



Statement for the Record of

Human Rights First

On

Senate Judiciary Committee

Joint Subcommittee Hearing

Subcommittee on Border Security and Immigration

Subcommittee on Crime and Counterterrorism

“Biden’s Afghan Parolee Program”

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I. About Human Rights First

Human Rights First is an independent, non-profit organization that for more than four decades has pressed the United States to take a leading role in promoting and defending human rights. Established in 1978, Human Rights First's mission is to ensure that the United States is a global leader on human rights. The organization works in the United States and abroad to promote respect for human rights and the rule of law. The organization's work includes advocacy and action to uphold the right to seek asylum and to protect democracy. The organization also partners with many of the nation's leading law firms to provide pro bono legal representation to refugees seeking asylum, and over the years has helped thousands of refugees receive asylum in this country.

II. Overview

For over twenty years, Afghan human rights defenders, civil society, and government leaders staked their lives, futures, and families on the international community's efforts to build a rights-based democracy in their country. When that effort collapsed in August 2021, they faced deadly retribution from one of the world's most repressive and brutal regimes. In response to this catastrophe, assisting our Afghan allies went beyond policy preferences – for many Americans, it was and is central to our moral identity. Human Rights First has worked since early 2021 to get support and protection for Afghan allies and other at-risk Afghans in the United States and abroad.

Following President Biden's April 2021 announcement of the full withdrawal of the U.S. military from Afghanistan by September 11th of that year, Human Rights First sprang into action. Our Veterans for American Ideals program (VFAI) developed a detailed plan to evacuate Afghan allies to a U.S. territory and led the creation of the Evacuate Our Allies (EOA) coalition. EOA has grown from three veteran-led groups to a 280-member working coalition of human rights, veterans, religious, national security, refugee, resettlement, and Afghan-American organizations that continue congressional and administrative advocacy, as well as legal assistance and representation, and public leadership, on issues around the evacuation and resettlement of Afghans.

As the U.S. prepared to withdraw from Afghanistan, violence from the Taliban against Afghan nationals increased, including the explicit targeting of Afghans associated with the U.S. mission. While the Biden administration took steps to evacuate groups of allies before the withdrawal was complete, this approach did not meet the need on the ground, leaving some Afghans behind once troops fully withdrew and others in third countries in need of resettlement support. Faced with a humanitarian catastrophe, Human Rights First assisted from the civil society side to support the response from NGO and veteran communities, Congressional offices, the State Department, and within Afghanistan. During the initial evacuation period, we identified evacuation needs and worked to get individuals out of Afghanistan to safety. In that time, Human Rights First

documented and referred over 95,000 vulnerable individuals in need of evacuation to the State Department. Without Operation Allies Refuge (OAR) and Operation Allies Welcome (OAW) the tens of thousands of Afghans that benefited from these efforts would almost certainly have been at risk of grave harm due to the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan.

III. Human Rights First Response to Assist OAR and OAW Afghans

The airlift phase of the evacuation made clear that Afghans faced additional obstacles once they left their country. The nearly 76,000 vetted individuals who arrived in the United States through and immediately after the evacuation faced legal and immigration challenges upon arrival at U.S. military installations. They were granted humanitarian parole, a two-year immigration status that allowed them to enter and work in the United States temporarily.

To provide Afghans arriving in the United States with legal support, we launched Project: Afghan Legal Assistance (PALA). Through coordination and collaboration with U.S.-based legal organizations, law firms, resettlement agencies, and other stakeholders, Human Rights First provides direct representation and “light-touch mentorship” to volunteer attorneys whose work supports Afghans across the country.

When Afghans seeking resettlement were temporarily housed in “Safe Havens” at U.S. military bases throughout the United States, our staff visited nearly all of them to offer legal advice, provide training, assist with applications, and answer questions related to immigration status in the U.S. Additionally, we have held multiple re-parole clinics to provide guidance on extending parole status, and pro se plus asylum clinics to provide resources on legal and non-legal resources that can help individuals advocate for themselves in court or before USCIS. PALA also mobilized a strong network of Dari and Pashto interpreters and translators to assist during all stages of legal representation.

To this day, we continue to partner with community organizations and resettlement agencies for Know Your Rights and Legal Orientation programs for Afghans. Often in partnership with other organizations focused on Afghan issues, we provide trainings and written guidance for volunteer lawyers, community-based organizations, and legal service providers serving Afghan communities. Since 2021, PALA has directly served over 4,000 Afghans.

Newly-arrived Afghans underwent vetting by various entities in the U.S. government, both at temporary “Lily Pads” or U.S. military bases abroad before being permitted entry to the United States, by Customs and Border Protection upon arrival at U.S. ports of entry, and at the Safe Havens in the United States. Moreover, a large number of those evacuated were people whom the United States already knew because they worked and served alongside U.S. forces in Afghanistan, and many were eligible for Special Immigrant Visas due to this work. Additionally, like other [immigrant populations](#), Afghan nationals submitted biometrics data and information to USCIS Field Offices when processing their asylum applications, green card applications, and other petitions. All Afghan nationals applying for asylum underwent thorough [security](#)

[processing](#) before their applications were decided upon. Those who applied for green cards through the Special Immigrant Visa process similarly were subject to [security vetting](#), before their applications were adjudicated. In the last four years, Human Rights First helped newly-arrived Afghan nationals to file 800 asylum applications and 1,100 green card applications; the vast majority of those applications have already been granted.

IV. The Ongoing Need for Action to Protect Our Allies and At-Risk Afghans

Throughout the past eleven months, the Trump administration has taken numerous steps that put our Afghan allies and other vulnerable Afghans at grave risk of harm. On May 12, 2025, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced it would revoke Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Afghanistan, putting around [11,000 Afghans](#) in the United States at risk of deportation. DHS's decision to terminate TPS for Afghanistan ignores the documented threats and instances of violence and persecution targeting women, girls, human rights activists, those who served with the U.S. military, and other vulnerable groups - as Human Rights First explained in a detailed [analysis](#) issued in May. Just weeks later on June 4th, President Trump signed a proclamation (the [Travel Ban](#)) banning nationals from a group of countries, including Afghanistan, from entering the United States. Although the ban includes an exemption for Afghans eligible for the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) status, many at-risk Afghans, including those who worked to advance the U.S. mission in country, such as former government officials, teachers, human rights defenders, judges, women and girls, will be devastatingly impacted by the ban.

This ban is layered on top of other injustices that have impacted Afghans, as one of the first steps President Trump took upon taking office was to [shut down](#) the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). Thousands of Afghans who had worked with the United States or had other U.S. ties were in the U.S. pipeline at the time the resettlement ban (the Refugee Ban) was issued, as Human Rights First has [previously explained](#). The Refugee Ban has prevented refugees, including Afghans, in need of protection from getting to safety in the United States, and halted essential services for recent arrivals, including Afghans impacted by the withdrawal of U.S. troops in 2021. The administration has also taken various steps to dismantle the Operation Enduring Welcome program that followed on from OAW and the congressionally mandated Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts (CARE). These programs together coordinated and managed various aspects of the ongoing resettlement process for vulnerable Afghans.

Most recently, following the tragic shooting of two National Guard members on November 26, the administration announced a halt in processing of immigration applications for nationals of the 19 Travel Ban countries, including Afghanistan, as well as a halt in adjudication of all asylum applications for all nationalities, among other harsh and unprecedented actions. Even before November 26, DHS had targeted Afghans in the United States, including our own clients, for detention and deportation, and we have heard numerous cases of Afghans who have been detained since November 26. The full extent of these punitive and discriminatory actions will be

felt for years to come, as families remain separated, and vulnerable Afghans are subjected to the risk of deportation and persecution.

Human Rights First has [detailed](#) that Afghans face worsening dangers if returned, as human rights monitors have recently documented, including public flogging, forced conversion, arbitrary detentions, executions, and other forms of persecution, torture or retaliation. Women and girls are “[systematically excluded](#)” from public life, experiencing denial of their basic rights, ongoing prohibitions on education, employment, travel and health care, and bans on singing or speaking in public. Religious freedom for all Afghans declined significantly, as the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has warned. Afghans in danger of Taliban persecution include women and girls, human rights defenders, journalists, religious minorities and other Afghans who do not share the Taliban’s interpretation of Islam, ethnic minorities, LGBTQ persons, civil society leaders, women’s rights advocates, Afghans who previously worked with the former Afghan government, Afghan national security forces, international military forces or those associated with the international community, and Afghans who worked with the U.S. military and government. Thousands of Afghans are awaiting U.S. resettlement or relocation in [Pakistan](#), and at risk of forced return by the Pakistan government, in addition to the estimated hundreds of thousands of Afghans stranded in Afghanistan and [other countries](#) awaiting U.S. relocation or resettlement. Afghans in danger of Taliban persecution face [sharply escalating](#) risks of forced return from Pakistan, Iran and other countries.

Adherence to international law is essential to securing and advancing U.S. national interest, as is the swift restoration of immigration processing for Afghans and other populations in the United States, equitable resettlement, relocation initiatives, and humanitarian aid. Forced and premature returns that violate international law endanger lives, risk destabilizing the region and heighten onward movements. Abandoning Afghans who put their lives on the line to work with the U.S. government and military, or to support human rights and democracy, will undermine trust in the United States and make it much more difficult for the United States to enlist allies and partners in the future.

VII. Examples of At-Risk Afghans and Allies Who Benefited from the OAR and OAW Effort

Efforts of organizations like Human Rights First, alongside many others, have enabled at-risk Afghans to continue their lives here in the United States and contribute to their new communities. Our new Afghan neighbors include former print, radio, and TV journalists, writers, artists, and athletes. Our allies include former members of the Afghan Air Force, members of the Afghan National Army, and members of the Afghan National Police, judges, prosecutors, and Afghan government employees who helped develop all sectors of civil society in Afghanistan prior to the Taliban takeover. Other evacuees included Alumni of the American University of Afghanistan, employees of U.S. and NATO-funded aid organizations, employees of the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, university professors, judges, and human rights, women’s rights and

children's rights advocates. Reflected throughout each of these groups is a large number of women evacuees, members of ethnic and religious minorities, and other groups actively persecuted now by the Taliban. Our clients have lost parents, siblings, children, colleagues, friends, and relatives to decades of Taliban and ISIS terrorism and violence, and yet continued to strive each day for a safe and democratic Afghanistan alongside U.S. forces.

VIII. Recommendations for Congress

Human Rights First, along with U.S. [veterans](#) who served in Afghanistan, and U.S. [Members of Congress](#) from [both sides](#) of the [aisle](#), have long implored the United States to honor the promises it has made to protect Afghans who put their lives on the line working with the U.S. government and U.S. military, as well as those who worked for human rights and democracy, or who face other persecution. Abandoning Afghans who risked their lives to work with the U.S. government and military, or to support human rights and democracy, to torture and possible death, will undermine trust in the United States and make it much more difficult for the United States to enlist allies and partners in the future. Instead, Congress should:

- Pass the *Enduring Welcome Act of 2025*, the *Afghan Adjustment Act* or *Fulfilling Promises to Afghan Allies Act*, and support reauthorization of more Afghan Special Immigrant Visas.
- Urge the Trump administration to swiftly reverse recent policy pronouncements to halt adjudications of asylum applications and other immigration applications that punish Afghans and other noncitizens.
- Press the Trump administration to end the Travel Ban, which (1) blocks reunification of Afghan asylees with their immediate family members stranded abroad, and (2) denies safety to Afghans in certain immigration statuses.
- Reverse the flawed TPS termination which sets a dangerous example to other countries.
- Restore U.S. humanitarian aid critical to supporting states that host large numbers of refugees; and restore funding, operational staffing levels, and overseas processing operations of the congressionally authorized Office of the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts (CARE).
- Urge the Trump administration to swiftly restart processing of thousands of at-risk Afghan refugees awaiting U.S. resettlement who are now stranded in Pakistan, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, or other locations, and launch a strong U.S. resettlement initiative for fiscal year 2026 for at-risk Afghan and other refugees. These refugees include family members of U.S. service members, Afghans who worked with the U.S. mission, and other refugees at risk of Taliban persecution.
- Call on the Government of Pakistan and other governments to halt mass returns of Afghan refugees, and uphold international law prohibitions against refoulement of people at risk of persecution or torture.