

WRITTEN STATEMENT OF
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DIRECTOR OF ADVOCACY, NO ONE LEFT BEHIND
BEFORE
HOUSE FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY
“ROUNDTABLE ON TALIBAN REPRISALS”
JANUARY 31, 2024

Chairman Mast, Ranking Member Crow, and all the Members in attendance thank you for holding this critical roundtable. My name is Andrew Sullivan. I am an Army veteran of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and I serve as the Director of Advocacy for No One Left Behind. No One Left Behind is the nation’s oldest charitable organization devoted to helping our special immigrant visa (SIV) eligible wartime allies from Iraq and Afghanistan evacuate and resettle in the United States.

I am humbled to testify today because I feel an obligation to speak for some of the people who cannot be at this hearing today. The people who can’t be here include over 50,000 Afghans who have reached out to No One Left Behind, desperate to escape Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. It also includes hundreds of No One Left Behind volunteers who’ve sacrificed immense amounts of time and their mental health trying to evacuate vulnerable Afghans. The people who can’t be here also include the over 830,000 Americans who served in Afghanistan, many of whom are dealing with acute moral injuries caused by a feeling that America abandoned our Afghan brothers and sisters in arms – it’s a feeling I share deeply. But the group whose voice I am most humbled to represent are the Afghans who have been killed by the Taliban.

In September 2020, No One Left Behind released a report in which we cataloged the tragic experiences of more than 300 Afghan interpreters or their family members who were killed due to their affiliation with America. Since the U.S. withdrawal, the threat to our allies has not abated, rather it has dramatically increased. In December of 2022, No One Left Behind sent a survey to SIV applicants and other Afghans within our vast network of those still trapped in Afghanistan. Over 13,600 Afghans were asked whether they knew of instances of reprisal killings of SIVS since the Taliban seizure of the country. Many of the responses we received didn’t have stories of targeted killings but were instead simply crushing, desperate pleas for help.

But in addition to these cries for help, we received 242 responses of extrajudicial killings committed by the Taliban. We could not independently verify each of these accounts, the ever-present and terrifying threat of Taliban violence suppresses these stories from being told. As one respondent stated about the killing of his cousin, “This may happen to anyone who supported the US Government in Afghanistan, but the Taliban closed the media coverage to share these kinds of news.”

The victims in these stories all had some affiliation with the U.S. mission, and all had, at minimum, a compelling case for a U.S. Refugee Admissions Program referral. But nearly half the responses involved

innocent victims who were in some stage of Special Immigrant Visa processing or had clear prima facie eligibility for an SIV. These Afghans were our closest allies, employed directly in support of America's mission. But rather than receive safety for their service, they faced brutality at the hands of the Taliban. One of the accounts that stands out starkest for me was of an interpreter killed in Jalalabad in September 2021, "I entered a shop to buy us some drinks when I heard gunshots. I came out of the shop and saw Imdadullah being shot in front of his two kids and his kids crying. Imdadullah had done his SIV visa interview in the Kabul embassy and was waiting for pickup before his hopes were shattered."

I'm grateful to the committee for being able to share Imdadullah's story, but telling his story is not enough. Congress must take action. Despite the dire situation for our allies, only one piece of SIV-related legislation has been passed since the fall of Kabul - an authorization of a paltry 4,000 additional SIVs. Our allies cannot wait. If America's promise, our promise, is to mean anything, Congress must support our Afghan allies by immediately passing the bipartisan and bicameral Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2023 and the Afghan Adjustment Act. Passing these bipartisan bills won't right all the wrongs we committed by abandoning our allies, but it will help prevent additional bloodshed.

Finally, it is important to realize that Afghan SIVs are not alone in feeling abandoned by America. Despite all the challenges facing Afghan SIV applicants at risk, at least there is a path for them. Others have no path, no hope, and face similar consequences for supporting U.S. combat operations and diplomatic activities. In Iraq, the 1244 SIV program is moribund - having accepted no new applications since 2014. In Syria, despite fulfilling identical roles to Afghan and Iraqi interpreters, Syrian allies have no SIV program. In Yemen, as far back as 2021, there have been reports of the Houthis detaining and harassing local national personnel of the U.S. Embassy, and American allies in the country remain at great personal risk for their service to us. America must learn from the brutal consequences of our failures in Afghanistan. We must create a permanent SIV program that is not tied to one country or war and anticipates that we may need to help others who worked for us, even in small numbers, again in the future. A permanent path for those who sacrificed for us would empower the U.S. military to recruit loyal partners worldwide, strengthening our national security and saving lives for decades to come.

For America to keep its promise, we must not only share these stories of Taliban reprisal. We must expedite the relocation of vulnerable Afghans, and we must create policies to ensure that it doesn't happen to any population of wartime allies again. Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.