

POLICY BRIEF **08.26.21**

Where Will Fleeing Afghans Go?

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We are in the midst of one of the largest and most rapid humanitarian evacuation missions in U.S. history. On August 15, 2021, the Taliban reclaimed the Afghan capital city of Kabul, and the priority of both the U.S. and NATO became securing the Kabul airport in order to evacuate individuals out of the country. By August 25, the White House claimed that the U.S. had facilitated the evacuation—in collaboration with coalition forces, international organizations, and private donors—of approximately 80,000 people from Kabul airport since August 14, although it is not clear how many of those individuals were American versus Afghan citizens.¹

On August 24, a Taliban spokesperson said the road to Kabul airport was closed to Afghan nationals. President Joe Biden had previously stated that he would consider extending the evacuation mission beyond August 31 if American citizens remained in Afghanistan, but has now reaffirmed the 31 deadline and mentioned the possibility of leaving even sooner.² The Taliban has warned of “consequences” if U.S. or British troops remain in the country beyond the end of the month.³ Regardless of whether the August 31 deadline is adhered to, it is clear that the window for evacuations is rapidly closing.

SURROUNDING COUNTRIES

Most Afghans who have managed to leave the country have not done so via the Kabul airport. Instead, in the months following the United Nations' withdrawal in May 2021,

tens of thousands of Afghans fled each week on foot to neighboring countries,⁴ following previous patterns of Afghan displacement. Historically, after the 1979 Soviet invasion, 1.5 million Afghans fled to neighboring Pakistan and Iran, and by 1986 nearly five million Afghans refugees were living between the two countries.⁵ Some Afghans eventually repatriated, but after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, a new generation of Afghans fled to the two neighboring states. As a result of these cumulative displacements, by the end of 2020, nearly 1.5 million Afghans were living in Pakistan, while Iran hosted 780,000.⁶

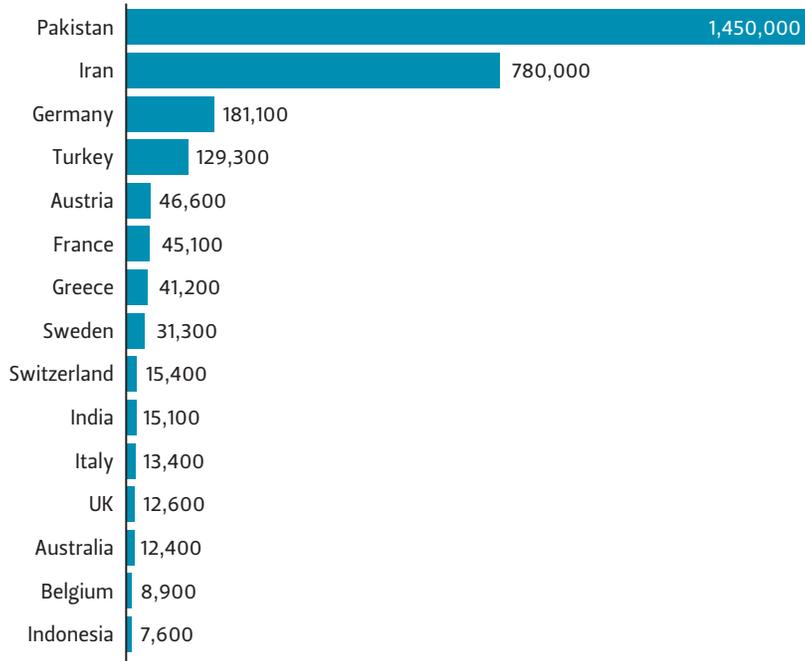
Currently, the Taliban control all the main land crossing points with Afghanistan's neighbors and have said they do not want Afghans to leave the country, while Iran and Pakistan have increased security on their borders.⁷ Nonetheless, desperate individuals and families, including those from the ethnically targeted Hazara minority, may still attempt to cross with the assistance of smugglers. In both Iran and Pakistan, Afghan refugees face barriers to local integration, and both countries have historically expelled mass numbers of Afghans back to Afghanistan in violation of international law. But with Turkey reinforcing its border with Iran and with Europe determined to avoid a repeat of its 2015 refugee “crisis,”⁸ most Afghans will have little choice but to remain in Iran and Pakistan, unless they can be resettled to a third country like the United States.



In the months following the United Nations' withdrawal in May 2021, tens of thousands of Afghans fled each week on foot to neighboring countries.

FIGURE 1 — NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES HOSTED THE HIGHEST NUMBER OF AFGHANS IN 2020

Countries with the most Afghan refugees and asylum seekers



SOURCE BBC, using UNHCR data for 2020

Approximately 77,000 Afghans were successfully admitted to the U.S. through the SIV program between 2006 and May 2021, but the program was also riddled with bureaucratic inconsistencies and backlogs, leaving at least 18,000 applicants and 53,000 family members at risk.

U.S. RESETTLEMENT

Refugee resettlement to the United States is a long and arduous process, taking years from start to finish, and only available to less than one percent of the world's refugees. To specifically assist Afghans with resettlement, the U.S. government created the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program in 2006 to provide Afghans who worked for the U.S. military as interpreters or in another capacity for at least two years with a pathway for resettlement in the United States, along with their family members. Approximately 77,000 Afghans were successfully admitted to the U.S. through the SIV program between 2006 and May 2021, but the program was also riddled with bureaucratic inconsistencies and backlogs, leaving at least 18,000 applicants and 53,000 family members at risk.⁹ The program slowed further during the Trump administration and as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. But while the Biden

administration took measures to widen the program and address the backlog, its actions were viewed by refugee advocates as too little too late.¹⁰ Notably, this program is not open to other groups of Afghans who are currently at risk, including journalists, women's rights advocates, and human rights defenders. These individuals were promoted and, in some cases, funded by the United States during its 20-year presence in Afghanistan, but will now face a threat of death as a result of the work the U.S. encouraged them to undertake.

On August 24, the Biden administration acquiesced to the demands of refugee advocates who had asked that Afghans be allowed to enter the U.S. under a little-known immigration tool called humanitarian parole. Invoking humanitarian parole has historical precedents, such as its use by President Gerald Ford to evacuate Vietnamese nationals during the fall of Saigon in 1975. Importantly, it will allow the Biden administration to evacuate individuals who have not yet qualified for the SIV program, as well as human rights defenders and other at-risk Afghans, though the current challenge will be ensuring that these individuals can actually reach the Kabul airport in order to be airlifted out of the country.

Some evacuated Afghans have been flown directly to military bases on U.S. soil, including Fort McCoy in Wisconsin, Fort Lee in Virginia, Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst in New Jersey, or Fort Bliss in Texas. Once processed, these individuals or families will be relocated across the U.S. via resettlement agencies, which are nonprofits and faith-based organizations contracted by the U.S. government.

However, the majority of evacuated individuals are not being flown directly to the United States, but are instead being sent to overseas airbases and third countries, including Sudan, Columbia, Kosovo, and Albania.¹¹ Biden's worry of a reprisal from right-wing politicians, news outlets, and voters likely explains his administration's attempts to look for third country solutions, rather than bringing evacuated Afghans directly to the United States.

RECOMMENDATIONS

First, Biden should not let his apparent fear of a right-wing nativist backlash prevent him from admitting refugees directly to U.S. territory. Biden would do well to remember that resettling Afghans—especially wartime allies—has support from a wide, cross-cutting swath of voters, including U.S. veterans. In fact, a CBS/YouGov poll from August 18, 2021, found that 81% of voters supported resettling Afghans who worked with the U.S. military.¹²

As such, the Biden administration should refrain from sending evacuated Afghans to U.S. overseas bases and third countries like Columbia or Sudan. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, the Ford administration evacuated approximately 130,000 Vietnamese refugees directly to U.S. soil via Guam. As the International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP) argues, the Biden administration could again use Guam to temporarily host Afghans while they are fully vetted, given health checks, and processed for visas. Flying evacuated Afghans to Guam will allow the U.S. government to conduct these checks on U.S. soil, offering real protections and a clearer path to resettlement in another geographic region of the U.S, whereas distributing Afghans across the globe is more likely to leave Afghans languishing in lengthy bureaucratic quagmires.

Second, the U.S. must dramatically increase the resettlement of Afghans from neighboring countries like Pakistan, and also step up its humanitarian assistance to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and smaller NGOs working with Afghans. Pakistan and Iran have already hosted the vast majority of Afghans over the course of the United States' military campaign, and the U.S. needs to better share the responsibility, especially given its direct role in Afghan displacement. The Biden administration proposed a refugee resettlement ceiling of 125,000 for FY 2022, but should raise this further considering the number of Afghans currently leaving their country as a direct result of the U.S. withdrawal. And while the UNHCR has been criticized for not taking a

strong enough stance in protecting Afghans in Pakistan,¹³ supporting its operation and also funding smaller NGOs that continue to assist Afghans in Pakistan and Iran in the coming months and years will prove critical as part of the broader U.S. response to Afghan displacement.

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Cite as:

Norman, Kelsey. 2021. *Where Will Fleeing Afghans Go?* Policy brief no. 08.26.21. Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, Houston, Texas.

<https://doi.org/10.25613/CRYQ-6A33>