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U.S. Department of State

# After Action Review on Afghanistan

January 2020 – August 2021



March 2022

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# Forward

*Members of the Afghanistan After Action Review team read relevant documents and met with current and former Department of State employees from all ranks and levels. In many cases, those interviewed were still processing the fall of Kabul to the Taliban and the end of our 20-year presence in Afghanistan, as well as the emotional trauma of working to help U.S. citizens, legal permanent residents, locally employed embassy staff, and at-risk Afghans leave the country under incredible duress. While most of our report is focused on “lessons learned” and ways in which the Department could better prepare for such events in the future, we were reminded time and again that the Department’s greatest asset is its people, including an extraordinary group of dedicated and talented professionals who worked tirelessly on the ground in Kabul, in Washington, and at other sites domestically and abroad to evacuate and assist as many people as possible. We salute them and the brave members of our military, 13 of whom lost their lives in this operation. Together, they safely evacuated roughly 125,000 people, including nearly 6,000 private U.S. citizens. Their work deserves our highest praise and gratitude, and it is to them that this report is dedicated.*

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# Methodology

At the request of Secretary of State Blinken, the After Action Review (AAR) team conducted a focused study of the Department’s decisions and actions directly related to the process of ending the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan from January 2020 to August 2021. The decisions of both President Trump and President Biden to withdraw U.S. military forces from Afghanistan during this period provide the overall context for the review, but it has not been the mandate of the AAR team to examine these decisions or to consider policy alternatives. Rather, the goal has been to understand how the Department prepared for and executed its duties and responsibilities in light of the decisions of both Presidents to end the U.S. military mission after nearly 20 years in Afghanistan.

Over the course of its 90-day review, the AAR team conducted a more than 150 interviews with current and former State Department officials at all levels of the organization and reviewed relevant documents and other materials. The interviews were conducted on a voluntary basis and either for attribution or on background. In order to protect the integrity of this process and in anticipation of future after action reviews, the AAR team strongly recommends that the requests of those interviewed – either to be fully anonymous or to not be named in the report – be fully respected. With the same considerations in mind, the current report does not directly cite the interviews or actions of individual Department personnel below senior-level officials. Additionally, when we refer to “evacuation” in the report, we are doing so in a non-legal, colloquial manner.

As part of its review, the AAR team has made a series of recommendations designed to address issues or challenges identified in its study. We understand that many parts of the Department have already drawn their own “lessons learned” from this period and have made or are making appropriate changes. The AAR team hopes that its study will support those efforts and identify for Department leaders other possible actions that could help the Department be better prepared to meet future challenges.

The AAR team wishes to thank all those who agreed to be interviewed. Their insights and perspectives were critical and reflected without exception a passion and commitment to the mission of the Department of State as the lead agency in the conduct of U.S. foreign policy.

# Executive Summary and Introduction

At the direction of Secretary Blinken, this 90-day After Action Review (AAR) has focused on the Department of State's execution of its duties directly related to the process of ending the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan from January 2020 to August 2021. The decisions of both President Trump and President Biden to end the U.S. military mission posed significant challenges for the Department as it sought to maintain a robust diplomatic and assistance presence in Kabul and provide continued support to the Afghan government and people. As conditions on the ground deteriorated and the prospects for successful peace negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban grew dimmer, leadership in the Department and at Embassy Kabul faced the dilemma that significantly reducing the remaining U.S. presence in Afghanistan and accelerating the departure of at-risk Afghans risked undermining confidence in the Afghan government and triggering the very collapse the United States hoped to avoid.

With the sudden collapse of the Ghani government and the Taliban's entry into Kabul on August 15, 2021, the Department of State confronted a task of unprecedented scale and complexity. Working with other U.S. government agencies, partner nations, and Afghan allies, Department personnel helped coordinate and execute a massive humanitarian airlift and evacuation from a dangerous and often chaotic environment in barely more than two weeks. The stress, demands, and risks of the situation are hard to exaggerate and placed tremendous burdens on the Department's personnel and its crisis response structures. Overall, the Department's personnel responded with great agility, determination, and dedication, while taking on roles and responsibilities both domestically and overseas that few had ever anticipated.

Most of the AAR's findings address specific Department of State activities during the period under review and are accompanied by recommendations for how the Department can be better prepared for future situations that involve complex crises in unstable operating environments with the possibility of a large-scale evacuation. In particular, the AAR's recommendations identify the need to plan better for worst-case scenarios, to rebuild and strengthen the Department's core crisis management capabilities, and to ensure that senior officials hear the broadest possible range of views including those that challenge operating assumptions or question the wisdom of key policy decisions. Many Department bureaus and offices are conducting their own lessons learned, and some have already begun implementing changes. We hope that this review will further inform and advance those efforts.

# Broad Factors to Consider

The AAR team believes it is important to underscore several broad factors that it found essential for understanding the context within which the Department operated during the period under review.

## *The 20-Year U.S. Involvement in Afghanistan Created Unique Circumstances*

The purpose of this review has not been to examine the history of U.S. engagement in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, it is difficult to separate the conclusion of the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan from the previous two decades of U.S. military and civilian involvement. Decisions and actions over the course of those two decades had a cumulative and profound impact on what happened when first President Trump and then President Biden decided to end the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan. Most significantly for this review, the 20-year experience of deep political and military engagement in Afghanistan created unique relationships, commitments, and responsibilities to Afghans who partnered in U.S. efforts there. This deep involvement transformed Embassy Kabul into one of the largest U.S. missions in the world, as multiple administrations sought to advance broad U.S. diplomatic and assistance goals in the historically war-torn country. This significant presence remained the case even after a reduction of Embassy Kabul's facilities and staffing in 2019, in large part because maintaining the embassy in a war zone required a substantial security and life support contingent.

The extensive U.S. presence in Afghanistan over two decades meant that many thousands of Afghans had worked on behalf of the United States either directly or indirectly, often at great risk to themselves and their families. These Afghans and their families faced the threat of reprisals from the Taliban and others, and there was a significant, legitimate concern they would be specifically targeted in the event of a Taliban takeover. Consequently, when Afghanistan's security forces and government collapsed during the U.S. military withdrawal, many Afghans and U.S. citizens expected that the U.S. government would help evacuate at-risk Afghans and their families alongside the U.S. citizens, both official and private, still in the country. As a result, U.S. evacuation efforts quickly escalated into a massive humanitarian airlift that transported more than 125,000 people out of Afghanistan. The scope and scale of this evacuation was highly unusual, with no comparable situation since the U.S. departure from Vietnam in 1975 following many years of intense military and political involvement. As such, although multiple lessons should be learned from the Afghanistan withdrawal, it is essential to remember the unique nature of the United States' presence in and departure from Afghanistan.

### *Scenes from the Dulles Expo Center*

Within days of Kabul falling, the Department began leading an interagency effort to turn the Dulles Expo Center into the primary processing facility for Afghans coming into the United States. Hosting thousands at any given time, the Dulles Welcome Center was the first stop for a large portion of the Afghans who were beginning their new lives in the United States. The center was operated by hundreds of staff from the Department, interagency partners, and NGOs who worked together to house, feed, provide medical attention, and process families and individuals so they could move on to bases around the country for resettlement. One Department volunteer recalled, "At one point, Save the Children handed out American flags, and I saw twin 4-year-old boys waving them at each other. Both were wearing T shirts that said 'LOVE IS MY SUPERPOWER.' It was wonderful to be able to finally transform the names on the manifests and all the huge families from my time on the SIV Task Force into living, laughing kids, playing and walking around holding hands with an American they met a few minutes or hours before."



## *Expectations for the Viability of the Afghan Government*

Many observers had long predicted that the withdrawal of U.S. military forces and those of our allies and partners would precipitate the collapse of the Afghan government and its security forces but estimates as to how long this might take varied. Other reviewers of the U.S. departure from Afghanistan will consider the quality of such predictive assessments, but for the purposes of this AAR it is important to note that during most of the period under review Department officials operated in accordance with guidance to continue embassy operations despite the military withdrawal and in the belief that the security situation would not deteriorate substantially in Kabul for several months at the earliest. As the Taliban's territorial gains continued during the early summer of 2021, there was increasing alarm in many circles that led to calls for more urgent preparations for an evacuation, if not the launch of an evacuation itself. U.S. officials, however, seemed to rely on received assurances that the Ghani government and its security forces would concentrate on the defense of Kabul and believed that they could hold the Taliban at bay for some time.

That this was the case does not mean the Department and the interagency could not have been better prepared for a worst-case scenario, especially when it came to planning for a noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO) with the potential to expand into a large humanitarian airlift. This report makes recommendations regarding how the Department can better prepare for future crisis scenarios, including the establishment of a red team capacity to challenge underlying assumptions. Nonetheless, in considering the Department's approach to dealing with the withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Afghanistan, it is important to recognize that for most of this period close observers (apparently including the Taliban itself) anticipated more time before a potential government collapse and the fall of Kabul. Indeed, efforts aimed at creating an interim government that would facilitate a peaceful transition of authority and avoid further loss of life were underway even as President Ghani decided to flee Kabul and thus precipitated the complete collapse of his government.



Department Personnel at HKIA

### *Consular Officers at HKIA*

Consular officers responded heroically to extraordinary challenges while on the ground at HKIA. Under relentlessly hostile and threatening circumstances, they assisted thousands of panicked U.S. citizens and at-risk Afghans in navigating a path to safety, drawing on their experience and judgment to make often wrenching decisions about who could enter HKIA to be evacuated and whom to turn away. The AAR team found the accounts of their experiences both uplifting and heartbreaking. Consular officers helped lost children find their parents; ensured medical care for those in need; and provided water, food, and shade to those exhausted by the ordeal of getting into the airport. They were also among those who comforted and assisted the victims of the terrorist attack at Abbey Gate. A consular officer worked with a colleague on the FBI task force to bring to safety a group of Afghan women whose husbands had received SIVs and were already in the United States. Others worked to rescue a female locally employed staff member trapped for three days between the Taliban control cordon and the airport gate until she managed to locate a polka dot umbrella to hold above her head that allowed Marines to identify her. Now safely in the United States, we understand she would like to join the Foreign Service once she becomes a U.S. citizen.

### **Leveraging Technology to Provide Global Consular Support**

When the crisis in Afghanistan began, Department personnel from around the globe responded en masse. Included in those efforts were Mission China, whose staff members, both American and local, played a critical role in helping identify and evacuate hundreds of U.S. citizens and their family members, remotely processing more than 500 SIV cases, and helping CA triage and respond to thousands of Congressional inquiries. Though Mission China personnel may have never imagined that they would be able to play a major role in the response to this crisis, the officers involved highlighted that helping U.S. citizens and others in need was a key reason they joined the Foreign Service and that these efforts gave them the opportunity to do this in a direct and innovative way.

### ***Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic***

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on Department operations in myriad ways related to the subject and period under review. To cite only a few examples, in the spring of 2020, Department measures to prevent the spread of COVID included a suspension of Embassy Kabul's in-person interviews for Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) processing. With Afghan staff directed to stay off the embassy compound to prevent local spread, U.S. personnel took on additional work responsibilities that kept them from focusing fully on their primary jobs. After the embassy adjusted to pandemic safety requirements and restored some functions, a debilitating COVID outbreak in June 2021 again undercut the mission's operational capacity. COVID-related precautions also reduced opportunities to convene classified discussions at post and the Department, including those in support of crisis planning and response. In fact, COVID mitigation efforts meant that some new embassy employees had not met others in their offices until the embassy evacuated to the Kabul airport. The pandemic's impact included COVID-related CDC testing requirements that complicated efforts to accelerate the departure of SIV applicants in July and August.

Once the evacuation began in August 2021, the impact of COVID on the Department's workforce posture presented both challenges and opportunities. With many Washington personnel engaged in telework, there were initial difficulties in staffing and running the Department's in-person crisis response. That said, the global decline in visa demand because of COVID made it easier for the Bureau of Consular Affairs to enlist personnel at embassies worldwide to assist in a massive around-the-clock effort to contact all U.S. citizens in Afghanistan and perform casework, significantly increasing outreach resources and response time.

### **Scenes from an Overseas Safe Haven – Ramstein**

We initially thought Ramstein would be a transit station, with evacuees arriving and then getting on a plane to the United States within a few days. As the evacuation in Afghanistan grew more frantic, families were separated and loved ones lost track of each other in the chaos. We started to get questions: *Have you seen this child? Did my loved one make it to Germany?*

Enter the Family Reunification Support Unit, a team dedicated to fielding emails and phone calls from people desperate for news of their families. Colleagues would look up the names in the database – sometimes requiring real sleuthing with alternate spellings – and try to provide information and comfort. One volunteer was particularly committed – she would go out walking from tent to tent, asking if people knew the person she was seeking. She always found the person and would take a photo to send back. Every day this volunteer held babies, held hands, took pictures, and then sent these back in compassionate emails that assured worried people their loved ones were safe. She offered evacuees a reminder they were not alone and provided human contact for desperate relatives and underscored the entire purpose of the mission: to help people.



## ***Lack of Senate-Confirmed Officials in the Department and Embassies***

During the period covered by this review, many critical domestic and overseas Department positions were not filled by Senate-confirmed appointees, but rather career employees serving in an acting capacity. Those career employees were experienced and capable professionals who did an outstanding job under difficult circumstances, but prolonged gaps in filling senior domestic or chief of mission positions overseas are not in the best interest of the Department or U.S. foreign policy.

The position of Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs offers a case in point. That position, critical to the conduct of U.S. foreign policy in Afghanistan and South and Central Asia, was filled by a series of talented career officers serving in an acting capacity throughout the Trump administration and most of the first year of the Biden administration. No matter how qualified the “acting” person is, it is not the same as having a confirmed official in position. This is true in the context of intra-Departmental and interagency decision making, but especially overseas where those serving as *chargé* may not have the access to senior host government officials needed to advance U.S. interests fully. Filling these positions with qualified individuals must be a priority for any administration and the Senate.



RSO Personnel at HKIA

### ***RSO Personnel at Embassy Kabul and on the Ground at HKIA***

In the run up to the fall of Kabul, the Regional Security Office (RSO) had developed a detailed plan to drawdown, evacuate, and secure sensitive materials at the embassy. As the Taliban reached the doorsteps of the mission, operations under this plan were condensed from three days to less than 24 hours, and RSO personnel displayed tremendous courage and exceptional dedication to duty at the risk of their personal safety in successfully executing the plan. After ensuring the safe departure of other embassy staff, these Diplomatic Security agents and contractors were the last Department personnel to depart the embassy, leaving hastily as gunfire erupted near the helicopter landing areas and looters began coming over the embassy walls.

At HKIA, RSO personnel ensured Department employees performing consular functions were protected while conducting assessments and screening of thousands of potential evacuees. In a non-permissive security environment, the airport gates were filled with potential dangers due to large, uncontrolled crowds and constant threats from ISIS-K and the Taliban. The agents and contractors’ ability to mitigate these risks to Department personnel while affording them the ability to carry out their vital humanitarian work helped facilitate the departure of tens of thousands of U.S. citizens, legal permanent residents, locally employed staff and their immediate families, partners and allies, and other Afghans at risk.

## *Significant Embassy Personnel Turnover During the Summer 2021 Crisis*

The rapid fall of Kabul occurred while the embassy was experiencing a major staff transition. Because Foreign Service tours in Afghanistan typically were one-year assignments, many officers who had served in 2020-2021 departed in late-July and early-August. Without expectation of an imminent government collapse, Embassy Kabul adhered to its normal rotation processes, which included the use of charter “rotator” flights that meant people left and arrived in large groups.

The Department has compelling reasons to limit tours to one year in demanding, dangerous unaccompanied posts like Embassy Kabul, but the decision to proceed with a normal rotation rested on overly optimistic assessments of the situation in Afghanistan, which some questioned. The timing of the handover meant that a significant number of officers, including some in key crisis leadership positions like the Senior Regional Security Officer and the head of the Consular Section, had arrived only weeks and in some cases days before the Taliban entered Kabul. The fact that so many personnel were new placed a tremendous burden on them to get up to speed on post-specific crisis planning and responsibilities as the situation in Afghanistan deteriorated. This was in addition to basic practical matters like getting to know new colleagues (already complicated by COVID) and learning the lay of the land, which are critical factors in responding to a crisis. The timing of the crisis during the height of summer turnover season thus made everything more difficult for those involved, and it is even more impressive how well they performed given such circumstances.



Task Force Members

### *PRM Efforts in the United States and Around the Globe*

The Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM), in concert with a team from the U.S. Digital Service, dramatically reengineered the resettlement process by establishing a new method to assign Afghans to one of the more than 350 local community resettlement partners and creating a strategic travel plan for more than 50,000 Afghans that allowed the United States to transition away from relying on military bases while prioritizing the needs of particularly vulnerable Afghans. Such a highly complex operation had never been attempted in U.S. resettlement history.

Their efforts did not end there – to bolster local resettlement agencies, PRM provided extensive local capacity development funding to support their efforts, worked with the General Services Administration to develop and manage a new “housing on demand” program based on the model traditionally used in disaster management, and expanded resettlement capacity by supporting new groups to provide initial resettlement services. As one of PRM’s many long-serving Civil Service employees noted, “Though we may have never imagined we would need to respond in so many different ways and on such scale, PRM personnel performed remarkably, leveraging their deep expertise, longstanding relationships, and every bit of their ingenuity to assist the thousands of Afghans in need at locations in the U.S. and around the globe.”

# Looking Ahead

The following pages contain findings and recommendations based on the AAR team's review, as well as an overall narrative description of the Department's deliberations and actions related to the process of ending the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan. It presents issues and events from the perspective of the Department and is not intended to provide a comprehensive overview of the actions of either the Trump or the Biden administrations related to the withdrawal from Afghanistan. It also does not capture the Afghan relocation efforts that continue today. The goal of the review is to strengthen the Department's ability, together with other key interagency partners, to respond to future complex international crises.

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## FINDINGS

In examining the Department of State's efforts between January 2020 and August 2021 related to the process of ending the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan, the After Action Review (AAR) team determined the following:

### *Planning for the Military Withdrawal*

1. The decisions of both President Trump and President Biden to end the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan had serious consequences for the viability of the Afghan government and its security. Those decisions are beyond the scope of this review, but the AAR team found that during both administrations there was insufficient senior-level consideration of worst-case scenarios and how quickly those might follow.
2. For the Department, the end to the U.S. military mission presented an enormous challenge as it sought to mitigate the loss of "key enablers" that the military had provided and maintain a diplomatic and assistance presence in Afghanistan in accordance with the stated intent of both administrations. Some officials questioned how and whether the Department could sufficiently mitigate the loss of military support, and the Bureau of Diplomatic Security (DS) warned of the level of risk that the Department would be accepting.
3. Even prior to the signing of the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban Agreement, President Trump had signaled his desire to end the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, and he steadily withdrew U.S. forces following that agreement. When the Trump administration left office, key questions remained unanswered about how the United States would meet the May 2021 deadline for a full military withdrawal, how the United States could maintain a diplomatic presence in Kabul after that withdrawal, and what might happen to those eligible for the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program as well as other at-risk Afghans.
4. Following President Biden's decision in April 2021 to proceed with the withdrawal of U.S. forces under a new deadline of September 11, the U.S. military moved swiftly with the retrograde to protect U.S. forces, but the speed of that retrograde compounded the difficulties the Department faced in mitigating the loss of the military's key enablers. Critically, the decision to hand over Bagram Air Base to the Afghan government meant that Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) would be the only avenue for a possible noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO).
5. Due to the enormous challenge of providing security for the large diplomatic mission in a conflict area, there was a plan to retain some U.S. forces to provide critical security, but the details of that – and what stay-behind force the Taliban would accept as consistent with the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban Agreement – had not been clearly established by the time Kabul fell to the Taliban in August 2021.

*Pre-Crisis Contingency Planning and Execution*

6. Ultimately, the Department's ability to maintain an embassy depended on the overall security environment in Kabul and the ability of the Afghan government to help protect foreign diplomats. For this reason, Embassy Kabul and the Department prepared a number of contingency plans, ranging from a further reduction in personnel, to a temporary relocation to HKIA, to a complete closure of the embassy.
7. The Department placed Embassy Kabul on ordered departure (OD) status at the end of April in the wake of President Biden's decision, but that did not result in a notable immediate reduction of the embassy's footprint (most of which involved security and life support) in part because of the need to take on additional roles and responsibilities given the withdrawal of the U.S. military.
8. While predictions varied, up until almost the time Kabul fell, most estimates were that the Afghan government and its forces could hold the city for weeks, if not months. That said, as security conditions in Afghanistan deteriorated, some argued for more urgency in planning for a possible collapse.
9. U.S. military planning for a possible NEO had been underway with post for some time, but the Department's participation in the NEO planning process was hindered by the fact that it was unclear who in the Department had the lead. Coordination with DoD worked better on the ground in Kabul.
10. A major challenge facing NEO planning was determining the scale and scope of the operation, especially when it came to how many at-risk Afghan nationals would be included, how they would be prioritized, and how long their evacuation might take. Senior administration officials had not made clear decisions regarding the universe of at-risk Afghans who would be included by the time the operation started nor had they determined where those Afghans would be taken. That added significantly to the challenges the Department and DoD faced during the evacuation.
11. Crisis preparation and planning were inhibited to a degree by concerns about the signals that might be sent, especially anything that might suggest the United States had lost confidence in the Afghan government and thus contribute to its collapse. However, the AAR notes that once it got underway, the plan for closing the embassy compound and evacuating U.S. government personnel and U.S. citizen and third-country contractors proceeded well, considering the speed at which it was implemented.

*Services for U.S. Citizens, SIVs, and other at-risk Afghans*

12. The Department and Embassy Kabul sent clear and consistent messages to private U.S. citizens in Afghanistan about the risk of travel to and residency in the country. Afghanistan had long been listed as a Category 4 country, and U.S. citizens were strongly discouraged from traveling to or remaining there.



13. At the time the Trump administration signed the agreement with the Taliban in February 2020, there was a significant backlog in the Afghan SIV process. That administration made no senior-level or interagency effort to address the backlog or consider options for other at-risk Afghans despite its commitment to a military withdrawal.
14. When the Biden Administration came into office, senior administration officials within the interagency took steps to accelerate the SIV process. For its part, the Department provided additional resources that began to reduce the backlog and established an interagency Afghanistan Coordination Task Force (ACTF) that facilitated the departure of 1,962 Afghan SIV applicants and family members in late July and early August 2021.
15. Since most at-risk Afghans would not be eligible for the SIV process, the Biden Administration expanded eligibility to allow a wider range of Afghans to apply to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. Within the Department, the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) led efforts to streamline Afghan referrals under the Priority 1 (P-1) designation to allow consideration based on individual applicants' circumstances and apparent need for resettlement. PRM also established a new Priority 2 (P-2) designation to provide more options for at-risk Afghans who had an affiliation with the United States, which the administration announced the beginning of August.

#### *Crisis Operations*

16. Embassy Kabul and TDY Department personnel performed heroically under dangerous and difficult conditions at HKIA to help evacuate tens of thousands of U.S. citizens, legal permanent residents, locally employed staff, and at-risk Afghans from Afghanistan after Kabul fell to the Taliban. Their work is a credit to the Department and the American people.
17. Although the Department had established the ACTF, it failed to establish a broader task force as the situation in Afghanistan deteriorated in late July and early August 2021. Establishing such a task force earlier would have brought key players together to address issues related to a possible NEO.
18. Naming a 7th Floor principal to oversee all elements of the crisis response would have improved coordination across different lines of effort.
19. The complicated Department task force structure that was created when the evacuation began proved confusing to many participants, and knowledge management and communication among and across various lines of effort was problematic. It did not help that various task force entities were physically scattered throughout the Department. Consistently staffing the task forces with experienced people during a pandemic also proved challenging.
20. When Kabul fell and the evacuation began, the Department faced enormous pressure to provide detailed information on the whereabouts and safety of private U.S. citizens still in Afghanistan. U.S. citizens abroad are not required to register with the Department, which relies instead on a system of voluntary registration by those who wish to make their whereabouts known and receive messages relevant to their safety and security. At any given

time, the Department therefore only has an estimate of the number of U.S. citizens in country, some of whom will identify themselves only in a crisis.

21. Nevertheless, in response to this crisis, the Department undertook a massive effort involving tens of thousands of phone calls to contact directly as many private U.S. citizens as possible to determine their whereabouts, whether they wanted to leave Afghanistan, and to provide information on how they could be evacuated. This was an extraordinary response to a unique situation.
22. The overwhelming volume of incoming calls and messages to the Department from other government agencies, Congress, and the public inquiring about individual cases mostly with regard to at-risk Afghans was challenging. Many of the calls involved distressed callers pleading for help in rescuing their loved ones and friends in a chaotic and dangerous environment. The lack of a centralized case management system to track and collate inquiries and a number of other communications and information management challenges added to the difficulties the Department faced.
23. Most important, the Department proved unable to buffer those on the ground in Kabul from receiving multiple, direct calls and messages from current or former senior officials, members of Congress, and/or prominent private citizens asking and in some cases demanding that they provide assistance to specific at-risk Afghans. Responding to such demands often placed Department employees at even greater risk and hindered the effort to move larger groups of people out.
24. Constantly changing policy guidance and public messaging from Washington regarding which populations were eligible for relocation and how the embassy should manage outreach and flow added to the confusion and often failed to take into account key facts on the ground.
25. Once the crisis began and Embassy Kabul relocated to HKIA, the Department was quick to surge additional personnel and resources to Kabul, Doha, and the temporary safe havens or so-called "lily pads" where those who were evacuated were taken for temporary shelter and further vetting and screening before onward travel to the United States. That said, the Department could have better identified, prepared, and equipped volunteers for the situation they encountered.
26. During the evacuation, U.S. diplomatic missions in the Middle East and Europe worked successfully and quickly with host government and DoD personnel to establish camps for tens of thousands of evacuees.
27. The Department demonstrated great agility in funding, staffing, and provisioning the reception center at the Dulles Expo Center with virtually no notice, as well as staffing and supporting other processing sites, including on U.S. military bases. These activities, however, are well outside the Department's normal areas of responsibility and should not serve as a precedent for future crises.

28. The Department has no systematic process to debrief task force and other crisis response staff promptly after a crisis, especially to assess and support the physical, mental, and emotional impact of their experiences.

## **Recommendations**

Based on its review of the Department of State's execution of its duties directly related to the process of ending the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan from January 2020 to August 2021, the AAR offers recommendations for Department leadership's consideration.

### **1. Strengthen the Department's Overall Crisis Preparedness and Response Capabilities.**

- The Office of Crisis Management and Strategy (CMS) in the Operations Center should serve as the Department's focal point for international crisis planning, strategy, and response. Fully staffing CMS must be a priority, and the office should be led by a Civil Service SES with substantial crisis management experience.
- While CMS plays a critical convening and facilitation role, the M family's authorities and capabilities are essential to a successful crisis response. The AAR recommends that M assign a senior advisor as a liaison to CMS, charged with coordinating M bureau crisis planning and response support. During a crisis, the advisor would coordinate M family resources and capabilities.
- CMS needs a strong planning component that can work closely with DoD planners, particularly with regard to planning for a possible NEO.
- The Operations Center must have the technology, equipment, and surge capacity/space to simultaneously run multiple task force elements in close proximity to one another.
- The Department should invest in crisis management software that can provide a common operating picture and synthesize appropriate information from across the organization. Most important, it needs a case management system that is compatible with other relevant Department systems, is interoperable with interagency platforms, and allows for tracking Congressional and other special interest cases while ensuring privacy safeguards and protection of PII. Mobility is of critical importance, and those working TDY or remotely must have the equipment and access to the system they need.
- The Department should further codify the roles and responsibilities of all key players in a major international crisis, including the domestic elements of a hybrid crisis or response. While the regional bureau involved will normally provide overall leadership of a task force, many other bureaus and offices have critical roles that must be included. The Department should also seek to identify and document key interagency capabilities used during this crisis that may be requested again.

### **2. Insulate Crisis Planning and Preparation from Policy Concerns.**

- The Department must insulate contingency planning and emergency preparedness from political concerns. While it may not be possible to prevent information from leaking regarding contingency planning, making such plans routine would eliminate political considerations in the same way that the completion of a post's F-77 report does not signal an evacuation is imminent.

### **3. Department Leadership During a Crisis.**

- In complex crises, the Department needs to appoint a single, principal-level crisis leader who can oversee multiple lines of effort across the policy and operational spheres.
- The Department must proactively and clearly message policy priorities and limitations to manage expectations. Acknowledging limitations and difficult choices up front will avoid creating unrealistic expectations during a crisis about what the U.S. government can do to help or whom it is prepared to evacuate.
- The AAR also notes the importance of Department leadership providing clear mission objectives and guidance, while delegating execution to the task force and crisis responders. Increased crisis training and exercises should help build trust and confidence among principals, senior leaders, and offices working the response effort.
- Department leadership needs to protect crisis responders from direct appeals for assistance outside of appropriate Department channels and chains of command. The Department should make clear that requests for assistance must be channeled through the task force and senior leadership at post so that they can be balanced with other priorities and operational security.

### **4. Strengthen DS' Direct Channel to Decision Makers.**

- Given that DS is charged with the safety and security of U.S. missions and personnel, DS's ability to provide its unfiltered assessment of security conditions to senior Department leadership, including the Secretary, must be ensured.

### **5. Build a Red Team Capability.**

- The Department should establish a red team capability to challenge underlying policy assumptions, especially those that impact contingency planning. The AAR believes S/P should lead this effort and be able to draw expertise from across the Department, as well as the interagency. CMS and S/P together would consult on when the red team should be convoked, but the Secretary or other Department principals could task the red team with specific reviews as needed.

### **6. Hold More Frequent Tabletop Crisis Exercises/Simulations.**

- CMS and FSI/CMT need to lead frequent tabletop exercises/simulations in Washington on international and hybrid crises. Those exercises should include key players and interagency participants, both from agencies with an international role and those more domestically focused.



- The Department should host tabletop exercises involving senior leadership and their staff early in a new administration to ensure that non-career leaders understand fully their roles and responsibilities and are well briefed on established Department crisis management structures, for international, domestic, and hybrid crises.

#### **7. More Effectively Utilize Personnel Resources in a Crisis.**

- The Department should establish flyaway teams that are able to deploy at short notice to posts in crisis. The teams would include individuals specially trained for high threat environments and with critical expertise in the core missions of the Department. Teams should train together with interagency partners to improve communication and collaboration during a crisis.
- The Department needs to centralize and track task force staffing and create a better mechanism to identify people with relevant skills/experience to assist in a crisis. GTM should be resourced to build and maintain the capability to identify those with requisite training and skills. M should have the authority to second such people to a task force for extended periods of time, especially at the initial stage of standing up the task force.
- The Department needs a TDY crisis coordination capability to provide support to personnel it sends out as part of its crisis response efforts. It should streamline administrative support and reduce bureaucratic hurdles, ensure consistent policy and resource application, provide/fund any necessary equipment and technology before departure, and minimize obstacles for people who deploy in a crisis.
- The AAR noted H and CA's innovative success in this crisis of utilizing remote workers and virtual teams across the Department and in consular sections around the world to support the crisis response. Incorporating available posts to support a crisis response remotely should be a best practice whenever possible.

#### **8. Improve Crisis Communications.**

- In a crisis, the Department should designate a senior official for strategic communications who can work with the task force and key offices and bureaus to draft public messages and hold regular background briefings for Congress and others, in addition to serving as an interlocutor for press briefings.
- Similar to CA's use of its newly established GSA.gov contract to expand call center capacity to answer basic questions with regularly updated points during the Afghanistan crisis, the Department should explore broader contract capacity to respond to public inquiries that are not about specific U.S. citizens and do not require case management, as well as ways to support initial data entry and response on U.S. citizen cases.

- The Department should actively support mobile-friendly communication platforms such as non-enterprise apps like WhatsApp and Signal. The Department should also consider a virtual contact center or soft phone solution, which could protect the Department's phone system and allow employees to support task forces remotely.

#### **9. Strengthen Lessons Learned, Care, and Support.**

- The Department should establish a central repository of lessons learned and after-action reports and use them to improve crisis planning. All crisis responders should complete an anonymous, standardized out-brief shortly after the crisis ends.
- The Department must ensure crisis responders have easy and ready access to effective mental health and emotional support. Especially for responders on the ground, the Department should consider mandatory mental health check-ins in the aftermath of a crisis. Supervisors should be attentive to their subordinates' well-being and offer appropriate support.

#### **10. Support for U.S. Citizens and Other Vulnerable Populations in a Crisis.**

- The AAR found that official warnings to private U.S. citizens throughout the review period were clear about the dangers of remaining in Afghanistan. Most who remained were Afghan-Americans who had made their own calculations about the risks involved or had compelling reasons to remain notwithstanding the inherent dangers. This is the case in many crisis situations. What was unique in the evacuation of Afghanistan, however, was the effort to identify and reach out directly to these U.S. citizens repeatedly. Going forward, the Department must consider if it will follow this model and, if so, what are the privacy and resource implications.
- The Department should clarify what criteria the Secretary would use to determine that seeking reimbursement for an evacuation is "impracticable" under 7 FAM 1864. Similarly, the Department should prioritize a move to electronic processing and signing of DS-5528, the evacuee manifest and promissory note, which will increase the situations where collecting reimbursement would be practicable and could feed into the Department's case management system.
- The Department should determine how it will treat local staff and update the FAM and FAH to include more explicit information as to when and under what circumstances the Department would evacuate local staff, whether they could be eligible for evacuation to the United States (vice a third-country safe haven), and the kind of support the Department could provide after an evacuation or a post closure.

## **11. Recommendations for High-Threat Posts.**

- Strengthen the Emergency Action Committee process in high-threat posts to ensure that decision points are more clearly linked with specific actions and decisions.
- Effective internal communications must be a priority at all posts, but especially those in a high threat environment. In particular, relying on country team meetings to convey important messages from the front office is not sufficient or adequate, especially in large posts. FSI should ensure that the ambassadorial seminar and DCM course provide future embassy leaders with training and examples of best practices to promote better internal communication, including frequent use of town halls and targeted messages from the front office.
- Reconsider how the Department approaches constructing and upgrading facilities in non-permissive or high-threat environments, including allowing OBO more flexibility to make incremental upgrades to facilities that may not meet physical standards rather than waiting for construction of new state-of-the-art facilities.
- Hold high-threat posts accountable for reducing holdings of classified and other sensitive materials and ensuring that embassy personnel are ready to exercise their duties related to retrograde, post closure, and destruction.
- Review practices related to LE Staff and contractors, including how best to retain updated information regarding employee status, badge information, personal contact information, and contract status. In addition, for U.S. contractors and contractors from third countries, consider including a clause that bolsters employment companies' responsibility for evacuation planning and resources for its staff in high-risk areas, including a return to the home of record.
- Continuously evaluate and assess which functions could be offshored to minimize in-country footprint. As the pandemic has shown, there are many tasks that can be done virtually/remotely. This should apply to other agencies as well and should be considered as a part of the NSDD-38 process.
- Consider ways to mitigate challenges related to one-year tours, including exploring options to make one-year tours into virtual two-year assignments by including a Washington-based component in a relevant office or desk or a linked assignment with a related portfolio at a regional post. This would mitigate the lost productivity from frequent turnover and encourage longer-term planning and team building.

## CONCLUSION

Chargé Ross Wilson left Kabul on the last flight from HKIA on August 31, 2021. The Department and interagency effort to process Afghans who have left or were evacuated and to assist U.S. citizens and SIV applicants now trying to leave the country continues to this day. Still, the departure of the last U.S. military and civilian officials effectively marks the end of a 20-year effort at nation building in Afghanistan. A study of the reasons for the failure of that effort is well beyond the scope of this report, but the sudden departure of President Ghani and the collapse of Afghan Security Forces served as a stark reminder that the future of the country would ultimately be determined by the Afghans themselves, not the United States and its allies and partners. Two U.S. Presidents had decided to withdraw U.S. military forces from Afghanistan on the basis of an agreement negotiated with the Taliban, even as the United States worked to secure at the negotiating table an intra-Afghan peace deal that might bring peace after decades of war. That deal never materialized, but even up to the fall of Kabul, there were efforts underway in Doha to reach an accord that might have created an interim government and allowed the U.S. civilian mission in Afghanistan to remain. Many observers believe that the Taliban used the February 2020 Agreement as a way to simply run out the clock pending the departure of U.S. forces, while President Ghani seemed never fully to appreciate the gravity of the situation or believed that, somehow, the United States might reconsider the decision to withdraw its forces. He also resented having to cooperate with implementation of an agreement that he had never signed.

Under both the Trump and Biden Administrations, the State Department faced the enormous challenge of maintaining a large diplomatic and assistance mission in Kabul despite the impending withdrawal of U.S. forces that provided critical security, intelligence, and life support functions. Some questioned whether this was possible or whether senior officials ever fully appreciated the level of risk it entailed, but the Department worked diligently to accomplish the mission even as it coped with a pandemic that had a significant negative impact on its global operations. In examining these efforts spanning two administrations, the AAR team was struck by the differences in style and decision making, most notably the relative lack of an interagency process in the Trump administration and the intense interagency process that characterized the initial period of the Biden Administration. This included a particular focus very early in the Biden Administration on the fate of those eligible for SIVs as well as larger numbers of other at-risk Afghans who might need assistance in the event of a Taliban victory. This led to the successful launch of an initiative under Department leadership to reduce the backlog of SIV applicants and begin moving those eligible from the country. That movement, however, was still in its early days as Kabul fell to the Taliban.

The sudden departure of President Ghani from Kabul and the fall of the city to the Taliban happened with a speed that caught almost all close observers by surprise. Until Kabul fell, commercial flights out of Afghanistan were available and even Afghans planning to depart were taking time to sell property and settle their affairs. But there had been warning signs that prospects the Afghan government forces would defend Kabul and hold out for a possible negotiated transfer of power were evaporating. While the Department and Embassy Kabul had prepared for various scenarios, including the possibility of a full evacuation from Afghanistan, there was not a sufficient sense of urgency. The routine turnover of key personnel at Embassy

Kabul on the eve of the crisis is perhaps the best indicator of that fact. Concern about signaling a loss of confidence in the Ghani government also impeded preparations for a worst-case scenario in Washington and Embassy Kabul. Those concerns were not illegitimate, and Ghani himself even protested U.S. efforts to expedite the movement of SIV applicants, but the AAR team recognizes the need going forward to insulate worst-case contingency planning and preparations from political concerns.

It is important to highlight that notwithstanding the speed with which the situation evolved, Embassy Kabul successfully evacuated to HKIA as planned. That success was overshadowed by the scenes of chaos and panic that ensued as tens of thousands of Afghans sought desperately to flee the country in palpable fear of a potential Taliban bloodbath. Although detailed planning for a NEO had been underway for months, those plans were largely premised on a permissive environment, and key decisions about who would be prioritized for evacuation, aside from U.S. citizens and their families, had not been made. The Department itself had been slow in setting up its own task force structure, but there may have been no way to prepare fully for the situation once Kabul fell to the Taliban and the NEO morphed into the largest humanitarian evacuation since the fall of Saigon.

Almost immediately, the Department faced demands for detailed information on the welfare and whereabouts of U.S. citizens that it simply did not have and had never before been asked to provide under a system that relies on U.S. citizens overseas to register and update their information voluntarily. The Department initiated a massive operation involving its missions around the world to reach out to U.S. citizens directly and provide what assistance and guidance it could to those who had remained in Afghanistan despite repeated earlier warnings to leave while commercial flights were still available. The Department proved unable, however, to buffer fully those on the ground from the onslaught of special pleadings they received from all levels and directions to assist at-risk Afghans. Answering these appeals, some of which involved putting members of the military and Department employees at even greater risk, took critical time away from other essential duties aimed at evacuating as many people as possible. In addition, the Department had to juggle requests from allies as well as appeals from private individuals and organizations who sought to organize their own evacuations of people from various parts of Afghanistan.

Through difficult negotiations with the Taliban in Kabul and Doha, U.S. military and civilian officials were able to stabilize the situation after the difficult first days and enlist the Taliban's fitful cooperation in allowing the movement of high-priority groups to the airport, including eventually the embassy's locally employed direct-hire staff and their immediate families. Challenges in getting access to the airport and the often dangerous situation outside the perimeter meant that, in the end, many of those who would have been prioritized for evacuation never made it in before the airlift ended. The horrific ISIS-K terrorist attack of August 26, 2021, near Abbey Gate that resulted in the deaths of 13 brave U.S. service members and more than 150 Afghans underscored how dangerous the situation was.

At the same time that it was dealing with the situation on the ground in Kabul, the Department enlisted the cooperation of countries primarily in the Middle East and Europe in the evacuation effort. In particular, the Department worked with DoD and others to establish temporary safe



havens, colloquially known as “lily pads,” where evacuees could be housed and cared for while awaiting further processing and potentially onward travel to the United States. The speed of the negotiations leading to the establishment of those safe havens and the agility with which the Department and interagency were able to provide staff and solve a host of logistical and financial problems was impressive. The same was true on the domestic side, where the Department took on unprecedented roles and responsibilities in setting up a reception center at the Dulles Expo Center from scratch and staffing it with hundreds of volunteers as well as working with DoD to care for and process tens of thousands of Afghans at U.S. bases across the country.

We end this After Action Review where we began, with praise and admiration for our colleagues throughout the Department. We have made a series of recommendations for ways in which we think the Department could better prepare for future complex crises, but in the final analysis, there is no substitute for the smart, hard-working, dedicated professionals that the Department could count upon in this crisis. We should be proud of what they and their partners in uniform accomplished during this evacuation and what they continue to do to help U.S. citizens and at-risk Afghans in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover.