discussions with Afghanistan's neighbors to secure access, basing, and overflight permissions?

Answer. The United States has access arrangements necessary for ongoing U.S. over-the-horizon operations over Afghanistan. These arrangements have allowed the United States to maintain uninterrupted counterterrorism operations over Afghanistan. Our ongoing engagement seeks to further bolster those capabilities.

Question. Is Russia involved in these negotiations or are Russian bases under consideration?

Answer. Fighting the scourge of terrorism is a global effort. We will continue to engage partners, allies, and key states around the world on how best to address it, and in the case of Afghanistan, we have long worked closely with the nations of Central Asia. We deal directly with our sovereign Central Asian counterparts on these issues. Separately, we engage regularly with Russia in order to understand Moscow's views as a regional government that is also concerned about possible terrorist threats in Afghanistan.

Question. What do you characterize as the risk to U.S. counterterrorism interests through over-the-horizon operations from the Gulf that include long travel times, dramatically reduced time on station, and inability to observe targets with an "ISR soak" to avoid civilian casualties?

Answer. I defer to the Department of Defense for questions about their operational capacities.

Question. The governments of Pakistan, China, Iran, India, and the Central Asian republics are all concerned, to varying degrees, about the possibility of Afghanistan-

based terrorist threats. To what extent do you view any of these countries as legitimate counterterrorism partners?

Answer. We are open to exploring varying degrees of counterterrorism cooperation with a range of countries, as long as the activities further U.S. national interests, have sufficient human rights protections, and are consistent with applicable law and policy guidance.

Question. In his public comments, President Biden indicated the U.S. struck a deal with the Taliban for Kabul evacuations and continued evacuations after 31 August. Specifically, what was agreed to between the U.S. and the Taliban with respect to the evacuation of U.S. citizens and vulnerable Afghan allies?

Answer. The Department of State continues to engage on a practical, pragmatic basis with the Taliban on issues of U.S. national interest, including counterterrorism, safe passage, and unhindered humanitarian assistance. The Taliban have assured the U.S. Government—and publicly declared—that they will not retaliate against individuals associated with the United States or the Ghani Government, and that those who wish to leave Afghanistan will be able to do so, provided they have valid travel documents. U.S. citizens and vulnerable Afghans continue to depart Afghanistan, a positive indication that the Taliban are delivering on their commitment to freedom of movement. The United States will continue to press the Taliban to ensure that all who wish to leave Afghanistan are able to and will monitor the Taliban's adherence to their commitments closely.

Question. Section 1217 of the NDAA FY 2021 requires that the Administration transmit any agreement or arrangement with the Taliban to Congress within 5 days. Why has the State Department not provided Congress any such agreement or arrangement as required by law?

Answer. 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. Do you commit to providing Congress any agreement or arrangement, and relevant materials, made between the U.S. and the Taliban since August 14?

Answer. 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 is the status of captured equipment to include small arms, heavy machine guns, mortars, artillery, anti-tank weapons, armored vehicles, rotary wing and aircraft? Will we destroy or allow them to atrophy over time? What will rise to threshold of destruction?

Answer. The vast majority of equipment transferred to the Afghan military was provided through the Afghanistan Security Forces Fund (ASFF), a Department of Defense (DoD)-managed fund under its Title 10 authority. DoD is responsible for monitoring and tracking the types and quantities of equipment transferred to a foreign government under Title 10 authorities or U.S. security assistance and security cooperation programs, including determining the disposition of the equipment. We defer to DoD to provide this information.

Question. Mr. Secretary, in your testimony, you emphasized that the military equipment left behind by the United States would soon be inoperable and would not pose challenges to the United States. However, there is another significant risk that the Taliban allows adversaries, especially China, Russia, and Iran—to examine U.S. military equipment. Did the Departments of State and Defense consider this risk, and incorporate that into its advice to the President? Do the Departments of State and Defense plan to take any action if you become aware of reports that sophisticated adversaries gain access to U.S. equipment? Are there concerns that foreign actors will provide Taliban training on captured equipment?

Answer. The Department of State shares Congress' interest in ensuring that the U.S. military equipment that the Department of Defense (DoD) procured using the Afghanistan Security Forces Fund (ASFF) and transferred to the former Afghan National Defense and Security Forces does not fall into the hands of sophisticated ad-

versaries of the United States. The Department defers all questions on risk assessments related to this military equipment to the Department of Defense.

Question. What support, if any, did external nations or forces provide to the Taliban before and during its summer 2021 offensive?

Answer. Senior Pakistani Government officials continued to support Afghan peace talks, including by encouraging the Taliban to engage in negotiations up until August 15. Various senior Pakistan officials also made repeated public calls for a political solution to the Afghan conflict and expressed concern an overthrow of Kabul by the Taliban would lead to a protracted civil war.

Question. What role did Pakistan play in the Taliban offensive?

Answer. Various senior Pakistani leaders, including Prime Minister Khan, called repeatedly for a political solution to the conflict in Afghanistan prior to the Taliban taking control of Kabul on August 15. In a May interview, for example, Khan stated that if the Taliban attempted to overthrow the Afghan Government in Kabul by force it would lead to a protracted civil war and an influx of refugees into Pakistan. Khan further claimed that Pakistan would use all the tools necessary to support peace in Afghanistan. Following August 15, senior Pakistani officials have continued to stress the need for an inclusive political settlement and the protection of women's educational rights in Afghanistan during multiple public events. Pakistan has made repeated public calls for the international community to directly engage with the Taliban to prevent further violence, avoid economic collapse, and avert a humanitarian disaster.

Question. What steps did the State Department take to reduce the levels of external support to the Taliban prior to and during the offensive that toppled the Afghan Government?

Answer. Up until August 15, the Department was actively working with the Government of Pakistan through a variety of regional initiatives in calling for the Taliban to pursue a political solution to the Afghan conflict by forming an inclusive government.

Question. What actions have Russia and China taken since Kabul fell to strengthen diplomatic and commercial ties with the Taliban, provide support for Taliban efforts to consolidate control over the country, or gain access to captured U.S. military equipment, communications gear, or any other sensitive technologies left behind?

Answer. While Russia maintains its Embassy in Kabul, the Taliban is still designated a terrorist organization by Moscow, and senior Russian officials have repeatedly stated that they have no plans to recognize the Taliban Government. Russia has sought to strengthen ties with countries that border Afghanistan in recent months more so than with the Taliban itself.

The People's Republic of China (PRC) has maintained its Embassy in Kabul. We continue to engage with countries that border Afghanistan and countries in the region, including the PRC, on the importance of the international community holding the Taliban accountable for their public commitments. The entire international community has a stake in ensuring the Taliban live up to their public commitments and obligations. The world is united in what they expect the Taliban to do, and Beijing has to decide where it is in that effort.

Question. Has the Taliban requested any specific diplomatic, financial, military, intelligence, or technical assistance from Russia, China, or Pakistan since the fall of the Afghan Government?

Answer. The Taliban have publicly called for increased economic ties with the People's Republic of China (PRC), including through the Belt and Road Initiative. In September 2021, the PRC pledged approximately \$31 million worth of grant-based aid to Afghanistan, including food supplies and coronavirus vaccines. Through active regional diplomacy Pakistan has made consistent, public calls for the international community to directly engage with the Taliban, including by calling for their assets to be unfrozen to avoid economic collapse and avert a humanitarian disaster. Further, Pakistan is providing limited humanitarian aid to the Taliban and is encouraging other countries to pursue similar policies. Russia has also called publicly for the unfreezing of Taliban assets.

Question. Please provide an assessment of the Taliban's compliance with the February 29 Agreement prior to April 14, 2021 to include a reduction in violence, adherence to counterterrorism commitments, and substantive dialogue with the Afghan Government.

Answer. Under the U.S.-Taliban Agreement, the Taliban committed to prevent any group or individual in Afghanistan from threatening the security of the United States and its allies, and to prevent any such group from recruiting, training, and fundraising and not to host them. We assess that the Taliban has made some progress on these commitments, but there is significantly more to do. We continue to press the Taliban to fulfill their counterterrorism commitments.

As part of the U.S.-Taliban agreement, the Taliban agreed to enter into intra-Afghan negotiations on a political roadmap and permanent and comprehensive ceasefire. Negotiations began September 12, 2020. The Taliban and Ghani Government teams have not met since the Taliban took control of Kabul on August 15, 2021.

Question. Section 1215 of the NDAA FY 2021 restricts funding for the Department of Defense for any activity to reduce force levels below both 4,000 and 2,000, until DoD submits a report to Congress or the President provides a written waiver. During the Afghanistan withdrawal, troop levels again exceeded 4,000 on the ground. Why has Congress has not received either the required report or written waiver as mandated by law?

Answer. I defer to the Department of Defense.

Question. President Biden previously said the United States “will not conduct a hasty rush to exit. We’ll do it responsibly deliberately and safely. And we will do it in full coordination with our allies and partners.” However, scenes from the U.S.-led evacuation effort based out of Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) suggested anything but a responsible, deliberate, and safe exit. Can you elaborate on the scale of forward planning?

Answer. 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 mission functions. The scenarios assumed reductions in embassy staffing while maintaining core mission functions under various conditions, up to and including suspension of operations and physical closure of the embassy.

Senior Department officials as well as embassies around the world were in close contact with our partners and allies prior to, throughout, and after the evacuation and relocation operations in August. The Department of State redoubled its efforts to consult with international partners to inform counterparts of our series of ordered departures, beginning on April 27. USNATO briefed Allies August 12, and at several North Atlantic Council and committee meetings over the following days and weeks, on the U.S. drawdown and evacuations.

Question. What contingencies were put in place in the wake of President Biden’s April announcement that the United States would withdraw all forces by September 11, 2021?

Answer. The safety and security of U.S. citizens and our personnel is my 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 CENTCOM.

Question. How many U.S. citizens are currently in Afghanistan? Please address how many total U.S. citizens are in Afghanistan, independent of how many may have indicated at some point an interest in staying in Afghanistan. Of the persons evacuated from Afghanistan in August, how many are U.S. citizens? How many are U.S. legal permanent residents? How many are SIV applicants?

Answer. U.S. citizens are not required to register with the Department of State or an embassy when they arrive in or depart from a country, and as a result we have no means of providing an exact number of U.S. citizens currently in Afghanistan. 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. When we expanded our evacuation operations on August 15, 2021, there were an estimated 6,000 U.S. citizens in Afghanistan. The U.S. Government facilitated the evacuation of approximately 6,000 U.S. citizens from Afghanistan through August 31. Between September 1 and November 9, the Department has assisted an additional 385 U.S. citizens and 285 Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs) depart Afghanistan, not including those that have departed on private charters or independently crossed a land border. We will continue to facilitate this travel. Like U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents are not required to register with the U.S. Em-

bassy. I defer to the Department of Homeland Security for statistics on the number of LPR evacuees admitted into the United States. In addition, I defer to the Department of Homeland Security for numbers of SIV holder evacuees admitted into the United States. We estimate that 40–50 percent of Afghan parolees may be SIV eligible because they took significant risks to support our military and civilian personnel in Afghanistan, working for or on behalf of the U.S. Government in Afghanistan or our coalition forces, or are a family member of someone who did. The Department is currently assessing how many of these Afghan evacuees had outstanding SIV applications.

Question. How many U.S. permanent legal residents are currently in Afghanistan? Please address how many total U.S. permanent legal residents are in Afghanistan, independent of how many may have indicated at some point an interest in staying in Afghanistan.

Answer. Like U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs) do not register their location with the Department of State. As a result, we are unable to determine the number of LPRs in Afghanistan or any other given country. Between September 1 and November 9, the Department has assisted 285 LPRs depart Afghanistan, not including those that have departed on private charters or independently crossed a land border. We will continue to facilitate this travel and will be relentless in helping LPRs depart Afghanistan, if and when they choose to do so.

Question. How many Special Immigrant Visa applicants are currently in Afghanistan?

Answer. We do not have a figure of how many Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants are currently in Afghanistan. This number is constantly changing since the Afghan SIV program continues to accept new applicants. As of October 6, 2021, there were approximately 27,000 Afghan SIV principal applicants at various stages of the application process. At this time, we cannot determine how many are still in Afghanistan.

Question. How many Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants remain in the pipeline? How many applications did the department process between April 2021 and August 2021? Specifically, what steps has the Department taken to streamline the process since Biden took office in January 2021?

Answer. As of October 6, 2021, the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) pipeline has approximately 27,000 SIV principal applicants. More than 19,000 are at the initial stage of the process, pending applicant action to submit a complete set of documents for consideration of Chief of Mission (COM) approval. The Department of State continues to accept new SIV applications and add them to the pipeline. From April 1, 2021, to August 31, 2021, the Department issued SIVs to 1,812 principal applicants (and 5,937 derivative applicants). The Department took efforts to decrease processing time to include quintupling (since May 2021) the staff who assess applications for COM approval, doubling the number of adjudicators at Embassy Kabul, increasing the staffing at the National Visa Center (NVC), initiating Project Rabbit with the Department of Defense (where the Department of Defense provides letters of recommendation for applicants after reviewing the human resources and employment records of Afghan SIV applicants), eliminating the COM Committee from the COM approval process, streamlining screening and vetting to be more time efficient while remaining secure, and utilizing the waiver of the requirement for a medical examination for SIV applicants in Afghanistan who completed all other steps for visa issuance.

Question. What is the U.S. plan for evacuating U.S. citizens, legal permanent residents, and SIV applicants from Afghanistan?

Answer. 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 to facilitate the departure of those who wish to leave Afghanistan, including U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents, our Afghans allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans. The initial priority is on supporting departures of U.S. citizens and LPRs and their immediate families. We are also facilitating the ongoing departure of Afghans who worked with and for the U.S. Government, and Special Immigrant Visa holders.

Question. Where will these people go?

Answer. Evacuees continue to arrive in a variety of destinations. While we are currently unable to provide consular services in Afghanistan, we will continue 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. Posts which have received Afghan SIV applications are prioritizing their processing.

We recognize that it is 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 (LPRs), and Afghans with travel documentation who wish to leave Afghanistan, while encouraging countries in the region and those that border Afghanistan to allow Afghans to enter. We are developing processing alternatives so that we can continue to deliver these important consular services for the people of Afghanistan. This effort is of utmost importance to the U.S. Government.

Question. What role has the State Department played in receiving Afghan evacuees in Washington, DC and Philadelphia?

Answer. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is the designated lead federal agency for U.S.-based Afghanistan-related relocation operations. Prior to that designation, the Department of State, with support from USAID, had opened a temporary transit facility near Dulles Airport. DHS assumed overall control of Dulles operations on August 29, 2021, when it was directed to serve as the lead agency to coordinate efforts to resettle Afghans, and the Philadelphia airport opened for arrivals as well. Department of State and USAID employees continued to support the Dulles operations of DHS in large numbers. Following admission of individuals relocated from Afghanistan to the United States by Customs and Border Protection at Dulles Airport, these employees worked closely with DHS, DoD, and federal health agencies to manifest Afghan travelers for flights and buses to their final safe haven base around the country for further processing. The Department had a small team at the Philadelphia airport to share lessons learned from Dulles, provide information to individuals relocated from Afghanistan who worked at the U.S. embassy in Kabul, coordinate family reunifications, and participate in interagency coordination meetings. The Department provided “wrap-around” services support at Philadelphia airport, specifically interpretation services to individuals upon their arrival.

Question. How much money has the State Department spent on the evacuation from Afghanistan, including the housing and transportation of evacuees?

Answer. As of October 13, 2021, the Department has obligated \$689.9 million in support of Operation Allies Welcome and related Afghanistan efforts, primarily involving relocation and resettlement of individuals at risk as a result of the situation in Afghanistan. Obligations by bureau and fund source are shown below. Obligations reported under CGFS include EDCS funded activities across multiple State bureaus, which are consolidated for reporting purposes under CGFS.

Bureau	Fund	Amount
CGFS	EDCS	\$92.8 million
CA	CBSP	\$3.8 million
PRM	ERMA	\$591.1 million
SCA	Diplomatic Programs	\$2.2 million
<i>Total (as of 10/13/21)</i>		\$689.9 million

Question. Mr. Secretary, you previously committed to providing details on the Department’s plans to support the continued evacuation of American Citizens, Legal Permanent Residents, Green Card Holders, and at-risk Afghans, thousands of whom were left behind after the U.S. military withdrawal. These include Afghan journalists, human rights defenders, members of parliament, women and girls, aid workers, and interpreters, among others. Many of these individuals played key roles in supporting the United States mission in Afghanistan and as a result of their work and public profile, are now at heightened risk of Taliban violence. Since the U.S. finalized its withdrawal from Afghanistan on August 31, this committee has received no additional clarity on the Department’s long-term planning, particularly as relates to at-risk Afghans. Those who dedicated themselves to supporting the U.S. and promoting democratic ideals, despite the risk, must not now be forgotten. Moving forward, how does the State Department plan to assist these at-risk Afghans, many of whom are now under increasing threat from the Taliban as result of their occupation, identity, or connections with the West? What does future evacuation planning look like for this class?

Answer. 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 to facilitate the departure of those who still wish to leave. We understand that the Taliban have targeted certain populations and professions among Afghan civilians in the past and denied access to services for vulnerable populations. The United States will work vigorously with the international community to explore all options to support members of vulnerable populations in Afghanistan including—but not limited to—women, children, journalists, persons with disabilities, LGBTQI+ individuals, and members of the ethnic and religious minority groups.

Question. Is the Taliban currently allowing at-risk Afghans to leave the country?

Answer. The departures of the Qatar Airways flights and others are a positive step in upholding the commitment to free movement. We continue to press the Taliban to see to it that U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents, and others with valid travel documents, including our Afghans allies and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans, are able to depart the country, if they so choose.

Question. If the Taliban requires visas for persons to exit Afghanistan and the U.S. no longer has a diplomatic presence inside Afghanistan, how will the U.S. get visas to those trying to exit the country?

Answer. We recognize that it is 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 (LPRs), and Afghans with travel documentation who wish to leave Afghanistan, while encouraging countries in the region and those that border Afghanistan to allow Afghans to enter. We are developing processing alternatives so that we can continue to deliver these important consular services for the people of Afghanistan. This effort is of utmost importance to the U.S. Government.

Question. How will the State Department facilitate the evacuation of eligible Afghans whose passports were destroyed by the U.S. during the withdrawal?

Answer. It is standard operating procedure during an emergency drawdown to mitigate risk by minimizing our footprint and reducing the amount of sensitive material remaining. U.S. Embassy Kabul's drawdown was conducted in accordance with this standard operating procedure.

We are developing processing alternatives so that we can continue to deliver important consular services for the people of Afghanistan. This effort is of utmost importance to the U.S. Government.

Question. In cases where safe evacuation isn't an option, what steps is the Department of State taking to mitigate the threat the Taliban poses to at-risk Afghans? To what extent is the Department collaborating with local or international nongovernment organizations in this effort?

Answer. We are continuing to examine all available avenues to provide protection for vulnerable Afghans. Our commitment to providing humanitarian assistance directly to the United Nations and NGO partners 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. We strongly encourage countries in the region and that border Afghanistan to allow entry for Afghans and coordinate with international organizations to provide humanitarian assistance to Afghans in need. 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.

Question. State Department spokesperson Ned Price recently indicated efforts to secure the release of Mark Frerichs “will not stop until Mark comes home.” What is the status of negotiations with the Taliban with respect to American hostage Mark Frerichs? What steps has the Department taken to secure his release? What additional avenues will the Department pursue to secure his release?

Answer. The Taliban have claimed they are holding U.S. Navy veteran Mark Frerichs. As the Taliban seek legitimacy, they cannot continue to hold an American hostage. We continue to raise the need for Mark's immediate release and safe return with the Taliban at every possible opportunity. The Taliban-led Government must meet its commitments and obligations, which include the immediate release of Mark Frerichs. We have been clear that any legitimacy and any recognition 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. Beyond Mark Frerichs, how many Americans citizens are currently held hostage by the Taliban, or the Haqqani network?

Answer. There are three open hostage cases of U.S. citizens in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. In addition to U.S. citizen and Navy veteran Mark Frerichs, there is an open hostage case for Paul Overby, who was kidnapped in Khost in May 2014 and Cydney Mizell, who was abducted and likely killed in Kandahar in 2008. The Department of State has sponsored a Rewards for Justice campaign of up to \$5 million for information on all three hostage cases. The Taliban, including the Haqqani Network, and their Haqqani affiliates, must release Mark Frerichs, provide answers and accountability for the other U.S. citizens taken hostage, and disavow the abhorrent act of hostage taking going forward.

Question. To what extent does the Department feel hostage cases, like that of Mark Frerichs, will be used by the Taliban as leverage to secure concessions from the United States? How many nationals of NATO allies are currently in Afghanistan? How many nationals of other U.S. allies and partners are currently in Afghanistan? What is the United States doing to help those countries evacuate their nationals?

Answer. I am concerned with the risk of future hostage-takings. The Taliban must release Mark Frerichs, provide answers and accountability for the other U.S. citizens taken hostage, and disavow the abhorrent act of hostage taking going forward. We coordinate regularly with partners and NATO Allies on both hostages and wrongfully detained citizens. The United States stands ready to assist partners and allies with recovery and reintegration.

Question. The private sector and NGOs took evaluation measures upon themselves given the lack of attention by the State Department to allow charter flights but are being met with substantive bureaucratic obstacles. Can you please elaborate why the U.S. Department of State inhibited private entities from allowing chartered flights to evacuate at-risk Afghans?

Answer. We are aware that some private entities have arranged for private charter flights out of Afghanistan. There have been significant challenges with these flights. 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 would be eligible for relocation or resettlement in the United States. In several instances where private entities have chartered aircraft to transport individuals out of Afghanistan, identity checks on arrival at transit destinations have revealed that many passengers were not eligible for relocation to the United States and, in some cases, that the manifests were not accurate, despite the best efforts of the private organizations supporting these charters. This puts the individual travelers at risk with no plan for relocation to the United States; damages the bilateral relationship of the United States with the destination countries; and makes it more difficult for the U.S. Government to rely on those partner countries to assist in future relocations out of Afghanistan.

Question. Media reports have indicated that as many as 550 congressionally funded journalists and their families working for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) and Voice of America (VOA) were abandoned in Afghanistan after the U.S. military withdrawal. Over 100 VOA and RFE/RL staff are still in Afghanistan and at great risk of reprisal by the Taliban. The reports indicate that in the final days of the evacuation, these journalists were designated as locally employed staff of Embassy Kabul, is that correct?

Answer. Yes, that is correct. VOA and RFE/RL staff were designated as Locally Employed Staff during the August evacuation and relocation operation. The Department of State is in close and regular communication with USAGM regarding VOA and RFE/RL staff who may still be in Afghanistan and wish to leave.

Question. Other than these journalists, how many locally employed staff of Embassy Kabul remain to be evacuated?

Answer. At the time of the August 2021 evacuation of Embassy Kabul, there were 689 direct-hire local staff employed by the embassy. Sixteen of the embassy locally employed staff remained in Kabul. Nine remained in Kabul by choice. Seven were unable to travel on August 30 and have requested assistance to depart Afghanistan. We will continue our efforts to facilitate the safe and orderly travel of those who were employed by Embassy Kabul as local staff.

Question. What steps were taken to prioritize the evacuation of VOA and RFE/RL employees and journalists in particular? Moving forward, can the Department commit to prioritizing the evacuation of RFE/RL and VOA staff who face heightened risk of Taliban violence in light of their work for a U.S.-funded press outlet?

Answer. Yes, we are in regular communication with USAGM about the staff of both outlets who may still be in Afghanistan and wish to depart. The Department of State has established a team to coordinate across government agencies and with advocacy groups, nonprofits, and others to facilitate freedom of movement for those who wish to leave Afghanistan, including U.S. citizens, LPRs, and at-risk Afghans to whom we have a commitment. This group includes the staff of RFE/RL and VOA.

Question. To what extent did the Department work with VOA and RFE/RL partners to support this objective? Were there particular obstacles to the Department of State doing so?

Answer. The State Department and Department of Defense worked around the clock to facilitate the departure of VOA and RFE/RL staff via both military and charter aircraft. The Department of State was in regular communication with USAGM throughout the operation in August and continues to maintain these lines of communication about the staff of VOA and RFE/RL who may still be in Afghanistan and wish to leave. As the situation outside of Kabul International Airport grew increasingly dangerous, we advised all local staff to shelter in place while we continued to develop departure options. We did not forget about USAGM employees and their families, nor will we.

Question. Are you aware of the fact that a number of these journalists have received death threats and inquiries from the Taliban about their work in the weeks since the collapse of the government?

Answer. We have seen the footage of brave Afghan human rights defenders making their voices heard and protesting in public spaces. We have also seen troubling footage of injuries suffered by journalists in Taliban detention as well as the violence against protesters. The United States will continue to monitor the human rights situation in Afghanistan. The Department will also continue to chronicle human rights abuses in its annual *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*.

Question. What steps does the Department plan on taking to ensure their safety in the interim? Specifically, what is the Department doing to ensure that they are safe and that the Taliban do not continue to harass them and their families?

Answer. The United States calls for the protection of, and respect for, media organizations and journalists to allow accurate reporting, which is key to press freedom. Over the last 20 years, Afghanistan's media sector has grown exponentially. We are extremely grateful for those members of the media who have courageously associated themselves with the American press to report on Afghanistan.

Question. The recently announced U.S. Refugee Admissions Program Priority 2 Designation for Afghan Nationals requires that applicants be located outside Afghanistan for their applications to begin processing. However, many eligible applicants weren't safely evacuated from Afghanistan before the end of the U.S. NEO on August 31 and are now barred from leaving the country by the Taliban. As a result, they are not able to have their P-2 applications processed. Will the Administration modify the P-2 program to allow for processing while inside Afghanistan?

Answer. This Administration has been clear about its enduring commitment to supporting the people of Afghanistan, including those who remain in country as well as those who seek to leave. While there are no plans for in-country processing or relocation support for individuals referred to the Priority 1 or Priority 2 program who remain in Afghanistan, the Administration is encouraging countries in the region and those that border Afghanistan to allow entry for Afghans and is 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.

Question. Mr. Secretary, you have repeatedly said that the Taliban must allow those Afghan nationals who want to leave and have valid travel documents to do so yet many of these journalists and those who worked for U.S.-funded projects have no such documents or onward visas. Why has the State Department not issued travel documents or verification letters to those Afghans who are eligible for Special Immigrant Visas or P2 visas?

Answer. Travelers do not require a letter from the State Department or any other U.S. Government entity to leave Afghanistan. While we are currently unable to provide consular services for immigrant visa applicants, including Special Immigrant

Visas (SIVs), in Afghanistan, we will continue 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. As operations at U.S. Embassy Kabul have been suspended, Afghans eligible and referred to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program must be outside of Afghanistan in a third country for their cases to be processed. We strongly encourage countries in the region and those that border Afghanistan, as well as other countries, to allow entry for Afghans and to coordinate with international organizations to provide humanitarian assistance to Afghans in need.

Question. What exact assurances have you obtained from the Taliban about their commitment to let such individuals leave Afghanistan?

Answer. The Taliban have publicly pledged to let people with valid travel documents, including U.S. citizens, freely depart Afghanistan. We continue 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 communications to the Taliban. We are also doing it in tandem with our allies and partners around the world. Freedom of movement is a top national security concern and national priority for us.

Question. Many of these journalists don't have passports. How does the United States Government plan to assist those without passports who were left behind by the military evacuation?

Answer. 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, they may face significant challenges fleeing to safety. We strongly encourage countries in the region and those that border Afghanistan to allow entry for Afghans and to 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.

Travelers do not require a letter from the State Department or any other U.S. Government entity to leave Afghanistan. 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. We are also doing it in tandem with our allies and partners around the world.

Question. Other governments like the United Kingdom and Germany have provided expedited entry into their country for their government-funded media. Why have similar arrangements only been made for private media outlets, like the New York Times, and not congressionally funded ones?

Answer. Admission to the United States is granted by the Department of Homeland Security. We are working closely with our interagency colleagues to facilitate the relocation and resettlement of all qualified, screened and vetted Afghans referred to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program through the expedited processing of individuals through our transit sites in third countries.

Question. What is the status of the P2 visa program for journalists and those who worked for U.S.-funded humanitarian projects?

Answer. The State Department continues to receive and process P-2 referrals to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). After 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 may contact PRM to begin processing their case. Individuals should follow the guidelines on wrapsnet.org to contact PRM. At that point, PRM will assign the case to a PRM-funded overseas Resettlement Support Center for processing. Please note a P-2 referral enables applicants to access the USRAP and is not a visa category.

Question. We have received reports that the State Department is reluctant to allow P2 applicants to enter the U.S. processing system due to delays and its limited capacity. Is this true?

Answer. This is not true. The Department is still receiving P-2 referrals from U.S. Government employers, including the Department of Defense, and qualifying media and non-governmental organizations. It is not currently possible for the U.S. Government to process refugee referrals inside Afghanistan, so Afghan nationals who are referred for resettlement will be processed once they leave the country.

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.

Question. If P2 applicants are not provided with direct entry into the refugee processing system, where do you expect them to go while their applications are pending given that they are being told it could take 1–2 years for their applications to be adjudicated?

Answer. 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. As operations at U.S. Embassy Kabul have been suspended, Afghans eligible and referred to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program must be outside of Afghanistan in a third country for their cases to be processed.

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, and like many refugees, may face significant challenges fleeing to safety. We are continuing to review the situation on the ground and consider all available options, and our planning will continue to evolve. We strongly encourage countries in the region and those that border Afghanistan to allow entry for Afghans and coordinate with international organizations and other humanitarian partners 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.

Question. We have received reports of P2 applicants who are stranded outside of Afghanistan in countries that will not allow them to stay for more than a limited period. What is the Department doing to assist P2 applicants facing such a situation?

Answer. We strongly encourage countries in the region and those that border Afghanistan to allow entry for Afghans and coordinate with international organizations and other humanitarian partners 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. Well before the August 31 deadline, 1,200 American University of Afghanistan (AUAF) students, staff and faculty were mobilized and ready to evacuate with the proper paperwork and logistical support. AUAF successfully secured planes to transport the students to multiple third-site locations. However, the Biden administration reversed its prior authorization granting AUAF access to Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) gates, allegedly claiming it was no longer a priority. Nearly 200 Afghan women who hoped to evacuate with this convoy are part of the Embassy Scholars program. These women were hand-picked by the U.S. Embassy to attend AUAF and given full-ride scholarships. How do you plan to support the evacuation of AUAF students and staff moving forward?

Answer. While U.S. Government evacuation and relocation flights out of Afghanistan have ended, our commitment to U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs), and at-risk Afghans in Afghanistan 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 United States 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 the airport in Kabul.

Question. How is the Taliban treating current or former students of the AUAF?

Answer. The State Department is aware of reports the Taliban have mistreated AUAF students, alumni, and staff. We take these reports seriously. The Taliban have committed to full access to education, general amnesty, and preventing retaliation. The Department continues to press the Taliban to fully adhere to these commitments, including their commitment not to retaliate. Any report or violations should be promptly investigated and those responsible should be held accountable.

Question. Mr. Secretary, have you determined whether Section 7008 of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, which restricts certain forms of assistance “to the government of any country whose duly elected head of government is deposed by military coup d’etat or decree or . . . a coup d’etat or decree in which the military plays a decisive role” applies to the Taliban in Afghanistan?

Answer. 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.

Question. The Department and USAID have announced the intent to continue "certain forms of foreign assistance programs that advance U.S. national interests" in Afghanistan. Decisions about which programs will continue—and those that will be paused or reprogrammed—reportedly will be subject to review. Yet, beyond the suggestion that humanitarian assistance will be exempted, the Department has provided the Committee with virtually zero information about the anticipated scope, process, timeline, benchmarks, and indicators of this review. What is the full scope of U.S. foreign assistance under review?

Answer. All humanitarian assistance programming to Afghanistan to support the lifesaving needs of the Afghan people continues directly through the United Nations and NGO partners. State and USAID are continuing to review all non-humanitarian assistance programs to Afghanistan.

Question. Who is leading the review?

Answer. The Office of Foreign Assistance is coordinating the review across State and USAID Bureaus for non-humanitarian assistance funds in Afghanistan and is working closely with interagency partners.

Question. Who will be consulted? Will Congress be consulted?

Answer. In addition to working closely with interagency partners, we look forward to working closely with the White House, OMB, and Congress as we consider our non-humanitarian assistance posture in Afghanistan.

Question. When do you anticipate completing the review?

Answer. We are undertaking the review on an expedited timeline.

Question. What metrics, benchmarks, and indicators will be used to determine whether a program "advances U.S. national interests"?

Answer. The review of non-humanitarian assistance is intended to ensure programs align with U.S. policy objectives, which include to: (i) prevent threats of terrorism against the United States and its interests; (ii) ensure the safe passage and freedom of movement of all U.S. citizens, Allies, and other individuals at risk from Afghanistan; (iii) prevent or mitigate a humanitarian disaster, including the humanitarian impacts of an economic collapse; (iv) support U.S. values, especially regarding human rights including the rights of women, girls, and members of minority groups; and (v) prevent broader regional destabilization.

Question. Is it both feasible and advisable to re-start non-humanitarian assistance programs in Afghanistan while we are still working to evacuate U.S. citizens and implementing partners?

Answer. State and USAID bureaus are assessing their non-humanitarian assistance programs, the operating environment, and other potential issues to mitigate risks. This review will consider how programs may be affected by the new security environment, as it is important that we consider how to mitigate the risks to on-the-ground implementers and beneficiaries, including to ensure assistance resources do not directly benefit the Taliban.

Question. What mechanisms will be put in place to guard against diversion?

Answer. Bureaus are planning for how they will make adjustments to monitor and evaluate continuing potential non-humanitarian assistance programs from outside Afghanistan, including through third parties, given that the operations of the U.S. embassy in Kabul are suspended. State and USAID and our implementers have experience using similar mechanisms, such as in Syria, and some bureaus already have years of experience in successfully managing programs from 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.

Question. Are you concerned by arguments that the resumption of U.S. non-humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan will legitimize the Taliban?

Answer. The President and I have been clear about the U.S. commitment to supporting the Afghan people, including women, girls, and members of minority groups. Our efforts to continue humanitarian assistance to support the lifesaving needs of the Afghan people demonstrates this commitment.

Question. Can you confirm that no U.S. foreign assistance, in any form, will be programmed with, through, or for the Taliban?

Answer. No U.S. assistance will be directed to the Taliban. We plan to provide assistance all through non-governmental organizations, international organizations, or other third parties to directly support the Afghan people.

Question. Former Administrator of USAID Andrew Natsios asserts that shipments of U.S. wheat, intended to ameliorate famine conditions in certain areas of Afghanistan in 2001, severely undercut the market for locally grown wheat on the eve of a bumper harvest (which, ironically, can largely be attributed to U.S. foreign assistance to incentivize alternative crop production, including through the introduction of improved seed varieties). Yet, faced with excess wheat supply and low demand (farmers simply could not compete with “free” U.S. wheat), continued production of wheat became unviable and farmers returned to poppy production. According to the Executive Director of the World Food Program, today, Afghanistan is once again “marching toward famine.” How will you ensure that U.S. humanitarian assistance, notably assistance delivered through the Food for Peace Program and U.S. contributions to WFP, will not result in a similar outcome?

Answer. USAID and State, through our implementing partners, including the World Food Program (WFP), undertake rigorous market analyses to ensure humanitarian assistance will not have adverse impacts on local producers or markets. In Afghanistan, USAID supports WFP to improve food security and nutrition conditions through in-kind aid, as well as cash and voucher assistance. WFP conducts frequent market and price monitoring to prevent potential disruptions, and predominantly uses locally procured wheat flour to support local production. WFP has also scaled up its cash transfer options, as cash is used where markets are easily accessible, supply routes are functioning, food commodities are available, and prices are stable. USAID does not currently provide U.S. wheat to Afghanistan but does support the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization in providing assistance to vulnerable farming households.

Question. How is the Department working with other donors to ensure that humanitarian assistance actually helps ameliorate, rather than exacerbate, humanitarian conditions in Afghanistan?

Answer. U.S. humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan enables our partners to provide lifesaving food, nutrition, protection, shelter, health care, water, sanitation, and hygiene services to respond to the needs generated by the complex emergency. U.S. humanitarian assistance is provided directly through international organizations and NGOs with extensive experience working in challenging environments, and they remain committed to delivering needs-based assistance with impartiality, neutrality, and independence. Close coordination with donor governments and partners is critical during this time, and we will continue to work closely with and support our partners to monitor and respond to the situation and to encourage other donors to do the same.

Question. What is the status of discussions with the Department of Treasury on the issuance of licenses and related guidance for humanitarian organizations operating in Afghanistan, including specific guidance relating to access to financial services?

Answer. As of September 24, OFAC issued two general licenses to support the continued flow of humanitarian assistance and other activities that support basic human needs in Afghanistan, including critical food and medicine. OFAC also issued a specific license authorizing transactions necessary for U.S. Government implementers of humanitarian assistance. These actions authorize the U.S. Government, certain international organizations (including the U.N. and its specialized agencies such as the World Bank), NGOs, and those acting on their behalf, to continue to engage in transactions that are ordinarily incident or necessary to the provision of humanitarian assistance and other activities that support basic human needs in Afghanistan. This follows past precedent in which the United States has taken steps to address urgent humanitarian needs in areas where sanctioned individuals and entities are active.

Question. In the aftermath of the Taliban’s takeover of Kabul, the United States, alongside other international donors announced a suspensions in assistance to Afghanistan. Western powers maintain that a resumption of aid is contingent upon assurances from the Taliban that it will respect human rights, and in particular the rights of women and girls. Despite the Taliban’s efforts to portray a more liberal face, its actions suggest we are headed toward a style of rule similar to that which dominated the 1990s, when women were banished from public life, media was strict-

ly controlled, and all forms of entertainment banned. Already, since taking power, there have been widespread reports of Taliban fighters violently assaulting peaceful protestors and arbitrarily detaining journalists, in addition to imposing restrictions on the rights of Afghan women. Given the Taliban's proven record of serious human rights abuses, do you intend to hold the Taliban accountable? How?

Answer. The legitimacy and support the Taliban seek from the international community will depend on their adherence to their commitments on preventing terrorist groups from posing a threat to the United States from Afghanistan and on protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms for all Afghans, allowing freedom of passage for American citizens, third country nationals and Afghans with the proper documentation that desire to leave, allowing unimpeded humanitarian access, and forming an inclusive government. The United States maintains a wide range of tools to ensure the Taliban upholds these commitments, including diplomatic engagement, economic and financial sanctions, and economic assistance.

Question. Will the Taliban's human rights record be factored into any decision to diplomatically recognize a Taliban-led Government?

Answer. The United States has a longstanding policy, albeit with several exceptions over the years, to avoid formal statements on recognition in cases of changes of governments. Our policy has not changed. Our focus in Afghanistan is on whether any Afghan Government is one we and the international community can work with. We will continue to engage the Taliban to advance our interests in Afghanistan, but they have a long path to legitimacy and will be judged by their actions, including actions to prevent terrorist groups from posing a threat to the United States from Afghanistan, uphold human rights and fundamental freedoms for all Afghans, allow freedom of passage, allow unimpeded humanitarian access, and form an inclusive government.

Question. What type of relationship do you envision the United States having with the Taliban if they continue to perpetrate widespread human rights violations? What would this mean for the future of U.S. assistance to Afghanistan?

Answer. Our focus in Afghanistan is on whether any Afghan Government is one we and the international community can work with. As we have consistently said, we are prepared to engage on a practical, pragmatic basis with the Taliban on issues of core U.S. national interests, including safe passage and counterterrorism. The legitimacy and recognition that the Taliban seek from the international community will depend on their conduct in areas that include, among other things, countering threats of terrorism, respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms for all Afghans and refraining from carrying out reprisals. Their actions, not their words, will factor into whether and how we decide to provide continued non-humanitarian assistance. The United States is committed to providing lifesaving humanitarian assistance for Afghans in need.

Question. In a Question for the Record I submitted to you after your confirmation hearing on January 19, 2021, I asked, "In addition to vital counterterrorism interests, U.S. efforts in Afghanistan have dramatically improved conditions for women, minority and youth. How would your State Department safeguard the gains made for Afghan women, minority and youth?" You responded, "Women, girls, and minority groups in Afghanistan have made extraordinary gains over the past 20 years, and protecting those gains will be a high priority in the Biden-Harris administration. For a peace agreement between the Afghan Government and the Taliban to be durable and just, it must account for the rights of women, girls, and minority groups." Obviously, that "durable and just" peace agreement never materialized and, immediately upon seizing power, the Taliban began rolling-back the hard-fought gains of women and girls over the past two decades.

Answer. We have consistently been clear that the future of Afghanistan is for Afghans themselves to decide but that our future political relationship will be shaped by their actions, especially with respect to the rights of women and girls. As we continue to engage the Taliban on issues of vital national interest, we have made clear that the international community is watching closely. We continue to press the Taliban to respect the rights of all Afghans, including women, girls, and members of minority groups.

Question. Zabihullah Mujahid, a Taliban spokesperson, has said the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan will be respected "in accordance with the respect of the principles of Islam" and "within the margins that we have." What does this mean?

Answer. We are deeply concerned about the Taliban's restrictions with respect to the human rights and fundamental freedoms for women and girls. We will monitor

closely how any government respects the human rights and fundamental freedoms that have been recognized as an integral part of the life of women and girls in Afghanistan during the last 20 years.

Question. Have the Taliban’s verbal commitments to respect the rights of women and girls “within the margins” provided the Administration with assurances that the Taliban’s rule will be “durable and just” in regards to women?

Answer. 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 all Afghans, including women and girls. As seen in the joint statement issued by the United States and more than 60 other countries at the U.N. Human Rights Council in August, the international community is deeply worried about Afghan women and girls, particularly their rights to education, work, freedom of movement, and peaceful assembly. 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, health care, and employment.

Question. How will you protect the gains of the past 20 years as “a high priority for the Biden-Harris administration” under Taliban rule?

Answer. The Taliban can only earn legitimacy gradually through a sustained pattern of action that demonstrates a genuine commitment to core expectations, such as respect for the human rights of all Afghans, including women and girls. We are working with the international community to remain unified in holding the Taliban accountable for these expectations. In our communications to the Taliban, we have been clear that the international community is watching closely, and that any future relationship will be shaped by the Taliban’s own actions. We have stressed that legitimacy cannot be earned quickly or by words alone; it must be demonstrated through concrete action.

Question. Women in Afghanistan made great progress over the last 20 years, but due to the erratic U.S. military withdrawal and subsequent diplomatic evacuation, now face an untenable future. Women will be segregated in schools and forced to cease activities they previously enjoyed. This is a monstrous step backwards. How do you respond to criticism that the United States turned its back on Afghan women and children? Did our withdrawal create an environment that will set Afghan women back even farther?

Answer. We stand by our ongoing commitment to supporting the aspirations of Afghan women and girls, and we are encouraged that our bilateral and multilateral partners stand with us and do the same. We will continue to closely monitor how any government in Afghanistan respects the human rights and freedoms that have become an integral part of the life of women and girls in Afghanistan during the last 20 years. We remain committed to providing robust humanitarian assistance, which provides vulnerable Afghans with critically needed food, health care, nutrition, medical supplies, hygiene supplies, and other urgently needed relief. It also addresses the protection concerns of women, children, and minorities.

Question. How do you plan to continue to promote women and girls’ rights in Afghanistan without a U.S. diplomatic presence on the ground?

Answer. We are committed to use every tool at our disposal—through our diplomacy and humanitarian efforts—to support, in coordination with many other countries, women, girls, and minorities in Afghanistan. Embassy Kabul’s operations have been transitioned to Doha and, together with the Special Representative for Afghanistan, these entities communicate to the Taliban on issues of vital national interest. Given the important and complex nature of coordinate support for the rights of Afghan women and girls, the Secretary will be naming a Senior Official for Afghan Women and Girls at the State Department to focus entirely on the ongoing effort both from the United States Government and in coordination with other countries.

Question. Throughout the period before final withdrawal, non-governmental organizations including the Committee to Protect Journalists regularly shared with various State Department entities lists of at-risk journalists and Afghans who needed evacuation from the country including their biographical and contact information. How many of these individuals were contacted by the State Department?

Answer. The evacuation and relocation effort has been a monumental task and the U.S. Government understands the need to coordinate across agencies, as we have done. 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 across the interagency and with other partners to facilitate freedom of movement for those who wish to leave Afghanistan, including U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents, our Afghans allies and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans. The initial priority was and is on supporting departures of U.S. citizens and LPRs and their immediate families. We are also facilitating the ongoing departure of Afghans who worked with and for the U.S. Government and Special Immigrant Visa holders. We are not in a position to detail our involvement with any specific groups at this time.

Question. Was this list ever shared with other governments who offered to help?

Answer. 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 with other partners to facilitate freedom of movement for those who wish to leave Afghanistan, including U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs), our Afghans allies and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans. The initial priority was and is on supporting departures of U.S. citizens and LPRs, and their immediate families. We are also facilitating the ongoing departure of Afghans who worked with and for the U.S. Government, and Special Immigrant Visa holders. We are not in a position to detail our involvement with any specific groups at this time.

Question. How many of these individuals were evacuated by the United States?

Answer. During operations in Afghanistan in August 2021, the U.S. Government 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.

Question. Given the Taliban's lack of adherence to fundamental human rights, like the freedom of religion, what dangers remain for religious minorities, including Christians, Hazara Shia Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs?

Answer. We have seen reports of harassment and violence targeted against members of religious minority groups. As the State Department's 2020 Religious Freedom Report stated, both the Taliban and ISIS-K, an affiliate of ISIS and a U.S.-designated terrorist organization, targeted and killed members of minority religious communities and individuals because of their religious beliefs. We have no reason to believe these dangers have decreased; we will judge the Taliban by their actions, not their words.

Question. The United States evacuated Afghan nationals to various military bases around the world, including some in the continental United States. How long will refugees be housed on U.S. Bases?

Answer. Individuals relocated from Afghanistan were temporarily hosted at military bases outside the United States. Over 50,000 moved on to the United States before a measles outbreak required a vaccination campaign. Because the MMR (measles, mumps, and rubella) vaccine requires 21 days post vaccination to become fully effective, the Centers for Disease Control ordered a 21-day post vaccination hold for all individuals relocated from Afghanistan to U.S. military bases, both in the United States and outside the United States. During that period, other resettlement processes continued for those already on the U.S. safe haven bases. As travelers complete the conditions established for their parole, the Department is coordinating with the International Organization for Migration, the Department of Health and Human Services, and Department of Defense to resettle individuals relocated from Afghanistan to their final destinations as quickly as possible within limits of local resettlement agency capacities. Those on bases overseas are being moved to the United States as soon as possible to complete their processing.

Question. Has the United States entered into any agreements with foreign governments to host Afghan nationals?

Answer. Partners around the globe have been instrumental in the process of relocating Afghan nationals, as well as U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents, and personnel from partner nations. Many countries have transited Afghans through their territories and many other countries made generous offers of support. Many countries have committed to permanently resettle Afghans.

Question. What percentage of those evacuated to the United States were admitted on parole alone? To what benefits will humanitarian parolees in the United States have access? What about those on U.S. bases overseas?

Answer. The decision on an individual's status in the United States, including whether they are paroled into the United States or admitted as a U.S. citizen, Lawful Permanent Resident (LPR), Special Immigrant (SI), or other category, including Afghans who were relocated from overseas as a part of Operation Allies Welcome (OAW), resides with the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services and Customs and Border Protection. 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 OAW. The individuals at safe havens overseas still waiting to travel to the United States are being fully supported, including with MMR and varicella vaccines, prior to transport to the United States.

Question. What vetting procedures are in place to move refugees and their families expeditiously?

Answer. 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. What happens to refugees if they fail vetting procedures at any step of the process?

Answer. The Department of Homeland Security has the lead on the screening and vetting requirements for all applicants for admission to the United States. Please contact DHS for more information.

Question. What entails "failing"?

Answer. The Department of Homeland Security has the lead on the screening and vetting requirements for all applicants for admission to the United States. Please contact DHS for more information.

Question. Under what authorities and with what funding are State/USAID operating the refugee intake centers at the Dulles Expo Center and in Philadelphia? What other agencies are contributing funding?

Answer. The Department of State provided support for individuals relocated from Afghanistan at the Dulles Expo Center under section 2(c)(1) of the Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1962 (MRAA) (22 U.S.C. 2601(c)(1)), which authorizes the President, when he determines it to be important to the national interest, to furnish assistance to meet unexpected urgent refugee and migration needs, and establishes the Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance (ERMA) Fund to carry out these purposes. The intake center at Philadelphia is operated by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), as lead agency for Operation Allies Welcome. State is providing funding for services to individuals relocated from Afghanistan at the Philadelphia intake center, including interpreters, [certain] medical care, and meals, under section 2(c) of the MRAA and Presidential determinations identified above. Other agencies supporting this effort including USAID, DoD, DHS, HHS, and Peace Corps are also relying on funding and authorities that may be available to these agencies for this purpose, including, as necessary, the drawdown directed under section 506(a)(2) of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961.

Question. Why were State and USAID, who do not handle domestic immigration or law enforcement, in charge of a domestic intake facility for Afghans attempting to immigrate to the United States as refugees or visa holders?

Answer. The August 2021 relocation of individuals from Afghanistan required a comprehensive government approach involving a coordinated interagency effort. Individuals who arrived at the Dulles Expo Center had already been admitted to the United States by Customs and Border Protection Officers at Dulles Airport in accordance with U.S. immigration laws. Department of State, with support from USAID, with local staffing in the area, were able to quickly stand up the Dulles Expo center, with 24/7 staffing levels to meet the demands of the thousands of Af-

ghans who needed to be onward processed to domestic military safe havens for additional resettlement processing.

Question. When did the Department start keeping track of Afghans who left the Dulles facility upon arrival? How many Afghans are believed to have left the Dulles facility without authorization? How long did it take the Department to clarify the guidance governing whether Afghans were free to leave the facility or not?

Answer. The Department of Homeland Security's Customs and Border Protection establishes conditions of parole and I refer you to it for full information in this regard.

Question. Did the Department possess sufficient biometric equipment to collect the samples necessary for vetting the Afghans transiting through the ports of entry in Dulles and Philadelphia? If not, what steps were taken to rectify the situation and ensure sufficient data was collected for vetting?

Answer. I refer you to the Department of Homeland Security for more information on biometric data collection required for vetting and admittance into the United States.

Question. Approximately how many of the Afghans processed through Dulles/Philadelphia have no identifiable connection to the U.S. Government?

Answer. Many individuals were admitted to the United States under humanitarian parole but may have been in the processing stage for a Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) or been employed by the U.S. Government but not yet qualified for an SIV. We estimate that 40–50 percent of evacuees are potentially eligible to apply for the SIV program. Additionally, some individuals may have a U.S. tie as the family member of a U.S. citizen or Lawful Permanent Resident. DHS, as the lead agency for Operation Allies Welcome, in coordination with the Department of Defense at eight locations throughout the United States, continues to document individuals relocated from Afghanistan.

Question. What documentation providing proof of identity did the Department deem was sufficient for Afghan refugees transiting into the United States?

Answer. I refer you to the Department of Homeland Security for more information on identity requirements for admittance into the United States.

Question. Without a resumption in international assistance—which previously accounted for around 40 percent of GDP—Afghanistan will face further economic instability. As long as Afghanistan's economy continues to deteriorate, humanitarian needs will remain high and new waves of refugees will seek refugee outside the country. How do you plan to work with USAID to address these needs, barring a full-scale resumption in U.S. assistance? How do you expect third countries to respond to fresh waves of Afghan refugees?

Answer. The U.S. Government is committed to providing humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people directly through the United Nations and NGO partners. The United States remains the single largest humanitarian donor to the Afghan response and provided nearly \$330 million in humanitarian assistance in fiscal year 2021. Immediate priorities are the safety and security of our partners; ensuring aid is delivered in accordance with internationally recognized humanitarian principles; and responsibly scaling up humanitarian assistance. State and USAID are monitoring the situation very closely, staying in daily contact with our partners, and assessing and adjusting to meet these priorities. We are also working closely with the international community to respond to the humanitarian crisis and worsening economic crisis.

Question. The hasty U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, and its failure to provide adequate safeguards for thousands of at risk Afghans, has bolstered the position of our adversaries, including Iran. With the arrival of fresh waves of Afghan refugees, how do you anticipate this will impact Iran's Fatemiyoun Brigade, and specifically its ability to undermine U.S. national security interests both in Afghanistan and beyond?

Answer. Iran has for years recruited Afghan Shia militants from within Afghanistan and from among Afghan emigres to Iran to fight on its behalf in Syria in so-called "Fatemiyoun Brigades." Iran will likely continue this practice in an attempt to avoid committing its own troops in Syria and potentially engage in similar practices in Afghanistan. The Administration will remain vigilant to developments in this regard and is committed to countering any Iranian threat to our forces, personnel, and vital interests with all appropriate means.

Regarding the issue of refugees, our priority is the safety and welfare of refugees and other individuals at risk as a result of the situation in Afghanistan. We are working within the United Nations and other international organizations to ensure the safety and welfare of refugees and other individuals at risk. We expect all states to uphold their obligations under international law, including applicable human rights and refugee law obligations, and to respect the principle of non-refoulement.

Question. Please elaborate on the Department's plans for the maintaining a diplomatic presence as relates to Afghanistan. Will the decision to re-establish a presence in Kabul be contingent upon diplomatic recognition of the Taliban?

Answer. The U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan suspended operations on August 31, 2021. For the time being, the U.S. Government is managing our diplomacy with 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.

Question. What, if any, other factors will be considered?

Answer. Resuming operations at U.S. Embassy Kabul will be subject to Congressional notification procedures and Department planning processes. The decision-making process will consider a variety of factors to include, but not limited to foreign policy priorities; representation maintained by other governments in the locality; and security requirements and policies necessary to mitigate identified threats, including to but not limited to those stemming from terrorism, political violence, crime, and Afghanistan's ability to provide security in accordance with its international obligations.

Question. Can you commit to consulting with the Chair and Ranking Member before finalizing any decision to establish a U.S. presence in Kabul?

Answer. Yes, the Department will work with Congress and comply with applicable laws on any resumption of operations at Embassy Kabul.

Question. How does the Department plan to uphold U.S. policy priorities in the absence of a formal presence?

Answer. We continue to communicate with the Taliban on a pragmatic, operational basis on our vital national interests. We have moved our diplomatic operations from Kabul to Doha, where our new Afghan affairs team is hard at work. We continue to facilitate departures for U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents, our Afghans allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans, if they choose to depart. We are focused on monitoring and mitigating the threat of terrorist activity emanating from Afghanistan and we will hold the Taliban to its commitment to prevent any group or individual from using the territory of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States or that of our allies. We also continue to support humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people and continue to press the Taliban to respect the rights of all Afghans, including women and girls, and to form an inclusive government with broad support.

Question. What are the Department of State's priorities as relates to Afghanistan?

Answer. First, the Department has continued its relentless effort to help any remaining U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents, our Afghans allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans, leave Afghanistan if they so choose. Second, 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 or our allies. Third, we will continue to support humanitarian assistance to the Afghanistan people. Fourth, we continue to press the Taliban to respect the rights of all Afghans, including women and girls, and to form an inclusive government with broad support.

Question. Where do human rights and counterterrorism fall on the spectrum?

Answer. The United States is committed to respect for human rights in all countries. We are deeply concerned about restrictions limiting women's participation in public life, including access to education, employment, and freedom of movement, and continue to press the Taliban to uphold the rights of all Afghans. We are disappointed in the composition of the interim "caretaker" cabinet announced by the Taliban which does not include women and only minimal numbers of members of minority groups.

Question. How do you plan to operationalize these objectives?

Answer. In all our communications to the Taliban, we have made clear that its relationship with the international community will be shaped by its own actions, including on counterterrorism, safe passage, unhindered humanitarian access, and respect for the human rights of all Afghans. We work closely with international partners to maintain unity in our approach and to make clear that any legitimacy, which the Taliban assert they want, will have to be earned through sustained action on these priorities. Mere assurances are not enough. We have made clear to the Taliban that the international community is watching closely.

On counterterrorism, we are coordinating closely with the Department of Defense, partners, and allies to retain and continue to build our counterterrorism capabilities to prevent, detect, and disrupt terrorist threats.

Question. Based on the State Department's most recent report to Congress on Chief of Mission staffing levels in Afghanistan (transmitted on July 13, 2021), there were 645 locally employed staff (LES) members working for the United States in Afghanistan. However, it was recently announced that the Department had evacuated 2,800 LES members from Afghanistan. Can you confirm all U.S. Embassy Kabul staff, including locally employed staff and their families, were safely evacuated? If not, why not and what plans are in place to ensure they are able to depart Afghanistan? Can you explain the discrepancy between these two numbers? Do the 2,800 evacuees include formerly employed LES members?

Answer. During the evacuation and relocation operations in August, locally employed staff members working for the United States in Afghanistan were evacuated with eligible family members. The figures noted represent the number of locally employed staff and the total number of people (i.e., locally employed staff and their eligible family members) who were safely evacuated.

Question. What is the total number of Afghans who have worked under U.S. Chief of Mission authority in Afghanistan (both currently and formerly employed)?

Answer. The number of Afghans who have been employed by Embassy Kabul and worked under U.S. Chief of Mission authority is estimated to be approximately 14,000 in the years since Embassy Kabul was re-established in 2001.

Question. How many of those individuals have been evacuated from Afghanistan?

Answer. At the time of the August 2021 evacuation of Embassy Kabul, there were 689 locally employed staff on the Embassy rolls. Sixteen of the Embassy locally employed staff remain in Kabul. Five declined to evacuate and remained in Kabul by choice and 11 were unable to travel on August 30, of which 7 have requested assistance to depart Afghanistan.

Question. How many of those individuals have successfully acquired SIV status? How many are still in the application stages?

Answer. The Department is currently assessing how many Afghans who were relocated had outstanding Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applications. Many of the Afghans relocated had submitted an SIV application that was moving through the multi-stage SIV process. Others had not yet begun the process or were in the first stages. The number of SIV applications in the pipeline changes daily as new applications are filed and others completed. We defer to the Department of Homeland Security on any questions regarding admission categories and adjustment of status.

Question. Is the United States considering recognizing any government of Afghanistan that is under the direction or control of the Taliban or members of the Taliban? If so, what conditions would need to be met before the United States gave such recognition?

Answer. As a general matter there is no requirement under international law to make a formal statement on recognition of governments. Our focus in Afghanistan is on whether any Afghan Government is one we and the international community can work with. We have also made clear, as have our international partners, that any steps toward legitimacy and recognition must be earned. Assurances alone are not enough.

Question. Who is the rightful leader of the Government of Afghanistan?

Answer. Our focus in Afghanistan is on whether any Afghan Government is one we and the international community can work with. We continue to press the Taliban and Afghan leaders to form an inclusive government that respects the rights and dignity of all Afghans.

Question. How many members of the Taliban are currently subject to U.N. sanctions?

Answer. There are 135 individuals and five entities associated with the Taliban that are currently designated under the UNSC's 1988 (2011) Taliban sanctions regime.

Question. How many members of the Taliban are currently subject to United States sanctions?

Answer. The Taliban organization was designated as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist by President George W. Bush in July 2002 upon issuance of E.O. 13268, which amended E.O. 13224 by adding the Taliban to the annex of certain designated individuals and entities. We defer to the Department of the Treasury on specifics regarding numbers of individuals and entities designated.

Question. Has the United States Government, any of its agencies, or any of its employees or agents (including contractors or any other persons working on behalf of the United States) given or donated any money or anything else of value to the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, or any member of the Taliban or Haqqani Network since April 14, 2021? If so, please specify the amounts of money or other items of value, the persons who provided the money or items of value, and the recipients of the money or items of value.

Answer. The Taliban is a Specially Designated Global Terrorist Entity, and the Haqqani Network is a designated Foreign Terrorist Organization and a Specially Designated Global Terrorist Entity. We have accounted and will account for that, ensuring that all our actions are consistent with U.S. law and policy.

Question. Is the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, or any member of the Taliban or Haqqani Network requesting any payments of money or other items of value in exchange for permitting U.S. citizens, U.S. permanent legal residents, or SIV applicants to leave Afghanistan?

Answer. The Taliban is a Specially Designated Global Terrorist Entity, and the Haqqani Network is a designated Foreign Terrorist Organization and a Specially Designated Global Terrorist Entity. We have accounted and will continue to account for that, ensuring that all our actions are consistent with U.S. law and policy.

Question. In your testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on September 14, 2021, you indicated, as a result of the February 29 Agreement brokered by the Trump administration, President Biden "faced the choice between ending the war or escalating it." Were any other options available that would have allowed the United States and its NATO allies to maintain existing levels of support to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces?

Answer. As I testified, the choice confronting President Biden was either to go forward with the commitments his predecessor had made to withdraw forces by May 1, or escalate, not end, the war with the Taliban. After the signing of the Doha Agreement, the Taliban refrained from any direct attack on U.S. and international forces. Had we maintained a military presence indefinitely, the Taliban made clear they would have resumed attacks against U.S. and NATO troops. We did not believe there was a middle ground where we could safely maintain the same number of troops.

Question. Did military commanders on the ground indicate that they could adequately protect U.S. counterterrorism interest, prevent the collapse of the government, and protect Americans from Taliban and IS-K attacks?

Answer. I defer questions about military assessments, planning, and preparedness to the Department of Defense.

Question. What is the current status of Afghan military aircraft and personnel that fled to Uzbekistan?

Answer. Following relocation of all 494 Afghan military servicemembers and their families out of Termez, Uzbekistan, to the UAE on September 13, these individuals are in the pipeline for further processing. Embassy Tashkent sought and has received assurances from the Government of Uzbekistan that the aircraft will not be returned to Afghanistan and Taliban control. The 46 air frames remain under the control of Uzbekistan. State defers to the Department of Defense on additional details regarding the status of Afghanistan aircraft currently located outside of Afghanistan.

Question. Are there any concerns that the Government of Uzbekistan will actively allow the Russian Federation or People's Republic of China to gain access to the U.S.-origin military equipment, communications gear, or other sensitive technologies that escaping Afghan military personnel brought to Uzbekistan?

Answer. The Department of State shares Congress' interest in ensuring that the U.S. military equipment that the Department of Defense (DoD) procured using the Afghanistan Security Forces Fund and transferred to the former Afghan National Defense and Security Forces do not fall into the wrong hands. The Department defers all risk assessments related to this military equipment to the DoD.

Question. Are there concerns that the Government of Uzbekistan is unable to properly guard this equipment until it can be retrieved?

Answer. Embassy Tashkent submitted a diplomatic note to Uzbekistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs that affirmed U.S. responsibility for the aircraft that arrived in Uzbekistan in August via the Afghan Air Force. The diplomatic note further requested that the Government of Uzbekistan safeguard the aircraft, associated equipment and parts, and associated technical information; limit access to only officials of Uzbekistan and the U.S.; not operate the aircraft; and not transfer the aircraft, associated equipment, or technical information and data. Senior Government of Uzbekistan officials have confirmed that they will honor this U.S. request and have granted Embassy Tashkent officers access to inspect the aircraft.

Question. Do you believe that the Government of Uzbekistan will return this equipment to Afghanistan and the Taliban?

Answer. No. Senior Department officials have formally asked the Government of Uzbekistan not to return these aircraft to the Taliban. The Department has received high-level assurances that Uzbekistan will honor this request.

Question. Did the United States inform NATO of its decision to begin a non-combatant evacuation operation (NEO) of U.S. citizens and at-risk Afghans, before announcing and undertaking that action on August 14, 2021? If yes, to whom within the NATO command and leadership did the United States communicate its intentions to initiate the NEO, and when and on what date?

Answer. Senior Department officials as well as embassies around the world were in close contact with our partners and allies prior to, throughout, and after the non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) in August. The Department of State redoubled its efforts to consult with international partners to inform counterparts of our series of ordered departures, beginning on April 27. USNATO briefed Allies August 12, and at several North Atlantic Council and committee meetings over the following days and weeks, on the U.S. drawdown and evacuations. Beginning on August 22, Deputy Secretary Sherman began a series of calls with partners and allies to discuss the NEO and U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

Question. Did the United States inform Albania of its decision to begin an NEO of U.S. citizens and at-risk Afghans, before announcing and undertaking that action on August 14, 2021? If yes, to whom within the Government of Albania did the United States communicate its intentions to initiate the NEO, and when and on what date?

Answer. Senior Department officials as well as embassies around the world were in close contact with our partners and allies prior to, throughout, and after the non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) in August. The Department of State redoubled its efforts to consult with international partners to inform counterparts of our series of ordered departures, beginning on April 27. USNATO briefed Allies August 12, and at several North Atlantic Council and committee meetings over the following days and weeks, on the U.S. drawdown and evacuations. Beginning on August 22, Deputy Secretary Sherman began a series of calls with partners and allies to discuss the NEO and U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

Question. Did the United States inform Belgium of its decision to begin an NEO of U.S. citizens and at-risk Afghans, before announcing and undertaking that action on August 14, 2021? If yes, to whom within the Government of Belgium did the United States communicate its intentions to initiate the NEO, and when and on what date?

Answer. Senior Department officials as well as embassies around the world were in close contact with our partners and allies prior to, throughout, and after the non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) in August. The Department of State redoubled its efforts to consult with international partners to inform counterparts of our series of ordered departures, beginning on April 27. USNATO briefed Allies August 12, and at several North Atlantic Council and committee meetings over the following days and weeks, on the U.S. drawdown and evacuations. Beginning on August 22, Deputy Secretary Sherman began a series of calls with partners and allies to discuss the NEO and U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

Question. Did the United States inform Bulgaria of its decision to begin an NEO of U.S. citizens and at-risk Afghans, before announcing and undertaking that action on August 14, 2021? If yes, to whom within the Government of Bulgaria did the United States communicate its intentions to initiate the NEO, and when and on what date?

Answer. Senior Department officials as well as embassies around the world were in close contact with our partners and allies prior to, throughout, and after the non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) in August. The Department of State redoubled its efforts to consult with international partners to inform counterparts of our series of ordered departures, beginning on April 27. USNATO briefed Allies August 12, and at several North Atlantic Council and committee meetings over the following days and weeks, on the U.S. drawdown and evacuations. Beginning on August 22, Deputy Secretary Sherman began a series of calls with partners and allies to discuss the NEO and U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

Question. Did the United States inform Canada of its decision to begin an NEO of U.S. citizens and at-risk Afghans, before announcing and undertaking that action on August 14, 2021? If yes, to whom within the Government of Canada did the United States communicate its intentions to initiate the NEO, and when and on what date?

Answer. Senior Department officials as well as embassies around the world were in close contact with our partners and allies prior to, throughout, and after the non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) in August. The Department of State redoubled its efforts to consult with international partners to inform counterparts of our series of ordered departures, beginning on April 27. USNATO briefed Allies August 12, and at several North Atlantic Council and committee meetings over the following days and weeks, on the U.S. drawdown and evacuations. Beginning on August 22, Deputy Secretary Sherman began a series of calls with partners and allies to discuss the NEO and U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

Question. Did the United States inform Croatia of its decision to begin an NEO of U.S. citizens and at-risk Afghans, before announcing and undertaking that action on August 14, 2021? If yes, to whom within the Government of Croatia did the United States communicate its intentions to initiate the NEO, and when and on what date?

Answer. Senior Department officials as well as embassies around the world were in close contact with our partners and allies prior to, throughout, and after the non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) in August. The Department of State redoubled its efforts to consult with international partners to inform counterparts of our series of ordered departures, beginning on April 27. USNATO briefed Allies August 12, and at several North Atlantic Council and committee meetings over the following days and weeks, on the U.S. drawdown and evacuations. Beginning on August 22, Deputy Secretary Sherman began a series of calls with partners and allies to discuss the NEO and U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

Question. Did the United States inform the Czech Republic of its decision to begin an NEO of U.S. citizens and at-risk Afghans, before announcing and undertaking that action on August 14, 2021? If yes, to whom within the Government of the Czech Republic did the United States communicate its intentions to initiate the NEO, and when and on what date?

Answer. Senior Department officials as well as embassies around the world were in close contact with our partners and allies prior to, throughout, and after the non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) in August. The Department of State redoubled its efforts to consult with international partners to inform counterparts of our series of ordered departures, beginning on April 27. USNATO briefed Allies August 12, and at several North Atlantic Council and committee meetings over the following days and weeks, on the U.S. drawdown and evacuations. Beginning on August 22, Deputy Secretary Sherman began a series of calls with partners and allies to discuss the NEO and U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

Question. Did the United States inform Denmark of its decision to begin an NEO of U.S. citizens and at-risk Afghans, before announcing and undertaking that action on August 14, 2021? If yes, to whom within the Government of Denmark did the United States communicate its intentions to initiate the NEO, and when and on what date?

Answer. Senior Department officials as well as embassies around the world were in close contact with our partners and allies prior to, throughout, and after the non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) in August. The Department of State redoubled its efforts to consult with international partners to inform counterparts of our

series of ordered departures, beginning on April 27. USNATO briefed Allies August 12, and at several North Atlantic Council and committee meetings over the following days and weeks, on the U.S. drawdown and evacuations. Beginning on August 22, Deputy Secretary Sherman began a series of calls with partners and allies to discuss the NEO and U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

Question. Did the United States inform Estonia of its decision to begin an NEO of U.S. citizens and at-risk Afghans, before announcing and undertaking that action on August 14, 2021? If yes, to whom within the Government of Canada did the United States communicate its intentions to initiate the NEO, and when and on what date?

Answer. Senior Department officials as well as embassies around the world were in close contact with our partners and allies prior to, throughout, and after the non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) in August. The Department of State redoubled its efforts to consult with international partners to inform counterparts of our series of ordered departures, beginning on April 27. USNATO briefed Allies August 12, and at several North Atlantic Council and committee meetings over the following days and weeks, on the U.S. drawdown and evacuations. Beginning on August 22, Deputy Secretary Sherman began a series of calls with partners and allies to discuss the NEO and U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

Question. Did the United States inform France of its decision to begin an NEO of U.S. citizens and at-risk Afghans, before announcing and undertaking that action on August 14, 2021? If yes, to whom within the Government of France did the United States communicate its intentions to initiate the NEO, and when and on what date?

Answer. Senior Department officials as well as embassies around the world were in close contact with our partners and allies prior to, throughout, and after the non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) in August. The Department of State redoubled its efforts to consult with international partners to inform counterparts of our series of ordered departures, beginning on April 27. USNATO briefed Allies August 12, and at several North Atlantic Council and committee meetings over the following days and weeks, on the U.S. drawdown and evacuations. Beginning on August 22, Deputy Secretary Sherman began a series of calls with partners and allies to discuss the NEO and U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

Question. Did the United States inform Germany of its decision to begin an NEO of U.S. citizens and at-risk Afghans, before announcing and undertaking that action on August 14, 2021? If yes, to whom within the Government of Germany did the United States communicate its intentions to initiate the NEO, and when and on what date?

Answer. Senior Department officials as well as embassies around the world were in close contact with our partners and allies prior to, throughout, and after the non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) in August. The Department of State redoubled its efforts to consult with international partners to inform counterparts of our series of ordered departures, beginning on April 27. USNATO briefed Allies August 12, and at several North Atlantic Council and committee meetings over the following days and weeks, on the U.S. drawdown and evacuations. Beginning on August 22, Deputy Secretary Sherman began a series of calls with partners and allies to discuss the NEO and U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

Question. Did the United States inform Greece of its decision to begin an NEO of U.S. citizens and at-risk Afghans, before announcing and undertaking that action on August 14, 2021? If yes, to whom within the Government of Greece did the United States communicate its intentions to initiate the NEO, and when and on what date?

Answer. Senior Department officials as well as embassies around the world were in close contact with our partners and allies prior to, throughout, and after the non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) in August. The Department of State redoubled its efforts to consult with international partners to inform counterparts of our series of ordered departures, beginning on April 27. USNATO briefed Allies August 12, and at several North Atlantic Council and committee meetings over the following days and weeks, on the U.S. drawdown and evacuations. Beginning on August 22, Deputy Secretary Sherman began a series of calls with partners and allies to discuss the NEO and U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

Question. Did the United States inform Hungary of its decision to begin an NEO of U.S. citizens and at-risk Afghans, before announcing and undertaking that action on August 14, 2021? If yes, to whom within the Government of Hungary did the

United States communicate its intentions to initiate the NEO, and when and on what date?

Answer. Senior Department officials as well as embassies around the world were in close contact with our partners and allies prior to, throughout, and after the non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) in August. The Department of State redoubled its efforts to consult with international partners to inform counterparts of our series of ordered departures, beginning on April 27. USNATO briefed Allies August 12, and at several North Atlantic Council and committee meetings over the following days and weeks, on the U.S. drawdown and evacuations. Beginning on August 22, Deputy Secretary Sherman began a series of calls with partners and allies to discuss the NEO and U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

Question. Did the United States inform Iceland of its decision to begin a NEO of U.S. citizens and at-risk Afghans, before announcing and undertaking that action on August 14, 2021? If yes, to whom within the Government of Italy did the United States communicate its intentions to initiate the NEO, and when and on what date?

Answer. Senior Department officials as well as embassies around the world were in close contact with our partners and allies prior to, throughout, and after the non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) in August. The Department of State redoubled its efforts to consult with international partners to inform counterparts of our series of ordered departures, beginning on April 27. USNATO briefed Allies August 12, and at several North Atlantic Council and committee meetings over the following days and weeks, on the U.S. drawdown and evacuations. Beginning on August 22, Deputy Secretary Sherman began a series of calls with partners and allies to discuss the NEO and U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

Question. Did the United States inform Italy of its decision to begin a NEO of U.S. citizens and at-risk Afghans, before announcing and undertaking that action on August 14, 2021? If yes, to whom within the Government of Italy did the United States communicate its intentions to initiate the NEO, and when and on what date?

Answer. Senior Department officials as well as embassies around the world were in close contact with our partners and allies prior to, throughout, and after the non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) in August. The Department of State redoubled its efforts to consult with international partners to inform counterparts of our series of ordered departures, beginning on April 27. USNATO briefed Allies August 12, and at several North Atlantic Council and committee meetings over the following days and weeks, on the U.S. drawdown and evacuations. Beginning on August 22, Deputy Secretary Sherman began a series of calls with partners and allies to discuss the NEO and U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

Question. Did the United States inform Latvia of its decision to begin a NEO of U.S. citizens and at-risk Afghans, before announcing and undertaking that action on August 14, 2021? If yes, to whom within the Government of Latvia did the United States communicate its intentions to initiate the NEO, and when and on what date?

Answer. Senior Department officials as well as embassies around the world were in close contact with our partners and allies prior to, throughout, and after the non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) in August. The Department of State redoubled its efforts to consult with international partners to inform counterparts of our series of ordered departures, beginning on April 27. USNATO briefed Allies August 12, and at several North Atlantic Council and committee meetings over the following days and weeks, on the U.S. drawdown and evacuations. Beginning on August 22, Deputy Secretary Sherman began a series of calls with partners and allies to discuss the NEO and U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

Question. Did the United States inform Lithuania of its decision to begin a NEO of U.S. citizens and at-risk Afghans, before announcing and undertaking that action on August 14, 2021? If yes, to whom within the Government of Lithuania did the United States communicate its intentions to initiate the NEO, and when and on what date?

Answer. Senior Department officials as well as embassies around the world were in close contact with our partners and allies prior to, throughout, and after the non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) in August. The Department of State redoubled its efforts to consult with international partners to inform counterparts of our series of ordered departures, beginning on April 27. USNATO briefed Allies August 12, and at several North Atlantic Council and committee meetings over the following days and weeks, on the U.S. drawdown and evacuations. Beginning on August 22, Deputy Secretary Sherman began a series of calls with partners and allies to discuss the NEO and U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

Question. Did the United States inform Luxembourg of its decision to begin an NEO of U.S. citizens and at-risk Afghans, before announcing and undertaking that action on August 14, 2021? If yes, to whom within the Government of Luxembourg did the United States communicate its intentions to initiate the NEO, and when and on what date?

Answer. Senior Department officials as well as embassies around the world were in close contact with our partners and allies prior to, throughout, and after the non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) in August. The Department of State redoubled its efforts to consult with international partners to inform counterparts of our series of ordered departures, beginning on April 27. USNATO briefed Allies August 12, and at several North Atlantic Council and committee meetings over the following days and weeks, on the U.S. drawdown and evacuations. Beginning on August 22, Deputy Secretary Sherman began a series of calls with partners and allies to discuss the NEO and U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

Question. Did the United States inform Montenegro of its decision to begin an NEO of U.S. citizens and at-risk Afghans, before announcing and undertaking that action on August 14, 2021? If yes, to whom within the Government of Montenegro did the United States communicate its intentions to initiate the NEO, and when and on what date?

Answer. Senior Department officials as well as embassies around the world were in close contact with our partners and allies prior to, throughout, and after the non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) in August. The Department of State redoubled its efforts to consult with international partners to inform counterparts of our series of ordered departures, beginning on April 27. USNATO briefed Allies August 12, and at several North Atlantic Council and committee meetings over the following days and weeks, on the U.S. drawdown and evacuations. Beginning on August 22, Deputy Secretary Sherman began a series of calls with partners and allies to discuss the NEO and U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

Question. Did the United States inform the Kingdom of the Netherlands of its decision to begin an NEO of U.S. citizens and at-risk Afghans, before announcing and undertaking that action on August 14, 2021? If yes, to whom within the Government of the Netherlands did the United States communicate its intentions to initiate the NEO, and when and on what date?

Answer. Senior Department officials as well as embassies around the world were in close contact with our partners and allies prior to, throughout, and after the non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) in August. The Department of State redoubled its efforts to consult with international partners to inform counterparts of our series of ordered departures, beginning on April 27. USNATO briefed Allies August 12, and at several North Atlantic Council and committee meetings over the following days and weeks, on the U.S. drawdown and evacuations. Beginning on August 22, Deputy Secretary Sherman began a series of calls with partners and allies to discuss the NEO and U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

Question. Did the United States inform North Macedonia of its decision to begin an NEO of U.S. citizens and at-risk Afghans, before announcing and undertaking that action on August 14, 2021? If yes, to whom within the Government of North Macedonia did the United States communicate its intentions to initiate the NEO, and when and on what date?

Answer. Senior Department officials as well as embassies around the world were in close contact with our partners and allies prior to, throughout, and after the non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) in August. The Department of State redoubled its efforts to consult with international partners to inform counterparts of our series of ordered departures, beginning on April 27. USNATO briefed Allies August 12, and at several North Atlantic Council and committee meetings over the following days and weeks, on the U.S. drawdown and evacuations. Beginning on August 22, Deputy Secretary Sherman began a series of calls with partners and allies to discuss the NEO and U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

Question. Did the United States inform Norway of its decision to begin an NEO of U.S. citizens and at-risk Afghans, before announcing and undertaking that action on August 14, 2021? If yes, to whom within the Government of Norway did the United States communicate its intentions to initiate the NEO, and when and on what date?

Answer. Senior Department officials as well as embassies around the world were in close contact with our partners and allies prior to, throughout, and after the non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) in August. The Department of State redoubled its efforts to consult with international partners to inform counterparts of our

series of ordered departures, beginning on April 27. USNATO briefed Allies August 12, and at several North Atlantic Council and committee meetings over the following days and weeks, on the U.S. drawdown and evacuations. Beginning on August 22, Deputy Secretary Sherman began a series of calls with partners and allies to discuss the NEO and U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

Question. Did the United States inform Poland of its decision to begin an NEO of U.S. citizens and at-risk Afghans, before announcing and undertaking that action on August 14, 2021? If yes, to whom within the Government of Poland did the United States communicate its intentions to initiate the NEO, and when and on what date?

Answer. Senior Department officials as well as embassies around the world were in close contact with our partners and allies prior to, throughout, and after the non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) in August. The Department of State redoubled its efforts to consult with international partners to inform counterparts of our series of ordered departures, beginning on April 27. USNATO briefed Allies August 12, and at several North Atlantic Council and committee meetings over the following days and weeks, on the U.S. drawdown and evacuations. Beginning on August 22, Deputy Secretary Sherman began a series of calls with partners and allies to discuss the NEO and U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

Question. Did the United States inform Portugal of its decision to begin an NEO of U.S. citizens and at-risk Afghans, before announcing and undertaking that action on August 14, 2021? If yes, to whom within the Government of Portugal did the United States communicate its intentions to initiate the NEO, and when and on what date?

Answer. Senior Department officials as well as embassies around the world were in close contact with our partners and allies prior to, throughout, and after the non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) in August. The Department of State redoubled its efforts to consult with international partners to inform counterparts of our series of ordered departures, beginning on April 27. USNATO briefed Allies August 12, and at several North Atlantic Council and committee meetings over the following days and weeks, on the U.S. drawdown and evacuations. Beginning on August 22, Deputy Secretary Sherman began a series of calls with partners and allies to discuss the NEO and U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

Question. Did the United States inform Romania of its decision to begin an NEO of U.S. citizens and at-risk Afghans, before announcing and undertaking that action on August 14, 2021? If yes, to whom within the Government of Romania did the United States communicate its intentions to initiate the NEO, and when and on what date?

Answer. Senior Department officials as well as embassies around the world were in close contact with our partners and allies prior to, throughout, and after the non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) in August. The Department of State redoubled its efforts to consult with international partners to inform counterparts of our series of ordered departures, beginning on April 27. USNATO briefed Allies August 12, and at several North Atlantic Council and committee meetings over the following days and weeks, on the U.S. drawdown and evacuations. Beginning on August 22, Deputy Secretary Sherman began a series of calls with partners and allies to discuss the NEO and U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

Question. Did the United States inform Slovakia of its decision to begin an NEO of U.S. citizens and at-risk Afghans, before announcing and undertaking that action on August 14, 2021? If yes, to whom within the Government of Slovakia did the United States communicate its intentions to initiate the NEO, and when and on what date?

Answer. Senior Department officials as well as embassies around the world were in close contact with our partners and allies prior to, throughout, and after the non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) in August. The Department of State redoubled its efforts to consult with international partners to inform counterparts of our series of ordered departures, beginning on April 27. USNATO briefed Allies August 12, and at several North Atlantic Council and committee meetings over the following days and weeks, on the U.S. drawdown and evacuations. Beginning on August 22, Deputy Secretary Sherman began a series of calls with partners and allies to discuss the NEO and U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

Question. Did the United States inform Slovenia of its decision to begin an NEO of U.S. citizens and at-risk Afghans, before announcing and undertaking that action on August 14, 2021? If yes, to whom within the Government of Slovenia did the

United States communicate its intentions to initiate the NEO, and when and on what date?

Answer. Senior Department officials as well as embassies around the world were in close contact with our partners and allies prior to, throughout, and after the non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) in August. The Department of State redoubled its efforts to consult with international partners to inform counterparts of our series of ordered departures, beginning on April 27. USNATO briefed Allies August 12, and at several North Atlantic Council and committee meetings over the following days and weeks, on the U.S. drawdown and evacuations. Beginning on August 22, Deputy Secretary Sherman began a series of calls with partners and allies to discuss the NEO and U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

Question. Did the United States inform Spain of its decision to begin an NEO of U.S. citizens and at-risk Afghans, before announcing and undertaking that action on August 14, 2021? If yes, to whom within the Government of Spain did the United States communicate its intentions to initiate the NEO, and when and on what date?

Answer. Senior Department officials as well as embassies around the world were in close contact with our partners and allies prior to, throughout, and after the non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) in August. The Department of State redoubled its efforts to consult with international partners to inform counterparts of our series of ordered departures, beginning on April 27. USNATO briefed Allies August 12, and at several North Atlantic Council and committee meetings over the following days and weeks, on the U.S. drawdown and evacuations. Beginning on August 22, Deputy Secretary Sherman began a series of calls with partners and allies to discuss the NEO and U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

Question. Did the United States inform Turkey of its decision to begin an NEO of U.S. citizens and at-risk Afghans, before announcing and undertaking that action on August 14, 2021? If yes, to whom within the Government of Turkey did the United States communicate its intentions to initiate the NEO, and when and on what date?

Answer. Senior Department officials as well as embassies around the world were in close contact with our partners and allies prior to, throughout, and after the non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) in August. The Department of State redoubled its efforts to consult with international partners to inform counterparts of our series of ordered departures, beginning on April 27. USNATO briefed Allies August 12, and at several North Atlantic Council and committee meetings over the following days and weeks, on the U.S. drawdown and evacuations. Beginning on August 22, Deputy Secretary Sherman began a series of calls with partners and allies to discuss the NEO and U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

Question. Did the United States inform the United Kingdom of its decision to begin an NEO of U.S. citizens and at-risk Afghans, before announcing and undertaking that action on August 14, 2021? If yes, to whom within the Government of the United Kingdom did the United States communicate its intentions to initiate the NEO, and when and on what date?

Answer. Senior Department officials as well as embassies around the world were in close contact with our partners and allies prior to, throughout, and after the non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) in August. The Department of State redoubled its efforts to consult with international partners to inform counterparts of our series of ordered departures, beginning on April 27. USNATO briefed Allies August 12, and at several North Atlantic Council and committee meetings over the following days and weeks, on the U.S. drawdown and evacuations. Beginning on August 22, Deputy Secretary Sherman began a series of calls with partners and allies to discuss the NEO and U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

Question. Putin has been strengthening Russia's security position in Central Asia in recent years, and, in August 2021, held military exercises on the border with Afghanistan. How worried are you about Russia and China strengthening their respective positions in Central Asia?

Answer. The United States remains committed to close cooperation and strong engagement with the countries of Central Asia. We continue to engage productively with the region in the C5+1 format, through mil-mil cooperation, and by other means. While Russia has used the situation in Afghanistan to press its Central Asian neighbors for increased cooperation, the countries of Central Asia have made clear they have no desire to become dependent on any one country.

Question. What do stronger Russian and Chinese presence in this region mean for the Biden administration's strategic pivot to focusing on great power competition with Russia and China?

Answer. Russia and China have a stake in preventing global terrorism and regional instability. To the extent that their presence and influence supports these shared objectives, we are prepared to cooperate. Where their actions and preferences negatively affect our interests and those of our partners, we will push back forcefully. Our withdrawal from Afghanistan will free up significant resources and senior level attention to focus on strategic competition, which is one of the central challenges that will define the 21st century.

Question. Moscow has been engaging the Taliban since at least 2014, and since 2018 hosted them for several rounds of peace talks. Russian officials also routinely met with the Taliban in Qatar over the years. They did so while simultaneously cultivating ties with the internationally-recognized Afghan Government in an attempt to position Russia as a peacemaker. Since the Taliban takeover of Kabul, it seems the Russian Government has concluded that the Taliban are a reality that they have to deal with, if not empower. Russia's presidential envoy for Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, has called for unfreezing the Afghan Government's reserves or risk a spike in illegal narcotics and arms traffic. Russia, like China, abstained from the most recent U.N. resolution that merely called on the Taliban to live up to its commitments is one recent example. How do you see Russia's role in Afghanistan going forward?

Answer. Russia has indeed sought to position itself as a peacemaker and will likely continue to do so. This role is motivated to a considerable extent by Russia's desire to assert itself as a global power. Russia also has serious concerns about Afghanistan's possible role as a haven for international terrorism, especially with respect to ISIS-K, and thus may be a useful partner for us in pressing the Taliban to adhere to the counterterrorism commitments of the U.S.-Taliban Agreement. Russia is unlikely to develop significant economic ties with Afghanistan.

Question. Are you concerned about Russia empowering the Taliban and by extension possibly other terrorist groups/activities? What do you intend to do to prevent Russia from engaging in malign behavior in Afghanistan?

Answer. Though Russia maintains its embassy in Kabul, the Taliban remain designated as a terrorist organization by Moscow, and senior Russian officials have repeatedly stated that they have no plans to recognize the Taliban Government. Russia has sought to strengthen ties with Afghanistan's neighbors in recent months more so than with the Taliban itself. We continue to engage with Russia to reiterate that we will not tolerate destabilizing behavior anywhere in the world.

Question. How will Afghanistan impact the bilateral U.S.-Russia relationship? Will Afghanistan be a point of tension or cooperation? How important will this issue be within the U.S.-Russia relationship?

Answer. Despite the tension in the broader U.S.-Russia relationship in recent years, Afghanistan has consistently been an area in which productive conversation is possible. Though our motives and preferred methods differ, there remains significant overlap in terms of several key goals, with counterterrorism and counternarcotic efforts chief among them. Afghanistan is likely to remain somewhat set aside from our various bilateral issues.

Question. The 2019 U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) report notes a decline in opiate trafficking from Afghanistan along the so-called "northern" route, through Central Asia to Russia. While the threat posed by narco-trafficking to Russia appears to be on the decline, the threat posed to Western Europe appears to have increased significantly. Since Putin aims to weaken the West, how might Putin further capitalize on a scenario where more drugs are coming into Western Europe after U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan? What can be done now to prevent more drugs flowing into Western Europe?

Answer. UNODC has reported declining seizures on the Northern Route since 2015. However, due to the inherent difficulties in researching illicit activities, a reduction in reported seizures does not necessarily correlate to a reduction in trafficking. In 2019 and 2020, there were major seizures of heroin in Kazakhstan and Eastern Europe that transited from Iran across the Caspian Sea to Central Asia and Russia. The Afghan drug trade is dynamic, and it is likely too soon to state with confidence that there has been a significant diminution of flow through Russia. With Russia suffering a massive increase in drug overdose deaths since the onset of the pandemic and instituting increasingly harsh drug-related laws in recent years, the Kremlin has significant reason to try to keep narco-trafficking out of Rus-

sia and Afghanistan. The Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) works to strengthen our European partners' ability to combat organized crime and corruption which are key enablers of smugglers. INL seeks to strengthen law enforcement capacity to detect and interdict narcotics and other contraband smuggling along known trafficking routes, including the Balkans Route. Additionally, INL is increasing its efforts to strengthen the rule of law and law enforcement along Europe's periphery, which will help authorities to combat narcotics and other smuggling.

Question. There has been much discussion about how our withdrawal from Afghanistan allows the U.S. to shift focus to other pressing foreign policy priorities, such as strategic competition with China. How do you view U.S. foreign policy priorities post-Afghanistan withdrawal, and what resources that had previously been focused on Afghanistan will be made available for those priorities?

Answer. We are focused on strengthening our alliances and partnerships to address the issues that have greatest impact on the safety and well-being of Americans, including COVID-19, the climate crisis, cyber security, and the China challenge. We will continue to work with our partners to address enduring threats such as terrorism and nuclear proliferation and will remain engaged in holding the Taliban to its public commitments, including on counterterrorism, safe passage, and human rights and fundamental freedoms. The Department is currently reviewing all non-humanitarian programs and funding for Afghanistan. This review will inform decisions on what non-humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people should continue or be reprogrammed. We are assessing how much Diplomatic Engagement funding needs to be retained for Afghanistan policy and support, and what remainder could be available for other priorities, working with Congress.

Question. Does the Administration believe that the United States and China share similar goals with respect to Afghanistan? Are there areas with respect to Afghanistan where the interests of the United States and the interests of China are different?

Answer. We continue to engage with countries that border Afghanistan and countries in the region, including the People's Republic of China (PRC), on the importance of the international community holding the Taliban accountable for its public commitments and obligations. The PRC is an important regional stakeholder. There are certainly areas where our interests are aligned with the PRC regarding Afghanistan. The entire international community has a stake in ensuring the Taliban live up to their public commitments and obligations, not just on safe passage but also respecting the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all Afghans, including women, girls, and members of minority groups; upholding their commitments on counterterrorism; not carrying out reprisal violence against those who choose to stay in Afghanistan; and forming an inclusive government that can meet the needs and reflect the aspirations of the Afghan people. The world is united in what they expect the Taliban to do, and Beijing has to decide where it is in that effort.

Question. What is your assessment of the implications should China be in a position to secure access to Afghanistan's mineral resources?

Answer. Increased corruption in countries with major development projects backed by the People's Republic of China (PRC), including under the Belt and Road Initiative, is a serious problem. Corruption erodes economic benefits for local economies and populations, undermines the rule of law, fails to adhere to international environmental and social best practices, and at times prevents U.S. firms from competing. Corruption serves as a gateway to other criminality, such as money laundering; labor abuses; bribery; and trafficking in minerals, precious metals, and gemstones back to the PRC.

Question. How do you expect India's security concerns and security environment to change in light of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan? How will U.S.-India collaboration change to account for these changes? What are Administration priorities for further deepening security collaboration with India, both related to developments in Afghanistan but also to ensure that the U.S.-India partnership maintains its focus on advancing shared goals in the Indo-Pacific?

Answer. India has longstanding concerns about regional terrorism and instability in South Asia, which have grown more acute in light of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. As noted in the recent leaders' joint statement between President Biden and Prime Minister Modi, the United States will continue to deepen counterterrorism cooperation with India and coordinate closely on developments in Afghanistan. U.S.-India security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and beyond remains robust and we expect it to expand further in the foreseeable future.

RESPONSES OF U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE ANTONY BLINKEN TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR BENJAMIN L. CARDIN

Question. No one group has made more significant strides since 2001 than Afghan women. In terms of the economy, women have come a long way since the fall of the Taliban regime. They returned to work by the hundreds of thousands, and many became business owners and entrepreneurs. Afghanistan rebuilt an education system that had basically stopped functioning. In 2001, only 900,000 students were in primary school—all of them male. Prior to the fall of Afghanistan, more than 9 million students were in school, with nearly 40 percent of them girls. How can the Administration hold the Taliban and Afghan Government to account in preserving the rights and gains of Afghan women without the support the U.S. military provided to Afghan forces and the check it served on the Taliban?

Answer. 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 all Afghans, including women and girls, over the past 20 years. As seen in the joint statement issued by the United States and more than 60 other countries at the U.N. Human Rights Council in August, the international community is deeply worried about Afghan women and girls, particularly their rights to education, work, freedom of movement, and assembly. We continue to expect the Taliban meet its public commitments to respect the rights and dignity of all Afghans, including women and girls, in terms of their meaningful participation in political processes and public life, as well as access to education and employment.

Question. What is the U.S. planning to do to preserve the rights and gains of Afghan women and girls?

Answer. We have been clear about our intention to work alongside the international community to support the gains made by women, girls, and members of minority groups over the past 20 years. As seen in the joint statement issued by the United States and more than 60 other countries at the U.N. Human Rights Council in August, the international community is deeply worried about Afghan women and girls, particularly their rights to education, work, freedom of movement, and freedom of assembly. We will continue to communicate to the Taliban 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.

Question. What is the Administration doing to ensure that any agreement with the Taliban preserves and respects the human rights of Afghan women and girls, as well as diverse religious and ethnic minority groups and other marginalized communities?

Answer. We have been clear about our intention to work alongside the international community to support the gains that recognized the rights and fundamental freedoms of women and girls, journalists, human rights defenders, persons with disabilities, LGBTQI+ persons, and members of minority groups over the past 20 years. As seen in the joint statement issued by the United States and more than 60 other countries at the U.N. Human Rights Council in August, the international community is deeply worried about Afghan women and girls, particularly their rights to education, work, freedom of movement, and freedom of assembly. We will continue to communicate to the Taliban the need to respect the rights and dignity of all Afghans, including women and girls, in terms of their meaningful participation in political processes and public life, as well as access to education and employment.

Question. I remain concerned about specific groups that have worked closely with the U.S. Government, such as the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM) employees and their families who are still in Afghanistan—comprised of more than 100 Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty employees and their families who have not been evacuated. I am also concerned about the many women judges and court personnel who have been trained by American and international experts, such as the American judges affiliated with the National Association of Women Judges (NAWJ) here in the United States. And, I remain concerned about the employees of the Lincoln Learning Centers (LLCs) and their families, many who are still in Afghanistan. The LLCs comprised a network of 27 American Spaces, affiliated with the U.S. Embassy, which extended across Afghanistan and was managed through a cooperative agreement with an Afghan NGO, the Social Development and Research Organization for Afghans (SDROA). Part of a network of 600 American Spaces worldwide, LLCs served as locations where Afghans can learn the truth about the United States and our stance on the importance of democratic values like human rights and anticorruption. What steps are being taken to facilitate the safe

passage of these Afghans at-risk, including the USAGM employees and their families, the women judges, and the LLC employees and their families?

Answer. The United States will work vigorously with the international community to explore all options to support vulnerable populations in Afghanistan, including—but not limited to—women, children, persons with disabilities, members of the LGBTQI+ community, members of minority groups, journalists and other at-risk populations. We are continuing to examine all available avenues for protection for this population. 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, including with USAGM regarding USAGM, RFE/RL, and VOA staff, and with other partners to facilitate freedom of movement for those who wish to leave Afghanistan including U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents, our Afghans allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans.

Question. Two weeks ago, I joined my colleagues in sending a letter to President Biden asking for assurances that vulnerable Afghans are paroled into the United States and not left in third countries awaiting processing and asks the Administration to create a designated parole category for certain Afghan women and children, activists, human rights defenders, parliamentarians, journalists, and others who are in danger. The general parole that Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas announced last week only allows Afghans coming into the country, without any benefits or work authorization. Is the Administration looking into providing Afghans coming in under the parole program be allowed to receive benefits and/or ability to work?

Answer. United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) is the agency that adjudicates and grants parole. The Department of State does not grant parole and does not set policy related to parole. At the federally funded Department of Defense facilities, Afghan nationals are provided with housing and meals at no cost. They receive assistance in applying for a work authorization, are enrolled in temporary medical insurance, and receive additional medical care, if needed. Many evacuees are eligible to apply to adjust status under the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program or other legal immigration pathway available to them. Afghans who adjust status under the Afghan SIV program will be eligible to receive the same benefits as any Afghan SIV visa holder admitted to the United States.

On September 30, President Biden signed into law the continuing resolution to fund the government through early December. Among other items, the continuing resolution provides funds to help resettle Afghan allies in the United States and makes Afghan nationals eligible for expedited asylum processing, resettlement assistance, entitlement programs, child welfare support, and drivers' licenses if they passed background checks and were paroled into the United States by September 30, 2022.

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. While we are currently unable to provide consular services in Afghanistan, we will continue to process Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applications, including by transferring cases that are at the interview stage 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 and their families, Lawful Permanent Residents, and Afghans with travel documentation who wish to leave Afghanistan, while encouraging neighboring countries and Qatar (among others) to allow Afghans to enter. Afghan SIV applicants who are able to leave Afghanistan and whose SIV case is ready for interview may transfer their cases to any immigrant visa processing post. The Department of State has worked with various countries to host Afghans long enough to process their outstanding applications or transit to countries that will permit this. Asylum protections have been offered in certain countries, but the possibility for asylum as well as the outcome of any individual asylum requests will depend on third country asylum laws and policy as well as other factors. Partners around the globe have been instrumental in the process of relocating Afghan nationals, as well as U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents, and personnel from partner nations. Many countries have permitted Afghans to transit through their territories and many other countries made generous offers of support. Many countries have committed to permanently resettle Afghans. The United States has concluded

international agreements with several countries to facilitate these activities, and the Department of State continues to follow its normal procedure for transmitting the texts of these international agreements to Congress, consistent with 1 U.S.C. 112b.

RESPONSES OF U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE ANTONY BLINKEN TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR JEANNE SHAHEEN

Question. I understand the State Department is still working to determine the number of Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants who remain in Afghanistan. These individuals and their families are in direct and imminent danger from the Taliban because of their service to their country and the U.S. mission. I also understand that State continues to process these applications, though it is unclear where and how. What steps is the Department taking, in partnership with the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security, to continue the processing of SIV applications for those who remain in Afghanistan?

Answer. The Department of State continues to process outstanding Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applications at all processing stages controlled by the Department, including the Chief of Mission approval process and administrative processing for those who have been interviewed. These stages of the process were conducted outside of Afghanistan even before we suspended operations in Kabul. I defer to the Department of Homeland Security for updates on its processing of the I-360 petition for special immigrant status. While it is difficult for Afghans to obtain a visa to a third country, we are developing processing alternatives so we can continue to deliver these important consular services for the people of Afghanistan. Applicants in Afghanistan should continue to monitor their email for updates on their case statuses.

Question. Does the Department of State have the capacity to continue all steps in the application process, including those that were previously done in Kabul?

Answer. The Department of State continues to prioritize the processing of Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applications, including by quintupling the number of people assigned to review cases at the Chief of Mission approval stage since May. The Department also continues to coordinate with the government contractor at the National Visa Center to increase efficiencies and reduce delays, including increasing the number of staff processing Afghan SIVs by seven-fold. The Department has established a team, led by the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts, to coordinate across government agencies and facilitate the freedom of movement for those who wish to leave Afghanistan, including U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents, our Afghans allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans.

Question. How quickly can those applications be processed?

Answer. The Department of State is expediting the stages of the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) application process within its control as much as feasible. The Department has supplemented staffing at the Chief of Mission approval stage of the process to ensure the cases are processed expeditiously. In addition, the Department has coordinated with the contractor at the National Visa Center to devote additional resources to expeditiously handle SIV pre-processing. We continue to prioritize processing for qualified Afghan SIV applicants. Although applicants will not be able to complete the visa interview portion in Afghanistan, we are expediting continued SIV processing at all other stages of the process outside of Afghanistan. We are prioritizing this effort, and our commitment to continue to provide services has no expiration date.

Question. How is the State Department communicating with those applicants still in country to let them know of their options if they are able to secure safe passage out of Afghanistan?

Answer. The Department of State has added additional information to the Department's website to ensure applicants have the appropriate information to transfer their cases to another immigrant visa processing post.

Question. I appreciate that the Administration is conducting a much-needed review of the Afghan SIV program. When can we expect the report on the process?

Answer. Due to the exigent circumstances in Afghanistan, the Department of State and other interagency partners requested an extension of the deadline on the report required by E.O. 14013.

Question. Mr. Secretary, can I receive your commitment that the State Department will brief Congressional offices on a weekly basis on the SIV process and broader resettlement efforts?

Answer. 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 looks forward to more regular engagements with partners in Congress. We appreciate the commitment of members of Congress to these issues and acknowledge an opportunity for more coordination moving forward.

Question. In my recent conversation with NATO member ambassadors, many expressed a need for NATO to address regional stability following our withdrawal from Afghanistan, as well as ensuring that the Taliban does not once again harbor terrorists like Al-Qaeda and others, nor provide financial or logistical support to these groups. What can the United States and the Alliance do to ensure that Afghanistan does not become a haven for terrorists?

Answer. Discussions with our NATO Allies are underway to determine how best to continue the Alliance's work in the current context to monitor, prevent, and potentially counter terrorist activity emanating from Afghanistan. NATO played an absolutely critical role in leading the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan until its termination in September, and we will continue to work with NATO Allies to address our shared interests.

Question. Mr. Secretary, do you believe that the decision to withdraw from Afghanistan and the hastened withdrawal has damaged the strength of the NATO alliance?

Answer. The Alliance and U.S. standing within NATO remain strong. The June Summit that followed NATO's collective decision to withdraw troops showed the Alliance is unified and forward-looking. After 20 years and a reassessment of where to position our militaries based on today's global threat picture, Allies agreed to end our military engagement in Afghanistan. NATO is the foundation of Euro-Atlantic collective defense. The Alliance has overcome divisive issues in the past because of the strength of our approach based on consultation and consensus.

Question. What resources is the Department of State planning to mobilize in order to support our allies who are hosting Afghan refugees while visa processing is underway?

Answer. 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. We are in discussion with UNHCR which works with many other countries to resettle refugees, including those from Afghanistan. We commend countries who have already started to accept Afghan refugees who are in need of protection. And we strongly encourage countries in the region and those that border Afghanistan to allow entry for Afghans and coordinate with international organizations and other humanitarian partners to provide humanitarian assistance to Afghans in need. We also 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. After U.S. withdrawal completed, thousands at-risk individuals remain in Afghanistan at great personal risk. Charter aircraft have been ready to fly them to safety for weeks but the Taliban now refuses to allow their departure. How is the State Department engaging with the Taliban to allow the departure of charter planes, including from Mazar-E-Sharif?

Answer. 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. We have been evaluating requests for assistance on a case-by-case basis to support privately organized flights. This support involves reviewing 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 permanent resettlement in the United States. 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.

Question. The people of Afghanistan face a humanitarian catastrophe with limited access to basic necessities. How is the State Department vetting non-government recipients of U.S. assistance inside Afghanistan to ensure that they are not under the

coercion of the Taliban regime and are safeguarded from having their assets and operations seized by Taliban-controlled ministries?

Answer. The U.S. Government has put multiple measures in place to help ensure ongoing humanitarian assistance does not support any individual or entity that is or has been engaged in, or supportive of, terrorist activities or other activities inconsistent with U.S. national security and foreign policy interests. This may include vetting, pre-award risk assessments, ongoing risk analysis processes that mitigate against diversion, fraud, waste, and abuse, and carefully monitoring progress toward award objectives and achievement of expected results.

Question. In cases where primary funding recipients are sub-contracting with other local entities, how does the State Department monitor funding to ensure it gets to the Afghan people in need rather than exploited by malign actors?

Answer. State and USAID bureaus are assessing their non-humanitarians programs, the operating environment, and potential issues to mitigate risks. As part of that, bureaus are planning for how they will make adjustments to strengthen the monitoring and evaluation of continuing programs from outside Afghanistan, including through existing third parties, given the current footprint. 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.

Question. Noting that decades of evidence has demonstrated that in order to effectively address the needs of women and girls, the safety and security of female aid workers is critical—how is the Administration working right now to ensure that female humanitarian staff at every level are able to safely operate, including work directly consulting with Afghan women and girls on their priorities and needs, producing rapid humanitarian needs assessments, and designing and implementing humanitarian interventions?

Answer. We are working with the international community to set clear, unified expectations for a united, inclusive, and representative government with the full, equal, and meaningful participation of women; for parties to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms; and for immediate, safe, and unhindered access for humanitarian actors. Our humanitarian partners are working with staff on the ground, particularly women staff, to identify the safest ways to reach women and girls with life-saving humanitarian assistance. Our humanitarian programs are designed to be flexible, and we are supporting partners to adapt to the new environment in line with the recommendations of the women most impacted.

Question. Improving access to quality education, especially for girls, has been a key objective for U.S. 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.

1. Will the United States continue to support education in Afghanistan to protect these gains and prevent backsliding, especially for Afghan women and girls?
2. If so, how will the Administration ensure that aid does not end up in the hands of the Taliban?

Answer. The United States is committing to supporting the Afghan people, especially women, girls, and members of minority groups. As I have said, humanitarian will continue to be provided in Afghanistan, including to women, girls, and members of minority groups. We will be very focused on monitoring this humanitarian assistance to help ensure it is not diverted and reaches those most in need. In addition, as I noted in my testimony, the Department of State will be appointing a senior official who will coordinate the U.S. Government's effort to support women in Afghanistan. At the same time, we are engaged diplomatically and coordinating with the international community to hold the Taliban accountable for respecting the human rights of women and girls.

Question. Furthermore, will the Administration expand the license to operate humanitarian programs in Afghanistan to allow for continued education assistance?

Answer. The Administration has been clear about its intention to continue to provide humanitarian assistance in support of the Afghan people. As part of an ongoing review of our assistance to support the Afghan people, the Department is determining whether community basic education programs that promote U.S. national interests and provide equal education opportunities for girls and boys should continue

to the extent possible in support of the Afghan people. Prohibited transactions that are ordinarily incident and necessary to such activities are authorized by a specific license the Department of the Treasury updated on September 21.

RESPONSES OF U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE ANTONY BLINKEN TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR TIM KAINE

Question. On August 30, 2021, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) announced that, “due to both the lack of air traffic services and a functional civil aviation authority in Afghanistan, as well as ongoing security concerns, U.S. civil operators, pilots, and U.S.-registered civil aircraft are prohibited from operating at any altitude over much of Afghanistan.” Additional concerns have been brought to my staff that all International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) certified Afghan national air traffic controllers departed the country during the evacuation. Qatar and Turkey are working to restore commercial flights at Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA), but these are dependent on negotiations with the Taliban-led government. Can you please update me on the Department of State’s efforts to ensure air traffic control and management of Afghan airspace? Do Qatar and Turkey have the experience and equipment needed to facilitate the reopening of HKIA to commercial air travel and its safe operation over the long term? What, if any, assistance does the Department or the FAA anticipate providing to Qatar and Turkey in this regard?

Answer. We recognize the need for Kabul International Airport (KIA) to resume normal operations and urge the Taliban to work expeditiously with the Qatari and Turkish authorities to ensure this is done quickly, but also safely and securely. Qatar and Turkey share our view that there is an urgent need for humanitarian aid and safe travel. The Department of State will continue to engage diplomatically to resolve any issues and to hold the Taliban to their public pledge to let people valid with travel documents freely depart Afghanistan. We have reiterated this point to the Taliban.

Question. Will Qatar and Turkey’s activities in support of Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) operations—and that of any potential American contracting companies working with them—be considered activity subject to existing sanctions on the Taliban?

Answer. Our top priorities are to minimize the disruption to humanitarian aid in Afghanistan, while still denying assets to the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, and other sanctioned entities and individuals. The international community needs to quickly coordinate on identifying both an international funding mechanism and civil aviation partners who can assist in creating the conditions necessary for aircraft insurance and safe flight operations, including cargo. For any further questions on sanctions, I refer you to the Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control.

RESPONSES OF U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE ANTONY BLINKEN TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR EDWARD J. MARKEY

Question. Impartial international humanitarian organizations have raised serious concerns regarding their ability to continue assistance operations in Afghanistan given the Taliban are listed by the Treasury Department as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) group. In order avoid unwanted negative impacts for Afghan civilians the U.S. Treasury must provide a broad OFAC general license covering all humanitarian activities. Will you commit to supporting such a license, perhaps modeled on the general license OFAC issued for Ansarallah in Yemen prior to the designation revocation, and work in close collaboration with the humanitarian community to ensure a license is issued quickly?

Answer. On September 24, OFAC issued two general licenses authorizing the U.S. Government, certain international organizations (including the U.N. and 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, and public health and medical services (including COVID-19-assistance) to the Afghan people. This follows past precedent in which the U.S. Government 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 and medicine.

Question. Thousands of U.S. citizens, green card holders, and vulnerable Afghans were not evacuated prior to the departure of U.S. troops from Afghanistan. It is reassuring that efforts to evacuate vulnerable categories of individuals from Afghanistan have continued via negotiated evacuation flights and land crossings. Will you commit to continuing to process all requests and applications received by the Afghanistan Taskforce to secure safe haven for those who were not able to depart Afghanistan prior to the final withdrawal of U.S. troops? And specifically, will you clarify that P-2 category of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) will be among those prioritized?

Answer. The Department of State continues to receive and process P-2 referrals to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). Once outside of Afghanistan, an individual can begin processing through the USRAP.

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, and like many refugees, they may face significant challenges fleeing to safety. We are continuing to review the situation on the ground and consider all available options, and our planning will continue to evolve. We strongly encourage countries in the region and those that border Afghanistan 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 to not return Afghan refugees or asylum seekers to persecution or torture, and to respect the principle of non-refoulement.

Question. Refugee Council USA and its nine national refugee resettlement agency members have advocated for the need to raise the U.S. refugee acceptance cap from 125,000 to no less than 200,000 for fiscal year 2022. Will you commit to working closely with President Biden to answer their call to raise the cap? If the cap is not raised above 125,000, how would the Administration provide for the needs of Afghans who do not receive refugee status either through new legislative action or pursuant to the 1980 Refugee Act?

Answer. The President affirmed the United States' commitment to welcoming refugees by issuing the Presidential Determination (PD) on Refugee Admissions that raises the refugee admissions ceiling to 125,000 for FY 2022. The State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration has engaged in listening sessions and worked in close coordination with U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) partners, including resettlement agencies, RCUSA, and federal and state partners. We are incorporating feedback into our efforts to rebuild the program and will continue to partner closely with them going forward. Persons admitted with Special Immigrant Visas or who have been paroled into the United States do not count against the refugee ceiling. We anticipate admitting significant numbers of Afghan refugees through USRAP in FY 2022, with a regional allocation for refugees from the Near East/South Asia (including Afghanistan) of 35,000 under the new PD. On September 30, President Biden signed into law the Afghanistan Supplemental Appropriations Act, which allows for certain Afghan nationals paroled into the United States 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.

Question. What additional funds would be needed outside of the \$6.4 billion supplemental request to help resettle Afghans and other refugees to meet a 200,000 Presidential Determination in 2022?

Answer. 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. 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.

The FY 2022 President's Budget requested sufficient funding to support the goal of up to 125,000 refugee admissions in FY 2022. On October 8, President Biden issued the Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions for FY 2022, which raises the refugee admissions target to 125,000. If the President determines to increase the admissions target over this 125,000 target, the Department would need

to consult with Congress and then reassess funding needs and may require additional funds.

Question. Our NATO allies worked hand-in-hand with Afghan allies as part of the International Security Assistance Force mission. With the end of the mission the need to resettle vulnerable Afghans remains high. What commitments have other NATO allies given to accept vulnerable Afghans and refugees post drawdown of troops, and what diplomatic efforts are ongoing to ensure all NATO members, and other countries who committed to the mission, do their fair share to provide safe refuge to those in need?

Answer. The United States consulted with Allies and partners throughout the process of ending NATO's military presence in Afghanistan, including on the resettlement of Afghans at risk due to their association with Allied countries or NATO. Many governments have already stepped up, accepting thousands of vulnerable Afghans into their countries. The process is ongoing, and deliberations continue at NATO and bilaterally with our NATO partners on how to support Afghans in need of protection and those who still wish to leave Afghanistan.

RESPONSES OF U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE ANTONY BLINKEN TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR CORY BOOKER

Question. On Monday, August 23, Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst (JBMDL) was officially tasked by the DoD to serve as one of four military installations that will house Afghan Refugees as part of Operation Allies Welcome. JBMDL is currently housing 9,000 refugees, with the capacity to house a total of 13,000. I understand that JBMDL, in partnership with the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of State, is providing all refugees with COVID-19 testing and offering vaccines, as well as full medical screening and other health services. What is the plan for these individuals and how long do you foresee them staying there?

Answer. Afghan nationals who are paroled will be required to stay at a DoD facility until a tuberculosis screening has occurred, and vaccinations have been received followed by a 21-day quarantine period. At federally-funded facilities, Afghan nationals will be provided housing and meals at no cost. They will be able to apply for work authorization, be enrolled in temporary medical insurance, and receive additional medical care, if needed. They are matched with a resettlement agency affiliate in the United States and assisted with travel plans once that affiliate has indicated it is ready to receive the family at their final destination.

We are already helping Afghan arrivals move into welcoming communities across the United States and expect to increase these movements significantly in the coming weeks. However, we do not have a timeline right now for the completion of all travel for those who arrived and are staying in DoD facilities.

Question. Is the plan to eventually resettle them to civilian facilities while they await either the processing of SIVs or P visas or refugee status determinations?

Answer. We are helping Afghan arrivals move into welcoming communities across the United States and expect to increase these movements significantly in the coming weeks. We do not expect to relocate Afghan arrivals into another temporary facility before they arrive in their new homes in U.S. communities across the country. We do not have a timeline right now for the completion of all travel for those who arrived and are staying in DoD facilities.

Question. If so, what plans are in place or being put in place for such a transition?

Answer. We are helping Afghan arrivals move into welcoming communities across the United States and expect to increase these movements significantly in the coming weeks. We do not expect to move Afghan arrivals into another temporary facility before they arrive in their new homes in U.S. communities across the country. We do not have a timeline right now for the completion of all travel for those who arrived and are staying in DoD facilities.

Question. As each military base currently participating in Operation Allies Welcome has a set capacity for housing Afghan Refugees, does the Department of State have plans to continue sending refugees to these installations as others are resettled? Or, will each installation's population diminish as they begin the resettlement process?

Answer. We are already helping Afghans move into welcoming communities across the United States and expect to increase these movements significantly in the coming weeks. As these newcomers reach their final U.S. destination, there will be some new Afghan arrivals from those overseas military installations that were

transit points in Operation Allies Refuge. Those new arrivals will go through the same medical, health, and work authorization processes for all arriving Afghans.

As some individuals move to their new communities, and others arrive from overseas to domestic DoD facilities, the population at each facility will change. However, we do not have a timeline right now for the completion of all travel for those who arrived and are staying in DoD facilities.

Question. Outside of resettlement, are there any plans to increase the number of translators, specifically female translators, at each military installation?

Answer. We are working closely with the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security in ensuring that Afghan arrivals have safe conditions and are able to complete medical and immigration processing swiftly at each of the DoD facilities where they are being processed. For more information on interpretation, including any plans to increase the number of female interpreters, I defer to the United Coordination Group within the Department of Homeland Security, the lead for Operation Allies Welcome.

Question. Are there any plans to utilize SIV translators currently housed at each base as official translators in partnership with NGOs?

Answer. For more information on interpretation, including any plans to utilize Special Immigrant Visa interpreters, I defer to the United Coordination Group within the Department of Homeland Security, the lead for Operation Allies Welcome.

Question. Does the Department of State have any plans to meet the increased demand for health care services—specifically women’s health services—at military installations without robust local health care offerings?

Answer. We are inviting all arrivals to take advantage of the services offered on military bases, such as applying for work authorizations and health care services. For Afghans who need specialized assistance, we are making a range of services available including basic family medicine; pediatric care; obstetric care; emergency medicine; basic laboratory, radiology, and pharmacy services; basic dental care; and psychosocial support and mental health services.

For more information on the demand for health services and women’s health care services at DoD facilities, I defer to the United Coordination Group within the Department of Homeland Security, the lead for Operation Allies Welcome.

RESPONSES OF U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE ANTONY BLINKEN TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR MARCO RUBIO

Question. In his speech to the American people on August 26, President Biden admitted that “it could very well have happened” that the U.S. military provided a list or multiple lists of names of American citizens, SIV holders and other vulnerable Afghans to the Taliban. Since then, members of the Biden Administration, including you, have issued confusing denials. On “Meet the Press” I believe you said that “the idea that we shared lists of Americans or others with the Taliban is simply wrong,” but then later on you said that there were instances where you shared “names on a list of people on the bus” with the Taliban. I sent a letter to President Biden on August 27 asking for clarity on this. At any point during the evacuation of American citizens and vulnerable Afghans from Afghanistan, were the Taliban provided lists or names of any potential evacuees?

Answer. 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 operational communications to the Taliban and in tandem with our allies and partners around the world. The Department of State did not provide names of any potential evacuees or relocated persons to the Taliban at any point during evacuation and relocation operations.

Question. Who authorized sharing lists of potential evacuees with the Taliban?

Answer. The Department of State did not provide names of any potential evacuees or relocated persons to the Taliban at any point during evacuation and relocation operations.

Question. Can you confirm that every person whose name was on such as list was safely evacuated?

Answer. The Department of State did not provide names of any potential evacuees or relocated persons to the Taliban at any point during evacuation and relocation operations. As of September 1, approximately 124,000 people were relocated out of Afghanistan with U.S. support. Of these, approximately 6,000 were U.S. citizens

who evacuated on or before August 31; between September 1 and November 9, we have assisted in the departure of 385 U.S. citizens and 285 Lawful Permanent Residents.

Question. Do you commit to rescuing those included on a list, but who wasn't evacuated?

Answer. 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. 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.

We also recognize the need for international flights to resume regular operations and urge the Taliban to work expeditiously with the Qatari and Turkish authorities to ensure this is done quickly, but also safely and securely. We will continue to engage diplomatically to resolve any issues and to hold the Taliban to their public commitment to let people with travel documents freely depart Afghanistan. We have reiterated this point to the Taliban.

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. 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.

Question. Do you commit to informing every individual that was included on a list of the potential threat they or their family members in Afghanistan may face?

Answer. The U.S. Embassy in Kabul suspended operations on August 31, 2021, and a team at the U.S. Embassy in Doha, Qatar, is supporting these functions. While the U.S. Government has withdrawn its personnel from Kabul, we will continue to assist U.S. citizens and their families in Afghanistan. Our team in Doha is managing our diplomacy with Afghanistan, including consular affairs, administering humanitarian assistance, and working with allies, partners, and regional and international stakeholders to coordinate our messaging to the Taliban.

U.S. citizens are encouraged to register their presence through the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program to receive security alerts and updated information on travel in Afghanistan.

Question. Over the long term, one of the most significant implications from this disaster will be our policy toward the Chinese Communist Party. In justifying the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, you personally made the case that it was in our national interest because our strategic competitors would like nothing more than to see the United States remain in Afghanistan. Do you still believe the Chinese Communist Party is committing genocide?

Answer. I continue to believe that the Government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) is committing genocide and crimes against humanity against Uyghurs, who are predominantly Muslim, and members of other ethnic and religious minority groups in Xinjiang. These atrocities shock the conscience and must be met with serious consequences. I support using all appropriate tools, including those provided for in the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act, to pressure the PRC to end these atrocities and to promote justice and accountability for the victims.

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 significant vital interests in the world that we cannot afford to ignore.

Question. Do you believe the Chinese Communist Party will enlist the Taliban in its efforts to wipe out Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims?

Answer. We continue to monitor relations between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Afghanistan. Uyghurs and members of other religious and ethnic minority groups in Xinjiang have suffered unspeakable oppression, including genocide and crimes against humanity, at the hands of the PRC's authoritarian government. The PRC is engaged in human rights violations and abuses that shock the conscience and must be met with serious consequences. The United States must speak out consistently and jointly with allies and partners, impose costs and sanctions on those responsible, and help those fleeing persecution.

Question. Do you believe Beijing when it says that it is not interested in occupying Bagram Air Force base?

Answer. We are aware of reports that Beijing claims it is not interested in occupying Bagram Air Base.

Question. Do you trust the Chinese Communist Party to keep its word in any future climate negotiations?

Answer. The United States must judge Beijing by its actions, not its words. We know that addressing the climate crisis will require significant additional action by the People's Republic of China (PRC). We conduct results-oriented diplomacy with the PRC in climate negotiations. Current climate commitments by the PRC are not sufficient to hold the global temperature increase to 1.5 degrees C. We and others in the international community continue to press for the PRC to increase its emission reductions in this critical decade to get on a Paris-aligned trajectory.

Question. When will the Biden administration's China policy review be complete?

Answer. The Biden-Harris administration will address the China challenge from a position of strength in which we work closely with our allies and partners. There is no doubt that China poses the most significant challenge of any nation to the United States in terms of our interests and the interests of the American people. The Biden-Harris administration approaches China through the lens of competition and recognizes that there are adversarial and cooperative aspects to the U.S.-China relationship.

Question. Since the start of the evacuation, the Biden administration, and you, have consistently spoken of the need to work with the Taliban to evacuate American citizens and vulnerable Afghans out of the country. In your speeches with the Foreign Minister of Qatar and with Heiko Maas last week, you repeatedly referred to our "engagement with the Taliban." It's puzzling to me that the State Department is now engaging with the Taliban, when just a few short weeks ago, U.S. Embassy officials in Kabul were shredding passports and visas in their possession, so that they're not being used for kill lists. At what point did the State Department's approach towards the Taliban change from worrying about it forming kill lists to target American citizens and vulnerable Afghans to now considering the Taliban essential in evacuating those same people?

Answer. We continue to communicate to the Taliban concerning our vital national interests, including safe passage for U.S. citizens and others with valid travel documents. However, the legitimacy and support the Taliban seeks from the international community will depend on their adherence to their commitments on ensuring freedom of travel; to making good on their counterterrorism commitments; upholding the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all Afghans, including women, girls, and members of minority groups; naming a broadly representative permanent government; and forswearing retaliation.

Question. In public statements, the State Department has described the al-Qaida-aligned Haqqani Network as somewhat independent of the Taliban. In fact, the Haqqani Network is indeed a critical part of the Taliban. Sirajuddin Haqqani has been the deputy leader of the Taliban since at least 2015 and has been named as the "Acting Interior Minister," of the Taliban regime while Khalil Haqqani is the acting minister for refugees. The Haqqani Network, as you know, is a designated Foreign Terrorist Organization. When the State Department cooperated with the Taliban to evacuate American citizens, did State Department officials ever coordinate with members of the Haqqani Network?

Answer. The Haqqani Network and the Taliban are distinct entities, but they are affiliated. The Taliban is a Specially Designated Global Terrorist Entity, and the Haqqani Network is a designated Foreign Terrorist Organization and a Specially Designated Global Terrorist Entity. We have accounted for and will account for that, ensuring that all our actions are consistent with U.S. law and policy.

Question. Looking to the future, as the Biden Administration considers the provision of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, how will you ensure that such aid does not benefit the Haqqani Network or other terrorist groups?

Answer. 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 strengthen the monitoring and evaluation of continuing programs from outside Afghanistan, including through existing third parties, given the current footprint. Additionally, bureaus undertake steps to guard against the risk that our programs could benefit terrorists or their supporters. These steps may include mitiga-

tion measures such as name check vetting and specific program design to reduce those risks.

Question. When the last American C-17 left Kabul on August 31, there were at least several hundred American citizens left in Afghanistan. My office, and I know other Senate offices as well, have received reports from U.S. citizens claiming that the Taliban are not allowing them to enter airports, either for lack of travel documents or in some instances, not being accompanied by a male guardian. This Administration, writ large, has made excuses for the decision to leave these Americans behind by claiming that many of these Americans have decided not to leave Afghanistan, because they are dual nationals wishing to stay with their families or because they just have responded to State Department emails coordinating their evacuation. What makes you so confident that these Americans truly do not, or did not, want to leave Afghanistan?

Answer. 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. When the Department of State suspended Embassy operations in Kabul on August 31, 2021, we were specifically aware at that time of approximately 100 U.S. citizens who still wanted to depart but due to the security situation, could not do so. The Department has made every effort to contact U.S. citizens who are interested in leaving Afghanistan, and our commitment to help them depart remains steadfast. Several U.S. citizens have told us on calls that they are not yet ready to depart for family or other reasons. As we have said, our mission to assist U.S. citizens and their families to depart Afghanistan has no expiration date, and we continue to assist U.S. citizens and their families in Afghanistan who wish to depart. We continue to assist U.S. citizens and their families with departing from Afghanistan. Between September 1 and November 9, we have assisted in the departure of 385 U.S. citizens.

Question. Is it likely that some, if not all, want to leave but are being prevented from leaving?

Answer. We will be relentless in our efforts to assist U.S. citizens and their families, Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs), our Afghans allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans to depart Afghanistan, if and when they choose to do so. The U.S. Government is pressing the Taliban keep its public commitment 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 like Qatar to allow Afghans to enter.

We are prepared to assist U.S. citizens and their families to depart Afghanistan when they are ready to do so, whether it is today, tomorrow, a year from now or longer. Interactions with some U.S. citizens and their family members currently in Afghanistan have indicated that they are not ready to depart at this time. While some have stated they consider Afghanistan their home and do not wish to leave, others are working to get their affairs in order before seeking to depart. Others have indicated hesitancy, as they do not want to leave extended family behind.

Question. Is there the possibility that these dual nationals could be women whose more conservative family members are pressuring them into staying?

Answer. The decision for an individual to remain in or leave Afghanistan is incredibly complex and personal. The Department of State is working closely with interagency partners and others to facilitate the departure of those who wish to leave Afghanistan.

Question. In his first speech to the American people on August 16, President Biden had proudly announced that the U.S. Government had assisted in the evacuation of New York Times and Washington Post journalists from Afghanistan. Media reports have indicated that as many as 550 journalists of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Voice of America and their families remain in Afghanistan. These are entities funded by American taxpayers through the U.S. Agency for Global Media. Why did this Administration prioritize the evacuation of New York Times and Washington Post journalists from Afghanistan, but not those journalists on the Government's payroll?

Answer. We supported the movement of more than 124,000 people out of Afghanistan between August 14 and August 31. Among those were U.S. Government employees, Embassy employees, U.S. citizens, and many others, including journalists. Since August 31, we have worked closely with the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM) to evacuate USAGM-affiliated employees and family members. Many have already been relocated and we remain in close contact with USAGM regarding

USAGM, RFE/RL, and VOA staff who remain in Afghanistan. Our USAGM colleagues will not be forgotten and continuing to relocate them is among our top priorities.

Question. In the last few days before the evacuation ended on August 31, I believe the State Department had designated these journalists and their families as locally employed staff of Embassy Kabul so that they could be included in the final evacuation flights. Is this true?

Answer. As of September 1, approximately 124,000 people were relocated out of Afghanistan with U.S. support. At the time of the August evacuation, these Afghans included people who worked as staff of the U.S. embassy in Kabul and their families, those who served as translators and interpreters for our government, and other Afghans at risk.

Question. If this is true, why were they not evacuated?

Answer. A small number of embassy local employees chose not to be evacuated, for a variety of reasons. We remain in close contact with them to provide ongoing support.

Question. How many other U.S. Government employed staff were not evacuated?

Answer. During the evacuation operations in August, locally employed staff members working for the United States in Afghanistan were evacuated with eligible family members. A small number chose not to be evacuated and we remain in close contact with them to provide ongoing support.

Question. What steps will you take to guarantee that the RFE/RL and VOA journalists will be evacuated?

Answer. The State Department has established a team, led by the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts, to coordinate relocation efforts across government agencies and with advocacy groups, nongovernmental organizations, and others. The team is working closely across the interagency, including with USAGM, and with other partners to facilitate freedom of movement for those who wish to leave Afghanistan, including U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents, our Afghans allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans.

Question. In addition to American citizens, there are thousands of Afghans who worked alongside American service members, soldiers, diplomats and other staff that now face a real threat of death, because of their association with our nation. What is the status of the Priority 2 refugees' admissions program for journalists and those who worked for U.S.-funded humanitarian projects? Is the system at capacity?

Answer. The Department continues to receive and process P-2 referrals from U.S. Government employers and qualifying media and non-governmental organizations. After the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program 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 may contact PRM to begin processing their case. Individuals should follow the guidelines on wrapsnet.org to contact PRM. At that point, PRM will assign the case to a PRM-funded overseas Resettlement Support Center for processing.

Question. We have received reports that the State Department is reluctant to allow P2 applicants to enter the U.S. processing system due to delays and its limited capacity. Is this true?

Answer. This is not true. The Department is still receiving P-2 referrals from U.S. Government employers, including the Department of Defense, and qualifying media and non-governmental organizations. It is not currently possible for the U.S. Government to process refugee referrals inside Afghanistan, so Afghan nationals who are referred for resettlement will be processed once they leave the country. 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.

Question. If P2 applicants are not provided with direct entry into the refugee processing system, where do you expect them to go while their applications are pending given that they are being told it could take 1-2 years for their applications to be adjudicated?

Answer. Individuals with urgent protection needs should follow procedures to register for international protection and assistance with the government of the country they are in. They may also register and seek assistance from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). We are working with international humanitarian partners and other governments to seek ways to ensure those with pro-

tection concerns are able to receive the support they need while they await U.S. Refugee Admissions Program processing.

Question. We have received reports of P2 applicants who are stranded outside of Afghanistan in countries that will not allow them to stay for more than a limited period. What is the Department doing to assist P2 applicants facing such a situation?

Answer. For individuals who are in a third country and have contacted PRM, their case 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 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. 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. It is my understanding that U.S. allies and partners in the region, such as Qatar, have provided critical support for the evacuation. Going forward, what is the Administration's plan to coordinate with these regional partners to ensure that U.S. citizens and vulnerable Afghans who have been left stranded in Afghanistan can be evacuated now that the U.S. has withdrawn?

Answer. The State Department has established a team, led by the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts, to coordinate relocation efforts across government agencies and with advocacy groups, nongovernmental organizations, and others. The team is working closely across the interagency and with other partners to facilitate freedom of movement for those who wish to leave Afghanistan, including U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents, our Afghans allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans.

Question. On September 2, the State Department said in the press briefing that 77 percent of those evacuated from Afghanistan are "at-risk Afghans." More specifically, the State Department said that these are "those Afghans to whom we have a special commitment." I assume that these include SIV and P2 status holders, but can you clarify which Afghans are included in this group?

Answer. At the time of the August evacuation, these Afghans included people who worked as staff of the U.S. Embassy in Kabul and their families, those who served as translators and interpreters for our government, and other Afghans at risk. This group includes a broad range of individuals who were at risk due to their association with the U.S. Government or support for our goals.

Question. Does it include USAGM journalists?

Answer. Yes.

Question. Does it include Afghan women who are students at the American University of Afghanistan?

Answer. While U.S. Government evacuation 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, and at-risk groups in Afghanistan such as the students, faculty, and staff of the American University of Afghanistan. The United States is committed to supporting 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 the airport in Kabul.

Question. Does it include the former contractors and staff employed by the USAID programs?

Answer. This group of evacuees includes a broad range of individuals who were at risk due to their association with the U.S. Government or support for our goals. While U.S. Government evacuation 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, and at-risk groups in Afghanistan, such as the staff and contractors employed to oversee and implement USAID programs. The United States continues to support humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan. The Depart-

ment continues to explore options for those who wish to depart, and we continue to advocate for the full resumption of commercial flights out of the airport in Kabul.

Question. Does it include Afghans who converted to religions other than Islam?

Answer. The United States continues to advocate for the protection of the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all Afghans. The situation for so many Afghans is stark, and the needs remain great. We will continue to support the Afghan people through diplomacy, international influence, and humanitarian aid.

We understand that the Taliban have targeted certain populations among Afghan civilians in the past and denied access to services for members of vulnerable populations. The United States will work vigorously with the international community to explore all options to support members of vulnerable populations in Afghanistan including—but not limited to—women, children, journalists, persons with disabilities, LGBTQI+ individuals, and members of the ethnic and religious minority groups. We also continue to call on the Taliban to protect freedom of movement for all Afghans and allow the departure of those who seek to leave Afghanistan.

Question. With regard to the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, you personally justified the decision as being in the national interest of the United States. You even stated that our strategic competitors would like nothing more than to see the United States remain in Afghanistan. While I have long argued that the United States must focus on addressing the threat posed by authoritarians around the world, it's clear to me that the execution of this withdrawal has dramatically undermined the credibility we need to address the threat posed by these dictators. Already the Kremlin has used the withdrawal to call into question the American commitment to protect Ukraine. What is the State Department doing to reassure our allies and partners abroad of American defensive commitments?

Answer. The Department and our interagency colleagues are deeply engaged globally in strengthening and broadening security cooperation with U.S. forces. In addition to our close cooperation with NATO, the recently concluded Special Measures Agreement with Korea, negotiated by the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, is evidence of the value our allies and partners place on our cooperation. The United States is firmly committed to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and it remains the top security assistance recipient in Europe. In FY 2021, the U.S. Government provided \$393 million in security assistance to Ukraine. Our values and commitment to international norms set us apart from Russia in reassuring our allies and partners.

Question. Afghanistan was a major non-NATO ally, to whom we had made commitment to support and defend. Having abandoned Afghanistan, how will we assure allies and partners, like Ukraine, that also face significant military threats from authoritarian states?

Answer. The State Department is committed to building enduring security ties with allies and partners around the world to advance our national security. As I have said, there is nothing that our competitors and adversaries would have liked more than for the United States to re-up a 20-year war and remain bogged down in Afghanistan for another decade. Regarding Ukraine specifically, the United States is firmly committed to Ukraine's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity, and it remains our top security assistance recipient in Europe. In FY 2021, the U.S. Government provided \$393 million in security assistance to Ukraine, including an additional \$60 million in equipment and services via Presidential Drawdown Authority, highlighted during President Zelensky's September 1 White House visit as a symbol of our deepening strategic partnership and support for Ukraine in the face of ongoing Russian aggression. Further, the President's FY 2022 budget request continues to reflect Ukraine as the top priority within Europe for out-year resources. We appreciate the robust Congressional appropriations that have allowed us to support Ukraine as a foreign policy priority.

RESPONSES OF U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE ANTONY BLINKEN TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR RON JOHNSON

Question. Secretary Blinken, on August 27, 2021, I sent a letter to you and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin regarding a reported incident on August 26, 2021, in which it has been alleged over 400 individuals, including U.S. citizens, were turned away from the evacuation site at Hamid Karzai International Airport. The letter (attached) included four questions related to the alleged event, which I will repeat here. Please answer the following: Is the Department of Defense and/or the

Department of State aware of this alleged incident? If so, is there an open investigation into this matter?

Answer. I defer to the Department of Defense for all questions related to the security of and access to the airport.

Question. It is hard to believe that any U.S. military official would deny Americans the ability to evacuate Afghanistan. If this did in fact occur on August 26 (or any other date), what generalized or specific order was given to the commander that caused him to take such action?

Answer. I defer to the Department of Defense for all questions related to security of or access to the airport.

Question. Who gave the order to this commander? Please provide that individual's name, title, and department/agency. Where did this order ultimately originate?

Answer. I defer to the Department of Defense for all questions related to security of or access to the airport.

Question. What actions are being taken to locate and evacuate the American citizens that were allegedly turned away?

Answer. Our mission to assist U.S. citizens to depart Afghanistan has no deadline, and we are continuing to assist U.S. citizens and their families in Afghanistan who wish to depart. I defer to the Department of Defense for all questions related to security of or access to the airport.

Question. Please describe in detail the vetting process for evacuees from Afghanistan.

Answer. 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. During the hearing, you stated that there was a round of vetting in third countries and another round once individuals arrived in the United States. Please explain each stage in detail, including what vetting was performed in Afghanistan before individuals were allowed to board planes, in third countries, and after arrival in the U.S.

Answer. 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. Please explain how we are verifying the identities of evacuees and establishing the identities of those without identification papers.

Answer. I refer you to the interagency screening and vetting community, including the Department of Homeland Security, Customs and Border Protection, who are responsible for recording the arrival and processing the parole into the United States of evacuees.

Question. Are we asking U.S. service members to participate in the identification process?

Answer. I refer you to the Department of Defense for information relating what role its personnel may play in this process.

Question. Are we seeking personal confirmations or recommendations from U.S. service members?

Answer. I refer you to the Department of Defense for information on what role its personnel may play in this process.

Question. What databases are we comparing identification information against?

Answer. I refer you to the interagency screening and vetting community, including the Department of Homeland Security, Customs and Border Protection, who are responsible for performing this work.

Question. How confident are you that the databases being used contain sufficient information to detect matches?

Answer. I refer you to the interagency screening and vetting community, including the Department of Homeland Security, Customs and Border Protection, who are responsible for performing this work.

Question. Are we conducting biometric screening on each evacuee, and if so what does this entail?

Answer. I refer you to the interagency screening and vetting community, including the Department of Homeland Security/Customs and Border Protection, which is responsible for performing this work.

Question. Has the Department of Defense kept accurate and up-to-date records of individuals who have worked for the U.S. in Afghanistan?

Answer. I defer all questions regarding employment with the Department of Defense to the Department of Defense.

Question. What gaps do you believe exist in the information available for identification?

Answer. The Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program is open to individuals who worked for or on behalf of the U.S. Government, including U.S. Government contractors, and individuals who worked for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) or its successor mission. Applicants must provide proof that they meet the statutory requirements for this visa program including proof of identity and nationality, length of employment, letters of recommendation from a direct supervisor or senior official, and other information. In many circumstances applicants are unable to provide all of the required documents. U.S. Government contracting files often do not contain information on the individuals who worked for specific contractors or the period of time an individual was employed for a contractor under a specific contract. To confirm this information, the Afghan SIV unit must review information from the individual contractor, if they can locate them, to confirm the applicant's eligibility. This information is then reviewed by the Chief of Mission (COM) in determining whether to grant an applicant COM approval.

Question. Please provide the number of evacuees that do not have identification.

Answer. U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) is responsible for recording the arrival and processing the parole of all Afghan evacuees into the U.S. I defer to Department of Homeland Security regarding identification procedures conducted among relocated Afghans presently in the United States.

Question. Are there individuals whose identities remain unconfirmed, and if so how many?

Answer. I defer to Department of Homeland Security regarding identification procedures conducted among relocated Afghans presently in the United States.

Question. What security measures are in place for individuals without confirmed identities?

Answer. I refer you to the Department of Homeland Security for more information on security measures and requirements for admittance or parole into the United States.

Question. How many of the individuals among the Afghan evacuees are believed to be criminals or possible threats to U.S. national security?

Answer. 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. I defer to the Department of Homeland Security for more information regarding any such identified individuals.

Question. Are there individuals among the Afghan evacuees who have been specifically identified as taking up arms against the United States or our allies, or providing assistance to our enemies?

Answer. 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. For further information, I defer to the Department of Homeland Security.

Question. What is being done with those individuals when found? Are we detaining those individuals, deporting them, etc.?

Answer. I refer you to the Department of Homeland Security, as its component entities coordinate the interagency screening process, make final decisions on clearance for travel, parole, and related issues, and would take any action on detention or removal of a foreign national from the United States.

Question. Please provide the number of Afghan evacuees that have been denied entry into the United States due to vetting.

Answer. I refer you to the Department of Homeland Security, which has responsibility for the vetting of Afghans who relocate.

Question. Please provide the reason(s) for denial (ties to terrorism, evidence of taking up arms against the United States, criminal background, etc.).

Answer. I refer you to the Department of Homeland Security, which has responsibility for the vetting of Afghans who are relocated.

Question. Are you confident that the process in place is sufficient to keep out individuals seeking to harm the United States?

Answer. Yes. The Department of State is a part of the whole-of-government effort to appropriately screen and vet all potential travelers to the United States. We and other U.S. Government agencies have decades of experience working together to perform this critical work not just for these evacuees but for every traveler to the U.S.

Question. Has the U.S. Government identified any evacuees that were previously detained or incarcerated by U.S. forces in Afghanistan or elsewhere?

Answer. I refer you to the Department of Homeland Security, as Customs and Border Protection coordinates the interagency screening and vetting process and makes final decisions on clearance for travel, parole, and related issues.

Question. How many Afghan evacuees have been identified as Unaccompanied Alien Children?

Answer. As of October 15, our partners conducted over 300 best interest assessments for identified unaccompanied children outside the United States. Prior to arrival in the United States, the Department of State supports international organization partners to conduct best interest assessments for known unaccompanied children when possible. All unaccompanied children are referred to HHS's Office of Refugee Resettlement upon arrival in the United States. The Department of State works closely with HHS to facilitate reunification of children with their caregivers.

Question. There are reports of male evacuees at Ft. McCoy and elsewhere that have presented much younger, underage females as their wives. Can you confirm these cases and whether any of these individuals have made it into the United States?

Answer. We are aware of these reports and are working closely with the Department of Homeland Security as the lead federal agency on any protection-related concerns at the safe havens. We have provided guidance, developed in consultation with the Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement (HHS/ORR), to staff to help them look out for such cases and provide appropriate referrals for protective services. Any children arriving without a parent or legal guardian are referred to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of Refugee Resettlement (HHS/ORR), including married minors.

Question. How many cases of possible underage marriages have been reported?

Answer. The State Department does not independently track these figures. We understand cases have been reported. Any children arriving without a parent or legal guardian are referred to HHS/ORR, including married minors. I defer to HHS/ORR for specific figures.

Question. What guidance has been given regarding child brides and forced marriage?

Answer. The Department of State takes instances of child and forced “marriages” very seriously and has worked closely with interagency partners to identify and respond to any cases that have been uncovered. HHS/ORR is notified regarding any children arriving without a parent or legal guardian, including married minors. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is now the lead agency on protection of vulnerable populations at the CONUS safe havens. I refer you to DHS for further information on child brides and forced marriages, including guidance. At the OCONUS lily pads, the Department of State is supporting international organizations to help identify cases involving child and forced “marriages” and refer them to appropriate services, when possible.

Question. Is the first stage of vetting in third countries failing to identify and address these alleged incidents?

Answer. We are aware of these reports. We have provided guidance to staff to help them be on the lookout for such cases. There have not been many cases, but when staff identified them, appropriate action was taken in accordance with humanitarian standards and relevant immigration laws and practices.

Question. What is being done when possible cases of forced marriage, underage marriage, and polygamy are detected?

Answer. We are aware of these reports. We have provided guidance to staff to help them be on the lookout for such cases. When staff identified them, appropriate action was taken in accordance with humanitarian standards and relevant immigration laws and practices.

Question. There are also reports of child brides being sexually abused and assaulted by older male evacuees. Where have these alleged assaults occurred?

Answer. The Department of State takes instances of child “marriage” and abuse very seriously and has worked closely with interagency partners to identify and respond to any cases that have been uncovered. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is now the lead agency on protection of vulnerable populations at the CONUS safe havens. I refer you to DHS for further information on gender and child protection services. Regarding incidents involving abuse, since these are open law enforcement matters, I refer you to the Department of Justice for further information. Afghan parolees are expected to abide by the laws of the United States, both while in Department of Defense (DoD) installations and as resettled members of local communities. Incidents of criminal behavior on DoD installations are not tolerated and will be referred to law enforcement for appropriate action.

Question. What guidance, if any, has been issued to National Guardsmen or other U.S. officials in the United Arab Emirates and elsewhere for when they witness such abuse or assaults or receive a report of such?

Answer. All U.S. officials are encouraged to report abuse or assault when they witness it or receive reports of it, and some U.S. officials are required to do so, including reporting certain instances of child abuse pursuant to 34 U.S.C. § 20341. Protection of vulnerable persons, including those fleeing Afghanistan, is a top priority. U.S. partner organizations similarly work under strict codes of conduct meant to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse.

Question. We have all seen photos and video footage of what appears to be fully functioning U.S. equipment in Taliban hands. Please describe in detail what U.S. military equipment was left behind after the withdrawal.

Answer. The vast majority of equipment transferred to the Afghan military was provided through the Afghanistan Security Forces Fund, a Department of Defense (DoD)-managed fund under its Title 10 authority. DoD is responsible for monitoring and tracking the types and quantities of equipment transferred to a foreign government under Title 10 authorities or U.S. security assistance and security cooperation programs. I defer to DoD for this information.

Question. White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan was quoted in the press as saying, “We don’t have a complete picture, obviously, of where every article of defense materials has gone, but certainly a fair amount of it has fallen into the hands of the Taliban.” Please detail what was not destroyed or made inoperable.

Answer. The Department of Defense (DoD) determined which pieces of equipment to destroy or render inoperable by unauthorized users. I defer to DoD to provide this information.

Question. During the hearing, you stated that some of this equipment will become inoperable because the Taliban will not be able to maintain it. Is there an assessment of if and how much of the equipment you referenced can be maintained with assistance from foreign sources, e.g., China, Russia, etc.?

Answer. We are not aware of any offers Russia or China have made to the Taliban regarding the sustainment of U.S.-origin equipment. DoD or the intelligence community will be better positioned to assess the Taliban's level of technical expertise and its ability to maintain the equipment, with or without assistance from foreign sources.

Question. Has the U.S. seen evidence of any of that equipment being sold to, transferred to, or inspected by Iran or other foreign nations? Please provide as much unclassified information as possible.

Answer. The State Department has not received any verifiable reports of equipment that is being sold to, transferred to, or inspected by Iran. The Department of State continues monitoring reports, including for any information that may indicate that such transactions are taking place, at which point we would work with the DoD to determine how to respond. There are some assets that were out of the country when the Taliban took control of Kabul, and others were flown out of the country by Afghan Air Force personnel. The State Department is working with the inter-agency to safeguard and determine the disposition of these assets together with the partner nations where they reside.

Question. Secretary Blinken, you stated that approximately 124,000 people were evacuated from Afghanistan. Please break down that figure according to U.S. citizens, citizens of NATO allies, SIV applicants and their families, Afghans with valid visas, P2 applicants, and other relevant categories.

Answer. Of the approximately 124,000 people evacuated or relocated from August 14 to August 31, approximately 60,000 were brought to the United States as of September 14. Of those 60,000, approximately, seven percent are U.S. citizens, six percent are Lawful Permanent Residents, three percent hold Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs), and the rest are individuals either referred to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program through the P-1/P-2 program or otherwise vulnerable Afghans, the majority of whom worked with the United States. We believe approximately 50 percent of these may be eligible for SIVs.

Question. Please explain the differences in the vetting process for Afghans in these particular categories, if applicable.

Answer. Before visa issuance, Afghan Special Immigrant Visa applicants are reviewed at several stages of the application process. First, they are reviewed by the Chief of Mission for eligibility for the program. Subsequently, the Department of Homeland Security conducts a TECS search during the I-360 petition for special immigrant status approval process. At the visa interview, the consular officer will take biometric fingerprints for security vetting and review Department of State systems to determine whether an applicant requires additional security processing before the visa can be issued.

We will also continue to assist Afghans who may be eligible for referral to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. Afghans eligible and referred to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) must be outside of Afghanistan in a third country for their cases to be processed. Afghan applicants in the USRAP pipeline are subject to the same vetting process as all refugee applicants. They undergo an interagency security vetting process and the Department of Homeland Security's U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (DHS/USCIS) officers conduct extensive in-person interviews overseas to verify identity, establish eligibility, and identify information that could render an applicant inadmissible. DHS/USCI makes the final security determination and only DHS has the legal authority to grant a refugee admission to the United States.

Question. Please estimate how many SIV applicants and P2 referred applicants remain in Afghanistan and what is being done to assist their evacuation post-U.S. withdrawal.

Answer. We do not have estimates of how many Special Immigrant Visa applicants or P2-referred applicants remain in Afghanistan. We continue to fulfill our pledge to U.S. citizens and their families, Lawful Permanent Residents, 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.

Question. Given that applicants do not currently hold U.S. visas, are they able to leave?

Answer. We are consistently and diligently working with our partners in the region, across U.S. government agencies, and with partners in the private sector to explore all options to assist in the ongoing relocation of U.S. citizens and their families, Lawful Permanent Residents, our Afghans allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans. We will continue to engage diplomatically to resolve any issues and to hold the Taliban to their public pledge to let people with travel authorization, including U.S. citizens and their families, freely depart Afghanistan. We have reiterated this point to the Taliban.

Question. Please describe your strategy and options available for preventing the Taliban from blocking SIV applicants from leaving the country or detaining and mistreating them due to their service to the United States.

Answer. 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. We will continue our efforts to facilitate the safe and orderly travel of U.S. citizens, LPRs, and Afghans to whom we have a commitment and 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 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 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 public commitment of free passage for those who wish to leave the country including Afghans at risk. We are doing this in our direct and pragmatic operational communications with the Taliban and in tandem with our allies and partners around the world.

RESPONSES OF U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE ANTONY BLINKEN TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR MITT ROMNEY

Question. My office has heard multiple reports—including from Special Forces veterans and NGOs working to evacuate the SIV holders, SIV applicants, and at-risk Afghans whom they've worked with for years—indicating that the State Department has been recommending third countries not accept them. Is this accurate? Please explain in detail. If so, what is the State Department's plan to resolve these concerns and ensure that at-risk Afghans—especially those already vetted SIV holders—are able to evacuate before being further subjected to brutality at the hands of the Taliban?

Answer. 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 with other partners to facilitate for the departure of those who wish to leave Afghanistan, including U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents, our Afghans allies, and vulnerable and at-risk Afghans.

Question. Will the change of the U.S. intelligence posture in Afghanistan make it more difficult to review SIV applications, and specifically do you expect the withdrawal to lengthen the already oftentimes years-long timeframe it takes to review and make a decision on an application?

Answer. The Department of State does not anticipate the U.S. intelligence posture will impact Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) processing timelines. Most aspects of SIV application processing occurred outside of Afghanistan even before the U.S. withdrawal from the country. The Department is expediting SIV processing at all stages within our control. Currently, the main impediment to issuing Special Immigrant Visas for Afghans who have completed the Chief of Mission approval process is the suspension of operations at the U.S. embassy in Kabul. While we are currently unable to provide consular services in Afghanistan, we will continue to process SIV applications at all points of the process, 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 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 countries in the region, like Qatar, and those that border Afghanistan to allow Afghans to enter.

Question. What is the State Department plan for people who safely made it to third countries, but subsequently fail the vetting process?

Answer. Intelligence, law enforcement, and security professionals are conducting screening and security vetting, using biographic and biometric data, for all Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants and other vulnerable Afghans before they are allowed into the United States. If someone does not pass these checks while they are still overseas, the State Department will work with partners and allies around the world to identify countries that will accept Afghans for relocation.

Question. Which U.S. allies and partners have agreed to permanently take at-risk Afghans?

Answer. 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 their efforts to provide third-country resettlement to refugees around the world. We are in discussion with UNHCR who works with many other countries to resettle refugees, including those from Afghanistan.

We commend other countries who have already started to accept Afghan refugees who are in need of protection. We strongly encourage countries in the region and those that border Afghanistan to allow entry for Afghans and coordinate with international organizations and other humanitarian partners 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 is the state of negotiations for third countries that are taking SIVs during processing?

Answer. While we are currently unable to provide consular services in Afghanistan, we will continue 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 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. We are developing processing alternatives so that we can continue to deliver these important consular services for the people of Afghanistan. This effort is of utmost importance to the U.S. Government.

Partners around the globe have been instrumental in the process of relocating Afghan nationals, as well as U.S. citizens, lawful permanent residents, and personnel from partner nations. Many countries have transited Afghans through their territories and many other countries made generous offers of support. Many countries have committed to permanently resettle Afghans. The United States has concluded international agreements with several countries to facilitate these activities, and the Department of State continues to follow its normal procedure for transmitting the texts of these international agreements to the Congress, consistent with 1 U.S.C. 112b.

Question. The State Department, through its Rewards for Justice Program, is offering a reward of \$10 million for information that leads to Sirajuddin Haqqani's arrest. He's wanted in connection with the Serena Hotel suicide bombing attack in Kabul in 2008 that killed American Thor Hesla, as well as five others, including a number of Norwegians. He tried to assassinate Afghan President Hamid Karzai. He oversaw the day-to-day operations of the Haqqani network, infamous for their brutality and attacks such as a 2017 car bomb that massacred 170 people and wounded hundreds. This is a man who has directed brutal indiscriminate killing. This is the man who was just named Acting Interior Minister by the Taliban. Does the State department plan on maintaining the \$10 million bounty on Sirajuddin Haqqani (who was recently named Acting Interior Minister)?

Answer. The Taliban is a Specially Designated Global Terrorist entity, and the Haqqani Network is a designated Foreign Terrorist Organization; and we have and will account for that, ensuring that all we do is consistent with U.S. law and policy. No decision has been made yet on whether to maintain the \$10 million bounty on Sirajuddin Haqqani. The Department will consult with our interagency partners on this issue and make a determination that is based on the best interests of the United States. The State Department does not comment on such deliberations.

Question. What exactly does the Acting Interior Minister do, and does he have a role in allowing or disallowing people to leave the country?

Answer. The Ministry of Interior has traditionally had responsibility for Afghanistan's police force and some aspects of the country's internal security. Ministry of Interior personnel will likely have some influence on individuals' ability to travel freely in Afghanistan, including their ability to leave the country. The Department is watching the Taliban's actions closely.

Question. How many Americans left on the ground in Afghanistan are now subject to Haqqani's control/jurisdiction?

Answer. The United States does not require U.S. citizens to notify us of their location, and, consequently, the Department is unable to speak to the number of U.S. citizens residing in areas of Afghanistan where the Haqqani Network is present. The Department has made every effort to contact U.S. citizens who are interested in leaving Afghanistan, however, and our commitment to helping those who wish to leave remains steadfast.

Question. Does the U.S. still consider the Haqqani Network a terrorist organization?

Answer. The Haqqani Network is designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization under section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act and a Specially Designated Global Terrorist entity under E.O. 13224.

Question. Given the known terrorist in the Taliban leadership, will you commit not to recognize the Taliban Government?

Answer. The United States has a long-standing policy, albeit with several exceptions over the years, to avoid formal statements on recognition in cases of changes of governments. Our policy has not changed. The legitimacy and support the Taliban seek 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. The United States maintains a wide range of tools to ensure the Taliban uphold these public commitments, including sanctions and economic assistance.

Question. Did the U.S. make any agreements with the Taliban in order to maintain access to the Kabul airport for evacuation operations? If so, please detail the terms of the agreement.

Answer. The United States engaged in dialogue with the Taliban on matters of important U.S. interests, including the evacuation of U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents from Afghanistan. As a result of these discussions, the Taliban took steps to moderate their actions in ways that allowed us to complete our evacuation mission. 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. Additionally, will you commit to provide a copy of the agreements to Congress?

Answer. 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. In the Panjshir province, the National Resistance Front has mobilized against the Taliban. This group includes the Vice President of the Afghan Government (Amrullah Saleh). What is the position of the U.S. Government on the National Resistance Front and militia efforts to prevent Taliban control over territory?

Answer. The Department is not aware of Amrullah Saleh's current whereabouts.

Question. Are the Taliban and surrounding countries allowing American citizens, green card holders, and other at-risk Afghans across borders?

Answer. We continue to fulfill our pledge to U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents, 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. Travelers

do not require a letter from the State Department or any other U.S. Government entity to leave Afghanistan. If they have made their own arrangements with their onward destination country and any transit countries, individuals do not require permission from the United States. 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.

Question. In the few short weeks since they took control, what restrictions have already been put in place by the Taliban on women and girls?

Answer. We are deeply concerned about the Taliban's restrictions regarding human rights and fundamental freedoms for women and girls. Taliban political leaders have stated women have a right to education while also communicating adjustments must be made to make access consistent with Islam and Afghan culture. According to public, international news sources, public universities will be segregated by gender and include potential new dress codes for female students. Female professors will teach female students while male professors may teach female students from behind a curtain. In some cases, women have been asked to stay away from work, though exceptions are being made for women in the public health sector.

Question. How does State plan to balance getting aid to needy Afghans while making sure that aid does not get in the hands of Taliban terrorists?

Answer. 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, bureaus are planning for how they will make adjustments to strengthen monitoring and evaluation of continuing programs from outside Afghanistan, including through existing third parties, given the current footprint. Both agencies have years of experience in successfully managing projects remotely and through third party monitors from 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.

The U.S. Government takes seriously its duty as a steward of U.S. taxpayer funding and holds our implementing partners to the highest standards to ensure that taxpayer funds are used effectively and for their intended purpose. We require our partners to have proper safeguards and risk mitigation systems in place to help ensure that humanitarian aid reaches those who need it most. Our partners are required to take steps to mitigate against diversion, fraud, waste, and abuse, including any such incidents involving the Taliban and Haqqani Network.

Question. Will you commit to working with this committee on developing a strategy for aid moving forward?

Answer. Apart from humanitarian assistance, which will continue, the Department is continuing to review its non-humanitarian assistance programs and funding. We look forward to working closely with Congress as we consider our non-humanitarian assistance posture in Afghanistan.

Question. For the past few months, the Administration has told the Senate that withdrawal of forces will not negatively impact counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan. These briefings continued even as the Administration chose to withdraw without conditions, given that the Taliban did not, as it agreed in February 2020, cut ties with Al Qaeda. Will the Taliban prevent terrorists from organizing on Afghan soil?

Answer. We continue to communicate to the Taliban regarding these public counterterrorism commitments, including that they will not host terrorist groups inside Afghanistan. The Taliban are aware that we are closely monitoring their actions to counter terrorist activity and that we remain ready to take unilateral actions as needed to address U.S. national security concerns.

Question. Will the U.S. have to increase its diplomatic or military resources devoted to counterterrorism operations as a result of Taliban control of Afghanistan?

Answer. The Department continues to evaluate what resources will be needed to effectively address terrorism challenges in Afghanistan and the region without a counterterrorism presence in Afghanistan. Part of that effort entails intensified diplomatic engagement on issues of shared concern with countries in the region and that border Afghanistan. I defer to the Department of Defense regarding any shifts in military resources.

Question. How does the collapse of the Afghan Security Forces impact our ability to do intelligence gathering on the ground?

Answer. As President Biden has articulated, it is critical for the United States to retain over the horizon counterterrorism capabilities to prevent, detect, and disrupt terrorism threats. I defer to the Intelligence Community for questions on intelligence collection capabilities for Afghanistan.

Question. How far away is the closest U.S. military base or installation from which we can conduct over-the-horizon strikes in Afghanistan?

Answer. The United States maintains defense agreements and arrangements with allies and partners worldwide to enable our military to operate on a global scale. I defer to the Department of Defense regarding the specific deployment of any assets at overseas installations or naval deployments in maritime locations.

Question. Roundtrip, how much time would it take to conduct an operation at the farthest away point in Afghanistan?

Answer. I defer to the Department of Defense regarding planning timelines associated with any potential military operations.

Question. Have Russia or other adversaries tried to intervene to prevent new installations?

Answer. We take seriously any Russian or other interference in our security cooperation with allies and partners around the world as we continue to deepen relationships that enable our military to respond to threats to our homeland, no matter where those threats may emanate from. As President Biden has said, “We will not hesitate to raise the cost on Russia and defend our vital interests and our people.” Further information would need to be provided in a different setting.

Question. How many at-risk Afghans have been killed or brutalized since the U.S. withdrawal announcement in March?

Answer. The Department of State does not have specific figures; however, we have seen troubling footage of injuries suffered by journalists in Taliban detention as well as violence against protesters. The United States condemns in the strongest terms reports of Taliban kidnappings, beatings, intimidation, and killings of Afghan civilians. We stand firm with the international community in our commitment to hold perpetrators of these abuses accountable.

Question. Some of our allies have been extremely critical of the U.S. for not consulting with them on the withdrawal plan. This is contrary to the Administration’s messaging on the need to work closely with allies. What plans does the Administration have moving forward for coordination with our allies and partners on Afghan refugees, counterterrorism, and other issues that are arising from the withdrawal?

Answer. Along with other senior Department officials, I have convened or taken part in a series of bilateral and multilateral engagements to coordinate with our allies and partners about what we need to see from the Taliban and from any Government of Afghanistan. As President Biden has made clear, the United States will maintain robust counterterrorism capabilities in the region to neutralize any threats, and we will not hesitate to use those capabilities if we have to do so. I have noted that the legitimacy and support that the Taliban seek from the international community will depend on their conduct, including respecting human rights.

RESPONSES OF U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE ANTONY BLINKEN TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR ROB PORTMAN

Question. As I mentioned earlier, I am concerned about the close relationship between the Taliban and the Haqqani network. Your spokesman said the two are “separate entities,” but the head of that network is now the Interior Minister. So, it is pretty clear that they are not separate entities, but a closely combined organization. With known terrorists now part of the Taliban Government, what confidence do you have that they will not harbor terrorist training camps in Afghanistan and plot against us and our allies?

Answer. Speaking to the BBC on September 29, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah 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. Such statements and the Taliban’s cooperation seeking to prevent an ISIS-K attack at Kabul International Airport reflect the Taliban’s aim of demonstrating they are adhering to their counterterrorism commitments under the U.S.-Taliban Agreement. The United States continues to call on the Taliban to fulfill their commitments,

which include preventing terrorist groups or individuals from training, fundraising, and recruiting, and not hosting them.

Question. How does this fact influence your decision to resume U.S. aid to Afghanistan? Will any of this aid be passed to the United Nations or any other multi-lateral implementing partners? How much of the recently announced \$64 million will be implemented through USAID rather than State?

Answer. The United States delivers humanitarian aid through non-government partners, international organizations, and third parties according to the principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence.

On September 13, the United States announced nearly \$64 million in additional humanitarian assistance for Afghans. Of this amount, nearly \$40 million was provided through USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance and nearly \$24 million through State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration. This assistance went to independent humanitarian organizations, including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the World Health Organization to provide life-saving protection, shelter, livelihood support, essential health care, emergency food aid, water, sanitation, and hygiene services to respond to the needs generated by recent conflict and compounded by the severe drought and other natural disasters, as well as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Question. Recently, I sent a letter with Senator Rubio to Secretary Yellen to use all means necessary to keep internationally held reserve assets out of the hands of the Taliban. I am very concerned that these funds would not be used to help the people of Afghanistan, but rather to promote suppression and terror. What is the State Department's position on recognizing the Taliban in Afghanistan? What coordination and talks have you had with the Treasury Department on leveraging sanctions to decrease the Taliban's capability to sponsor international terrorism?

Answer. The United States has a long-standing policy to avoid, in most cases, formal statements on recognition in cases of changes of governments. Our policy has not changed. We will continue to communicate to the Taliban to advance our interests in Afghanistan. The Taliban will be judged on their actions, specifically with regard to meeting counterterrorism commitments and respecting the human rights of those in Afghanistan. The Department of State's understanding is that the Taliban does not have access to internationally held Afghan Central Bank reserve assets. The Taliban is designated as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist under E.O. 13224, as amended. The Department of State coordinates closely with the Department of the Treasury on sanctions policy and implementation.

Question. What is the State Department's assessment of future civil-society support for foreign aid and programming in Afghanistan? If possible, what safeguards will you use to ensure that this support does not end up in the hands of the Taliban? Will we also ask our allies to follow suit with those same safeguards?

Answer. The Department is continuing to review all non-humanitarian assistance programs in Afghanistan. The outcomes of this review will inform our decisions regarding what non-humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people should continue and what programs will be stopped.

As part of this review, State and USAID bureaus are assessing their programs, the operating environment, and other issues to mitigate risks. Bureaus are planning for how they may make adjustments to monitor and evaluate continuing programs from outside Afghanistan, including through third parties, given that the operations of the U.S. Embassy in Kabul are suspended. State and USAID and our implementers have experience using similar mechanisms, such as in Syria, in addition to some bureaus with historical experience successfully managing programs 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. It is clear that at some level, we coordinated with the Taliban to conduct the evacuation. However, the State Department, or any Agency of Department for that matter, has not been able to detail what assurances we gave or received from the Taliban. Are you able to explain the assurances that were exchanged between the Taliban and the United States during the evacuation effort? The reporting of such agreements to Congress is mandated in section 1217 of the FY21 NDAA.

Answer. The United States will continue to press the Taliban to ensure that all who wish to leave Afghanistan are able to, and will monitor the Taliban's adherence to their commitments closely. 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. The United States has spent close to \$780 million over 20 years to support a future of Afghan women. There are reports of peaceful protests by women in Afghanistan being broken up with gunshots and violence. With our withdrawal and the collapse of the Government we are looking at a whole generation of Afghan women who are now at risk of losing the gains they have made in regards of education and inclusion in the Government. What is the United States strategy to support women in Afghanistan and protect the progress we have made?

Answer. The United States will continue to support Afghan women and girls through our diplomatic engagement and robust humanitarian assistance. No society can succeed if half of its population is left out. Afghanistan can have neither security nor prosperity if its women and girls are not afforded opportunities to fully participate in society, including educational opportunities at all levels. We will monitor closely how any government respects the human rights and freedoms that have become an integral part of the life of women and girls in Afghanistan during the last 20 years.

Question. The number reported in the media is that we only evacuated 705 SIV applicants out of Afghanistan. The Department of State and other agencies have said this number is incorrect, however, they have refused to provide a different number. What is the final number of SIV applicants that were evacuated out of Afghanistan by the August 31 deadline?

Answer. 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 of these individuals had outstanding SIV applications.

We continue to prioritize processing for qualified Afghan SIV applicants. Although SIV applicants will not be able to complete a visa interview or other visa processing in Afghanistan, we are expediting continuing SIV processing at all other stages of the process outside of Afghanistan. We continue to prioritize this effort and our commitment to continue to provide services has no expiration date.

RESPONSES OF U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE ANTONY BLINKEN TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR TODD YOUNG

Question. What is your strategy for effectively providing consular services from Doha, Qatar to U.S. citizens, legal residents, and valid visa holders currently in Afghanistan?

Answer. The U.S. Government continues to expect the Taliban to provide safe passage to U.S. citizens and their families, Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs), and Afghans with valid travel documentation who wish to leave Afghanistan, while encouraging countries in the region and those that border Afghanistan to allow Afghans to enter. The Department of State relocated consular staff from Kabul and added temporary duty personnel to Doha to assist with the increased volume of casework. We are first focusing on U.S. citizens and immediate family members who are ready to depart and have travel documents including passports, LPR cards, or visas for non-U.S. citizen family members. We are exploring options for the subset of U.S. citizens with immediate family members for whom documentation has been an issue to identify ways to assist them, but this poses challenges.

Question. How will you seek to assist Afghan nationals who remain in Afghanistan and need to complete the application process to receive a Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) or Priority 2 (P-2) refugee designation?

Answer. While we are currently unable to provide consular services for immigrant visa applicants, including Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs), in Afghanistan, we will continue 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. As operations at U.S. Embassy Kabul have been suspended, Afghans eligible and referred to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program must be outside of Afghanistan in a third country for their cases to be processed. We are continuing to review the situation on the ground and consider all available options, and our planning will continue to evolve.

Question. Is the SIV or P-2 determination process for those who have been evacuated from Afghanistan, regardless of their current location or plans to bring them to the United States, still being expedited?

Answer. We are continuing to process SIV applications, 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. The interagency continues to work with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to identify individuals and associate them with their SIV applications, P-1/P-2 referrals to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, and other categories of eligibility as they continue the relocation process. P-1/P-2 referrals are designations for access to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program; these are not visas and are not linked to any status. For additional information, we refer you to DHS.

RESPONSES OF U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE ANTONY BLINKEN TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR JOHN BARRASSO

Question. How many individuals did the United States evacuate between August 12, 2021 and August 30, 2021 as part of the military assisted evacuation from Afghanistan? Please provide the total number and a breakdown of the number based on the citizenship of those individuals.

Answer. As of September 1, we estimated that 124,000 individuals had been relocated from Afghanistan with U.S. and partner support. Of these, approximately 6,000 were U.S. citizens. Also included were individuals who worked for us or supported us in our two-decade mission in Afghanistan.

The interagency continues to work with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to survey relocated individuals and identify if they have or are eligible for Special Immigrant status, P-1/P-2 referrals to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, and other categories of eligibility as they continue the relocation process. For additional information, we refer you to DHS.

Question. How many of the individuals evacuated by the United States were not U.S. citizens, special immigrant visa holders, P1 visa holders, or P2 visa holders?

Answer. As of September 1, approximately 124,000 people were relocated out of Afghanistan with U.S. and partner support. Of these, approximately 6,000 were U.S. citizens who evacuated on or before August 31; between September 1 and November 9, the Department assisted 385 U.S. citizens and 285 Lawful Permanent Residents to depart.

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. The interagency continues to work with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to identify individuals and associate them with their existing or newly created SIV applications, P-1/P-2 referrals to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), and other categories of eligibility as they continue the relocation process. P-1/P-2 referrals are designations for access to the USRAP; these are not visas and are not linked to any immigration status. For additional information, I refer you to DHS.

Question. What percentage of the Afghan citizens that left Afghanistan as part of the U.S. evacuation efforts were vetted before they got on the airplane?

Answer. 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, Afghans who have been relocated out of Afghanistan 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. It was reported that no U.S. citizens made it to the airport to depart on any of the last five planes that departed as part of the U.S. evacuation on August 30, 2021. When did the last U.S. evacuation flight containing a U.S. citizen leave Afghanistan?

Answer. The last U.S. flight to leave Afghanistan transporting private U.S. citizens was August 30, 2021.

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 U.S. Government is pressing the Taliban to provide safe passage to U.S. citizens, LPRs, and Afghans with travel documentation who wish to leave Afghanistan, while encouraging countries like Qatar to allow Afghans to enter.

Question. How many U.S. citizens were evacuated by the United States between August 12, 2021 and August 30, 2021?

Answer. There were approximately 6,000 U.S. citizens evacuated between August 12 and August 30, 2021.

Question. How many legal permanent residents were evacuated by the United States between August 12, 2021 and August 30, 2021?

Answer. The Department of State cannot definitively state the number of Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs) relocated by the U.S. prior to August 31. Like U.S. citizens, 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 at any particular time.

Question. How many locally employed staff were at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul prior to the evacuation? How many were evacuated by August 30, 2021?

Answer. At the time of the August 2021 evacuation of Embassy Kabul, there were 689 locally employed staff on the Embassy rolls. Sixteen of the Embassy locally employed staff remain in Kabul. Five declined to relocate and remained in Kabul by choice and 11 were unable to travel on August 30, of which seven have requested assistance to depart Afghanistan.

Question. How many U.S. citizens was the State Department aware of that were seeking to leave Afghanistan as of August 30, 2021?

Answer. The Department of State believes there were about 100 U.S. citizens seeking to depart immediately after we suspended operations on August 31, 2021. However, this number has fluctuated as additional U.S. citizens seek to depart and others change their decision to stay or to depart.

Question. With no U.S. diplomatic or military presence on the ground, what mechanisms are being used by the Administration to ensure the safe evacuation of the Americans the Biden administration left behind in Afghanistan?

Answer. The Department of State is in constant contact with U.S. citizens in Afghanistan who have told us they wish to leave. We continue to look for options for U.S. citizens to depart Afghanistan. We are working with bordering countries to allow U.S. citizens to enter via border crossings or other means of transportation and will continue to press the Taliban to keep their public promise that all U.S. citizens who want to leave will be able to depart.

Question. During your testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, you stated, "There had not been a single SIV applicant interview in Kabul in 9 months, going back to March of 2020. The program was basically in a stall." How many Afghan Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) were issued between March 2020 and the end of December 2020?

Answer. While the U.S. embassy in Kabul was not conducting interviews for any visa categories (including SIVs) from March 2020 until February 2021 due to the prevalence of COVID-19 in Afghanistan, the consular section continued to process applications that were past the interview stage. In addition, they continued taking oaths from applicants who were ready to have a visa issued but needed only to add newborn children to their cases. Also, a small number of cases were processed at consular posts outside of Afghanistan.

In all, the Department of State issued 643 Afghan SIV for principal applicants from March 2020 until December 2020.

Question. Were visa applications of individuals who had already been interviewed still being processed between March 2020 through the end of December 2020?

Answer. The U.S. Embassy in Kabul was not conducting interviews for any visa categories (including Special Immigrant Visas) from March 2020 until February 2021 due to the prevalence of COVID-19 in Afghanistan. They continued processing applications that were past the interview stage. In addition, they continued taking oaths from applicants who were ready to have a visa issued but needed only to add newborn children or take other actions to their existing cases. Also, a small number of cases were processed at consular posts outside of Afghanistan.

Question. On December 31, 2020, how many Afghan Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) and family members were pending scheduling for visa interviews?

Answer. On December 31, 2020, there were 622 principal applicants pending scheduling for visa interviews.

Question. What was the reason interviews were stopped between March 2020 through the end of December 2020?

Answer. The U.S. Embassy in Kabul was not conducting interviews for any visa categories (including Special Immigrant Visas) from March 2020 until February 2021 due to the prevalence of COVID-19 in Afghanistan in order to protect the health of visa applicants and its staff. The Country Team in Kabul assessed all factors and determined it was not safe for embassy staff or visa applicants to conduct interviews, especially given the lack of adequate medical care in Afghanistan.

Question. What impact did the coronavirus pandemic have on the ability to hold in person interviews for Afghan Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) in Kabul?

Answer. Due to the prevalence of COVID-19 in Afghanistan, U.S. Embassy Kabul did not conduct interviews for any visa categories (including Special Immigrant Visas) from March 2020 until February 2021. From June 13 to July 5, 2021, a COVID-19 outbreak at the embassy again forced a 3-week suspension of visa interviews. During those periods, however the embassy continued to process existing SIV applications that did not require close contact with applicants, such as reviewing documents, printing visas, and returning passports.

Question. Were in person interviews mandated by law as part of the Afghan Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) process?

Answer. Although the Afghan Allies Protection Act does not specifically mandate interviews, U.S. law and Department of State regulations require immigrant visa applicants appear personally before a consular officer to sign their application and verify their application by oath and, at that time, provide fingerprints. Fingerprints are required for security vetting.

Question. When did the in-person interviews at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul resume for Afghan special immigrant visas?

Answer. In-person visa interviews for Afghan Special Immigrant Visas and other immigrant visas at Embassy Kabul resumed in February 2021 after it was deemed safe for both visa applicants and Embassy staff. COVID-19 spikes later forced the embassy to suspend in-person visa services from June 15 to July 3.

Question. During your testimony you stated, “On February 4, 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.” When was the review completed and what were the findings?

Answer. The Department of State remains engaged with the interagency in reviewing the SIV program and finding ways to improve the efficiency of SIV processing, including with respect to the topics addressed in E.O. 14013.

Question. During the hearing, you stated, “This spring, I directed significant additional resources to the program, expanding the team of people in Washington processing applications from 10 to 50, doubling the number of SIV adjudicators in Kabul and our embassy there.” Based on the analysis you did to determine what additional resources were needed, how many Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) for Afghans did you estimate could be reviewed and completed per month with the additional resource you provided?

Answer. The U.S. Embassy in Kabul estimated that with the additional adjudicators, the consular section would be able to interview approximately 850 Afghan SIV cases per month and with additional staff, the Afghan SIV Unit could process up to 1000 or more Chief of Mission approval applications per month. Each Afghan SIV case includes the principal applicant, plus their immediate family members (spouse and minor children). While the number of family members varied per case, Embassy Kabul processed many more than 850 individuals each month when including SIV family members.

Question. When did the additional SIV adjudicators arrive in Kabul?

Answer. The additional Special Immigrant Visa adjudicators arrived on April 1, 2021.

Question. From January 20, 2021 through August 12, 2021, how many SIV special immigrant visas for Afghans were approved? How many individuals were denied?

Answer. From January 20 until August 12, 2021, the Department of State issued 1,527 Afghan Special Immigrant Visa principal applicants and 5,076 derivative applicants. Individuals may be denied an immigrant visa for a variety of reasons but most often for lacking required documentation or pending administrative processing. Such refusals can be overcome once additional documentation is submitted or administrative processing is completed. From January 20 through August 12, 2021, the Department of State refused 1,154 principal applicants and 4,140 derivative applicants. However, 99 percent of those refusals were due to additional documentation required or administrative processing (which can be overcome) and only one percent were related to other ineligibilities. Since the SIV program's inception, less than one percent of all SIV applicants (including family members) receive final refusals that cannot be overcome and are not ultimately issued visas.

Question. The State Department issued a statement on August 24, 2021 that "all immigrant visa appointments, including Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs), at the Embassy have been canceled." How many Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) for Afghans were still pending review on August 24, 2021?

Answer. There were approximately 18,000 Special Immigrant Visas at various stages of the pipeline on August 31, 2021. Almost 8,500 of these were at the initial stage of the process, where the National Visa Center has requested additional documentation before the application can be referred to the Chief of Mission for review. Approximately 540 applicants had documentarily complete cases at the National Visa Center that were pending interview scheduling for the future and 400 applicants had interviews scheduled that had to be canceled.

Question. How many Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders from Afghanistan were evacuated by the United States between August 12, 2021 and August 30, 2021?

Answer. Approximately 60,000 people were brought into the United States from Afghanistan through Operation Allies Refuge, of those approximately three percent were Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders, and approximately 50 percent were SIV eligible.

Question. How many Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders' family members from Afghanistan were evacuated by the United States between August 12, 2021 and August 30, 2021?

Answer. Approximately 60,000 people were brought into the United States from Afghanistan through Operation Allies Refuge, of those approximately three percent were Special Immigrant Visa holders, plus their eligible spouse and minor children. The average Afghan family size was five to six persons.

Question. How many Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants were evacuated from Afghanistan by the United States between August 12, 2021 and August 30, 2021?

Answer. Approximately 60,000 people were brought into the United States from Afghanistan through Operation Allies Refuge, of those approximately three percent were Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders, and approximately 50 percent were SIV eligible.

Question. How many Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicant family members were evacuated from Afghanistan by the United States between August 12, 2021 and August 30, 2021?

Answer. Approximately 60,000 people were brought into the United States from Afghanistan through Operation Allies Refuge, of those approximately three percent were Special Immigrant Visa holders, plus their eligible spouse and minor children. The average Afghan family size was five to six persons.

Question. What affiliation if any does the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have with the Afghanistan Taliban?

Answer. Though the TTP has a presence in Afghanistan, the group is a separate organization and perpetrates attacks against Pakistan independent of the Afghan Taliban. We do not have indications of Taliban support for TTP but believe large numbers of the group remain in Afghanistan.

Question. Was the Government of Pakistan supportive of the Taliban's offensive takeover of Afghanistan?

Answer. Various senior Pakistani leaders, including Prime Minister Khan, called repeatedly for a political solution to the conflict in Afghanistan prior to the Taliban taking control of Kabul on August 15. In a May interview, for example, Khan stated that if the Taliban attempted to overthrow the Afghan Government in Kabul by military force it would lead to a protracted civil war and an influx of refugees into Pakistan. Khan further claimed that Pakistan would use all the tools necessary to support peace in Afghanistan. Following August 15, senior Pakistani officials have continued to stress the need for an inclusive political settlement and the protection of women's educational rights in Afghanistan during multiple public events. Pakistan has made repeated public calls for the international community to directly engage with the Taliban to prevent further violence, avoid economic collapse, and avert a humanitarian disaster.

Question. What support did the government and military in Pakistan provide the Taliban in taking over control of Afghanistan from the democratically elected government?

Answer. Senior Pakistani Government officials supported Afghan peace talks, including by encouraging the Taliban to engage in negotiations. Various senior Pakistani officials also made repeated public calls for a political solution to the Afghan conflict and expressed concern an overthrow of Kabul by the Taliban would lead to a protracted civil war.

Question. What efforts did the Biden administration take to curb Pakistan's support of the Taliban in Afghanistan?

Answer. The State Department has engaged with the Pakistani Government at senior levels, including with my personal engagement and that of and Deputy Secretary Sherman, to urge close coordination and alignment with the international community on the way forward in Afghanistan. We have made it clear that a government in Kabul that is inclusive, protects the rights of women and minorities, adheres to its counterterrorism commitments, and ensures humanitarian access and safe passage for those who wish to leave Afghanistan would be in the best interests of all countries in the region, including Pakistan. We will continue to convey at the highest levels the importance the Biden administration places on Pakistan's constructive role moving forward.

Question. Is the Government of Pakistan currently providing financial support, logistics, and weaponry to the Taliban? If so, what is it providing?

Answer. Pakistan is providing limited humanitarian aid to the new Taliban Government and is encouraging other countries to pursue similar policies. Pakistan has not announced other assistance to the Taliban.

Question. Do you support additional sanctions on Pakistan and Pakistani Government officials involved in support for the Taliban?

Answer. U.S. sanctions designations are regularly reviewed and updated consistent with U.S. law and policy. Given Pakistan's critical cooperation, we do not support sanctions against the Government of Pakistan or its government officials.

Question. What is the Biden administration's strategy to prevent terrorists from once again having a platform in Afghanistan to plan and launch attacks against the United States?

Answer. Preventing Afghanistan from ever again becoming a safe haven for terrorists remains our top priority and we continue to apply a whole-of-government approach to counterterrorism efforts for Afghanistan. This consists of, but is not limited to, the continued use of sanctions regimes, engagement with the Taliban on our counterterrorism concerns, strengthening law enforcement and security sector assistance partnerships in regional countries, bolstering regional border security capabilities, and maintaining unilateral over the horizon counterterrorism capabilities.

Question. How has the counter-terrorism strategy changed since the fall of the Government of Afghanistan?

Answer. Our counterterrorism objectives of ensuring Afghanistan is never again used as a safe-haven for terrorism have not changed, but our strategies necessarily evolve with the changing circumstances. We are seeking to bolster security partnerships and capabilities in the region, as well as continue to maintain our over-the-horizon capabilities. We continue to use a whole-of-government approach to address terrorist threats that may emanate from Afghanistan.

Question. What specific agreements has the Biden administration made with the Taliban since the January 2021?

Answer. 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. During the evacuation efforts in Afghanistan, what commitments or promises did the Biden administration make to the Taliban?

Answer. The evacuation and relocation effort has been a monumental task. The Taliban publicly committed to allowing safe passage for U.S. and other foreign nationals as well as Afghans with travel documents. We continue to hold the Taliban to this public commitment on assuring safe passage.

Question. What counter-terrorism commitments did the Taliban agree to with the United States and what is your assessment on whether the Taliban has upheld its commitments?

Answer. The Taliban publicly committed to not allow individuals or groups, including al-Qa'ida, to use Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies; to send a clear message that those who pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies have no place in Afghanistan, and to instruct their members not to cooperate with such groups or individuals; to prevent them from recruiting, training, and fundraising and not host them; and not to provide visas, passports, travel permits, or other legal documents to those who pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies to enter Afghanistan. The Taliban have taken some positive steps but have not fully upheld all these public commitments.

Question. What tools does the United State have to ensure the Taliban upholds its commitments?

Answer. The United States maintains a wide range of tools to ensure the Taliban upholds these public commitments, including diplomatic engagement, sanctions, and economic assistance. The legitimacy and support the Taliban seeks from the international community will depend on their actions, including preventing terrorist groups from posing a threat to the United States from Afghanistan, adherence to upholding human rights and fundamental freedoms, allowing freedom of passage for American citizens, third country nationals, and Afghans with proper documentation that desire to leave allowing unimpeded humanitarian access, and forming an inclusive government that includes women and members of minority groups.

Question. Media reports indicate that members of the Afghan Air Force reportedly flew 46 aircrafts, including A-29 light attack planes, Cessna C-208 utility aircraft, and UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters, to Uzbekistan. What is the Administration doing to ensure these aircraft are never handed over to the Taliban?

Answer. While this process falls under DoD authority because of the original source of funding, the Department of State continues to participate in our regional security engagements with the governments of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan as the Department of Defense determines, in discussion with the interagency, the final disposition options for the Afghanistan Security Forces Fund (ASFF) funded aircraft as well as a variety of other ASFF-funded materiel that is outside Afghanistan. I defer to the Department of Defense on additional details for the status of Afghanistan aircraft currently located outside of Afghanistan.

Question. Is the Administration negotiating to bring the aircraft to U.S. military bases in the Middle East?

Answer. The Department of State shares Congress' interest in ensuring that the U.S. military aircraft that the Department of Defense (DoD) procured using the Afghanistan Security Forces Fund or other DoD authorities and then transferred to the Afghanistan Government do not fall into the wrong hands. As the aircraft were transferred under DoD authorities, the process of repossessing the aircraft fall under DoD authority as well. The Department of State participates in discussions with the interagency regarding the final disposition options for aircraft and other materiel that is outside Afghanistan. DoD may take the equipment back into its own stock, offer it to other USG entities, or consider transfer of the equipment to a foreign partner under section 333 authority with State concurrence. DoD may also declare the aircraft as Excess Defense Articles, at which point State authorities would govern any transfer to a foreign government. State defers to DoD on addi-

tional details for the status of Afghanistan aircraft currently located outside of Afghanistan.

Question. During his testimony before the House Subcommittee on National Security, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction stated, “A reduced U.S. civilian and military presence in Afghanistan amid a deteriorating security environment could create new challenges for conducting effective oversight of U.S. funded programs, grants, and contracts for reconstruction work.” Given the fact there is now no U.S. diplomatic or military presence in Afghanistan, how can the Administration ensure U.S. taxpayer resources will be used appropriately and go to the intended recipients?

Answer. State and USAID bureaus are assessing their programs, the operating environment, and other potential issues to mitigate risks associated with ongoing humanitarian assistance programming. As part of that, bureaus are planning for how they will make adjustments to strengthen 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 is your plan to conduct effective oversight of U.S. funded programs and grants under the current security environment in Afghanistan?

Answer. State and USAID bureaus are assessing their programs, the operating environment, and other potential issues to mitigate risks associated with ongoing humanitarian assistance programming. As part of that, bureaus are planning for how they will make adjustments to strengthen the monitoring and evaluation of continuing programs from outside Afghanistan, including through existing third parties, given the current footprint. 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 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 required to take steps to mitigate against diversion, fraud, waste, and abuse.

Question. How many implementing partners are still up and running on the ground in Afghanistan?

Answer. The United States partners with a range of non-governmental organizations, international organizations, and third parties in Afghanistan to deliver vital humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people.

To respond to humanitarian needs, State and USAID are currently working with 10 public international organizations including IFRC, FAO, WFP, UNICEF, WHO, UNHCR, OCHA, IOM, ILO, and UNFPA. In addition, USAID has nine non-governmental organization partners operating humanitarian programs in Afghanistan.

The U.S. Government continues to be in communication with implementing partners in Afghanistan, both regarding security conditions on the ground and about their ability to continue their work.

Question. How does the Biden administration intend to facilitate humanitarian access in Afghanistan?

Answer. The Department can, and will, continue to provide humanitarian assistance to Afghans in need directly through the U.N. system, partners, and NGOs; and will do so in a way that is consistent with any sanctions that apply to Afghanistan. No humanitarian assistance will be provided to the Taliban.

Question. Have you negotiated any deal with the Taliban regarding humanitarian assistance?

Answer. The United States is working with the international community to ensure the Taliban follows through on their commitments to allow 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. This united effort is of utmost priority for leaders across the international community, U.N. agencies, and NGOs committed to providing assistance in Afghanistan. No humanitarian assistance will be provided directly to the Taliban.

RESPONSES OF U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE ANTONY BLINKEN TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR TED CRUZ

Question. Terror Ties/Haqqani Network: There is an ongoing debate about the degree to which terrorist groups, including as especially Al Qaeda and ISIS, are likely to find safe-havens in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Part of that debate involves the degree to which such groups are supported by and entangled with the Taliban. You and other Administration officials have downplayed the Taliban's ties to the Haqqani Network and al-Qaeda, the President himself said al-Qaeda was "gone from Afghanistan," and a State Department spokesman said last month that "the Taliban and the Haqqani Network are separate entities." According to public reports, Undersecretary of Defense Colin Kahl even told Senators that that al-Qaeda in the region does not pose an "imminent threat to the homeland."

There are public reports indicating that the intelligence community assesses al-Qaeda is rebuilding in Afghanistan and will have the ability to threaten the United States within the next 2 years. Do you agree with those assessments?

Answer. Preventing Afghanistan from ever again becoming a safe-haven for terrorists remains our top priority, and we continue to apply a whole-of-government approach to counterterrorism efforts for Afghanistan. This consists of, but is not limited to, the continued use of sanctions regimes, communicating to the Taliban on our counterterrorism concerns, strengthening law enforcement and security sector assistance partnerships in regional countries, bolstering regional border security capabilities, and maintaining unilateral counterterrorism capabilities from "over the horizon." The Taliban committed to not allow individuals or groups, including al-Qa'ida, to use Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies. 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. Siraj Haqqani is now the Interior Minister and Khalil Haqqani is the Minister of Refugee Affairs. Please describe the full extent to which you assess designated terrorists or officials affiliated with terrorist groups have significant influence inside the Afghan Government.

Answer. We are concerned that Haqqani Network leadership has been appointed to these positions. The Haqqani Network is designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization under section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act and a SDGT under E.O. 13224. The Taliban itself is a Specially Designated Global Terrorist, and we have and will account for that, ensuring that our interactions are consistent with U.S. law and policy. Engagement with the Taliban is conducted consistent with U.S. law and to advance U.S. national security goals. At this time, the U.S. Government has not taken a position on whether the Taliban is the government of Afghanistan. Any future relationship between the Taliban and the international community will depend on the Taliban's actions.

Question. On August 27, according to public reports, you distributed an internal document highlighting numerous incidents at intake centers of sexual abuse and situations in which much older Afghan men have presented young. How many cases have there been in which the State Department or other government girls to authorities as their "wives." That document noted that the State Department had urgently requested guidance from across the Administration about what to do—but had not received it. According to public reports, a subsequent report by DHS concluded that the dynamic showed the "desperation" of families to get children out of Afghanistan: your process itself facilitated coercion and forced marriages of little girls. On September 14, you confirmed before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that "there have been a limited number of cases where we have separated people because we were concerned."

How many cases have there been in which the State Department or other government officials separated people due to such concerns?

Answer. Protection of Afghans at-risk in U.S. safe havens is among our key objectives in relocating SIV holders, parolees, and their family members. This includes protection from gender-based violence, human trafficking, and forced marriage. I defer to the Department of Homeland Security as the lead federal agency at U.S. safe havens for the number of cases of forced marriage identified.

Question. The State Department requested "urgent guidance" from other agencies after purported child brides were brought to intake centers and presented as "wives." Have you received guidance? If yes, what was it?

Answer. U.S. Government staff at overseas processing locations for Afghans are utilizing guidance from the State Department to screen for early and/or forced mar-

riage and sexual exploitation. Through the Department's participation in the inter-agency Unified Coordination Group, we understand that the Departments of Homeland Security and Health and Human Services have screening tools, but I defer to these agencies for specific guidance they may have promulgated to address these and other protection concerns at U.S. safe havens.

Question. What steps, if any, has the Department taken to address child exploitation, including forced marriages and other sexual exploitation, inside transit and intake centers in the United States?

Answer. The Department of State is coordinating across the U.S. Government and with domestic and international partners to detect potential cases of forced marriage or other forms of abuse among vulnerable Afghans at relocation sites, as well as to prevent and investigate crimes and to protect any victims identified. U.S. funding to international organizations supports the deployment of expert protection staff to identify and assist Afghans with particular vulnerabilities at overseas processing locations, including those at risk of early and forced marriage. I defer to the Department of Homeland Security as the lead federal agency on steps taken at U.S. safe havens.

Question. The State Department has been aware of child trafficking linked to the withdrawal for almost a month. Which agency or entity brought this situation to the attention of your office?

Answer. My staff alerted me to the risks of trafficking in persons and forced marriage inherent in displacement contexts and particular to Afghan relocation operations. State Department staff with expertise in humanitarian response, international migration, child protection, gender-based violence prevention and response, and combatting human trafficking have advised on and taken actions to prevent these risks throughout Operation Allies Welcome.

Question. What steps are being taken to ensure that each Afghan evacuee has been properly vetted, including screening to ensure that each Afghan evacuee has never raised arms against the United States or otherwise engaged in armed conflict against U.S. military personnel?

Answer. Prior to entering the United States, all Afghan nationals undergo a Department of Homeland Security (DHS) led multi-layered screening and vetting process that includes national security and criminal record checks. Upon relocation from Afghanistan, individuals are brought to international transit points in Europe and the Middle East, which are known as lily pads. At these international transit points, DHS or the Department of Defense (DOD) collects biometric (e.g., facial image and fingerprints) and biographic information (e.g., name, date of birth and ID number). Fingerprints are compared against DoD, DHS, and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) repositories. Biographic information is vetted by the National Counterterrorism Center, FBI, and other Intelligence Community partners. DHS then consolidates biometric and biographic results.

If these checks raise unresolved questions about an individual, that individual is not permitted to board a flight to the United States. Screening is ongoing, so even while individuals are continued to be processed at the safe havens, checks against the various national security and public safety databases continue in order to account for any new information identified.

Question. Does/will the State Department and any/or Department of Homeland Security vetting process require each Afghan evacuee to provide a sworn statement under oath that he/she did not raise arms against the United States or otherwise engage in armed conflict against U.S. military personnel?

Answer. I defer to the Department of Homeland Security, which is the lead federal agency on the security vetting and screening of foreign nationals requesting to enter the United States.

Question. Please provide the committee with a complete sets of all forms being used in the process to vet Afghan evacuees.

Answer. I defer to the Department of Homeland Security, which is the lead federal agency on the security vetting and screening of foreign nationals requesting to enter the United States.

Question. Yes or No—Can you assure the American people, with 100 percent confidence that the vetting process the Biden administration is using to vet Afghan evacuees will be completely effective to screen out and deny entry to every Afghan evacuee who raised arms against the United States or otherwise engaged in armed conflict against U.S. military personnel?

Answer. I defer to the Department of Homeland Security, which is the lead federal agency on the security vetting and screening of foreign nationals requesting to enter the United States, and which holds the authority to admit foreign nationals into the United States if eligible.

