

## January 31st Opening Statement to the HFAC O&A Subcommittee Thomas Kasza, Executive Director, 1208 Foundation

Chairman Mast, Ranking Member Crow, honorable committee members, and friends of Afghanistan, I am the Executive Director of the 1208 Foundation, and a Green Beret with 15 years in uniform. The following opinions are mine alone.

---

The Improvised Explosive Device was the insurgent's weapon of choice In Afghanistan, responsible for 55% of Special Forces deaths. To combat this threat, a unit of specially trained Afghans was formed to safeguard Green Berets like me. They were known as the National Mine Reduction Group, or NMRG: DOD contractors **eligible for the Special Immigrant Visa.**

They were our most trusted partners: While the war was marred by the infamous "Green on Blue Attacks", but our trust in them was so complete that they lived on our bases, with easy access to huge quantities of weaponry and explosives.

The hazards they undertook were immense: From 2015 onwards, 22 Green Berets died, compared to **47** NMRG members. We owe them and their families a debt, but they've been abandoned. In the quagmire of the SIV approval process, many have been killed waiting, dozens are missing, and their applications are being denied for increasingly arbitrary reasons.

---

One might ask; what made them volunteer for the most dangerous job in the country?

It was faith. Faith that the United States of America was honorable, and moral, and would protect them in return for protecting us. **And American leaders- civil and military, Democrat and Republican, were found faithless when it mattered the most.**

Rather than debating the normalization of the Taliban, I will illuminate the fallout of continued apathy and half-measures, because it is apathy that allows us to violate our principles and ignore promises.

It is apathy which betrays allies.

Apathy does not restrict itself to the failings of government; it leeches into our psyches, and manifests in the indifference of leaders and institutions.

---

Given this audience, many are familiar with National Geographic's Retrograde, which documents the final collapse of Afghanistan

What makes it so impactful -and so damnable- is that no faces are blurred, no identities concealed, whether American or Afghan; a "creative decision" approved by Disney and Nat Geo executives.

Think of the arrogance required to believe that the Taliban couldn't find an online video chronicling their ultimate triumph. And if not arrogance, **the soulless indifference to exposing and exploiting those who protected American Soldiers.**

**And so Retrograde became a hit list which the Taliban used to identify, abduct, torture and kill** one whom my organization pledged to safeguard. A 21-year-old father named Omar.

Disney has since **refused** to aid the other NMRG members who were exposed, but they are not alone in their apathy. Though Green Berets aspire to the motto "De Opresso Liber" ("To Free the

Oppressed”), senior leaders desecrated this ethos by permitting an outsider to put accolades and golden statues ahead of our living partners.

However, I’m not here for Disney or Nat Geo, because they were enabled by policy. I’m **here to give a voice to someone who had his taken**; While Omar was on his deathbed, an Afghan member of my foundation spoke with him and recorded his account.

The following has been edited for the clarity of this roundtable, and a timestamped original entered into the record.

This is Omar’s testimony:

---

While on my way to the bazaar, Taliban members stopped my taxi and asked for my identification. They took it, showed their commander, but didn’t do anything. However, two days later they came to my house and arrested me.

I was held for 16 days. They tortured me, drowned me, broke my ribs and I lost consciousness multiple times. I don’t remember being released, but one morning my family woke up to dogs barking and found me lying in the street.

The beatings left me barely able to breath, and a doctor said that my lung wasn’t working. My family got me to Peshawar, Pakistan, where I received four surgeries.

While the Taliban had me, they **showed** me the Retrograde movie and accused me of working with the foreign forces in it. They asked me what my job was, and I told them I cleared IEDs. They found me through the Retrograde movie and are still asking villagers and family members about me.

---

Soon after giving this statement, Omar succumbed to his wounds.

We are here to talk about Taliban reprisals: There’s the case study: Nat Geo gave the Taliban a target package. The Taliban used it.

I hate that being an ally to the US is so thankless, but more than that, I want the gratitude I enjoy as a veteran extended to those who risked their lives for me. Habib served with US troops for 19 years. Kashmir spent 15. Aman, 10, Gardishah 8. All have had SIV applications rejected for nonsensical reasons. Let’s honor them for putting their lives on the line for this country.

Honorable members of the Committee: Will you let apathy damn them to the same fate as Omar, or will you **enforce the promises made to those who protected American Soldiers?**

**I ask that you designate the NMRG for expedited processing within the SIV program, that they may truly be thanked for their service.**