

Scenario 238

THE LARGEST AIR-LIFT IN HISTORY

It happened in August 2021 at the KABUL AIRPORT when America faced a humiliating defeat in the longest war of its history. Referring to Reuters in **daily DAWN** dated 2nd September 2021:

"Soon after taking over Kabul by the Taliban, the US military was forced to take drastic steps for evacuation including sudden stop for all flights from Kabul's International Airport for seven hours because there was nowhere for the evacuees to go. For months, the US military officials had urged the Pentagon and the White House to convince other countries to take Afghans at risk from Taliban retaliation.

They had largely failed to secure agreements with other countries, prompting officials across the US government to rush to try to find space for the evacuees."

President Biden administration's scramble was emblematic of failures over those few months, which culminated with a hastily organised airlift that left thousands of US-allied Afghans behind and was punctuated by a suicide **bombing outside Kabul's airport** that killed 13 US troops and scores of Afghans.

The chaotic end to America's longest war had sparked the biggest crisis of President Biden's seven months in the White House, finger-pointing within the administration and questions about whom, if anyone would be held responsible. Despite the missteps, the administration carried out one of the largest airlifts in history, ***evacuating more than 120,000*** Americans, Afghans and people of other nationalities amid the threat of attacks by the militant Islamic State group [ISIS]. The last US troops left the Afghan soils on Monday, the 30th August 2021.

Current and former officials & lawmakers held there was little appetite for Mr Biden to fire or demote top advisers over the handling of the US withdrawal. The Democratic president, meanwhile, strongly defended his administration's actions. Frustrated and angry officials at the

Pentagon privately blamed the lack of urgency leading up to the airlift on the State and Homeland Security departments, who in turn blamed the White House for slow decision-making.

However, a failure like this was collective. Everybody played his role to make the ship sink and then watching it from harbour smilingly.

BIDEN DEFENDED HIS EXIT SCHEDULE:

On 31st August 2021; while addressing his nation, President defended his decisions over **PULL-OUT** schedule. The President made clear that:

'I was not going to extend a forever exit,' Biden said while defending his decision to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan - a move which led to the Taliban returning to power. ***Staying longer was not an option;*** it was said in an address to the nation, a day after the end of a 20-year US presence in Afghanistan.

Mr Biden praised troops for organising an airlift of more than 120,000 people wishing to flee the Taliban regime. He was widely criticised - at home and by his allies - over the abrupt manner of the US withdrawal, which led to the unexpected collapse of the Afghan security forces US troops had trained and funded for years.

The Taliban were able to reclaim control of the whole country within 11 days - finally entering the capital, Kabul, on **15th August 2021**. Biden had deployed nearly 6,000 troops to seize control of the airport to co-ordinate the evacuation of US and allied foreign nationals and local Afghans who had been working for them. Thousands of people converged on Kabul Airport in the hope of being able to board one of the evacuation flights.

Taliban supporters, including those in Kandahar, were celebrating on the streets but Biden was praising his troops for the mass evacuation and promised to continue efforts to bring out those Americans who were still in Afghanistan and wanted to return - about 200 Americans altogether. Biden added in his speech:

"A lot of our veterans and their families have gone through hell. Deployment after deployment. Months and years away from their families, loss of limbs, traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress.

I was not going to extend this forever war, and I was not extending a forever exit. The war in Afghanistan is now over."

1 *In a tweet he said the US did not need troops on the ground to defend*
2 *it. His decision was ‘**not just about Afghanistan. It’s about ending an era***
3 ***of major military operations to remake other countries.**’*
4

5 Joe Biden tried to ‘*turn the page*’ from a month of chaos and deaths
6 in Afghanistan and, more broadly, from 20 years of ultimately futile
7 US attempts at occupation and nation-building. At times he seemed
8 defensive, noting that **Americans were warned 19 times to exit**
9 **Afghanistan before** the 30th August US military withdrawal. He accused
10 Afghan leaders, allies on whom the US had depended, of ‘*corruption and*
11 *malfeasance*’. And he blamed Trump for negotiating what he characterised
12 as an inadequate withdrawal agreement with the Taliban.
13

14 President Biden said the US had no vital interest in Afghanistan, and
15 tried to reframe US foreign policy as depending less on military
16 deployments and more on diplomacy and international cooperation **to**
17 **face adversaries like China and Russia [?]**.
18

19 Public opinion polls showed Americans supported the US withdrawal
20 from Afghanistan, only few were unhappy with how Biden oversaw the
21 exit. White House held that the nation would be grateful for what
22 Mr Biden accomplished and would soon forget the details of how the
23 war ended.
24

25 On the same last day of 31st August 2021, the White House spokeswoman
26 Jen Psaki said: ‘**Now, it’s a 20-year war, so there’s obviously a lot to dig**
27 **into**’. Democrats wanted to pursue Biden’s domestic agenda — expanding
28 social programs, funding infrastructure and protecting voting rights. On
29 the national security front, they wanted to highlight their investigation
30 of the 6th attack on the US Capitol Hill by Trump’s supporters on
31 6th January 2021.
32

33 How Congress would eventually proceed will depend on the level of
34 interest from voters. Less than 40% of Americans approve of Biden’s
35 handling of the military withdrawal from Afghanistan, according to
36 **Reuters’ poll** released just after the exit-day.
37

38 National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said a month earlier that
39 the Biden administration would conduct a ‘**hot-wash**’ — an after-
40 action review — to discover what went wrong in Afghanistan and
41 that he expected results of that review to be made public. It would simply
42 sort out - **Who to blame?**; naturally some poor nation like Pakistan
43 would be named to slaughter – because in America all Generals and

civil officials are sacred cows whether they belong to Democrats or Republicans.

The last month in Afghanistan was a series of US failures, from the intelligence and military to diplomatic and immigration fronts, with one ***core error was the failure to anticipate the speed of the Taliban's advance and collapse of the Afghan military.***

'In some way, everyone is to be blamed in America,' some Republicans pointed fingers at Sullivan and Secretary of State Antony Blinken as the two most responsible for setting the conditions for a chaotic evacuation and have demanded their departure.

Republicans also called for Biden to fire the US special envoy for Afghanistan, *Zalmay Khalilzad*, who negotiated the Trump administration's 2020 deal with the Taliban that set the stage for the withdrawal. However, no one gave ears to this baseless demand because the then President Trump was happy with his proceedings and it was the necessity of that time.

But when House Minority Leader **Kevin McCarthy** was asked whether he thought Biden or Blinken should be impeached, the California Republican did not answer, saying instead his focus was on getting the Americans out of Afghanistan. Defence officials told Reuters the State Department appeared out of touch with the reality on the ground in Afghanistan and had too much confidence in Afghan army, police and the Ghani government.

During a congressional hearing in June 2021, Blinken was asked if the administration was considering getting at-risk Afghans out of the country while their cases were being reviewed. His reply was:

"If there is a significant deterioration in security that could well happen, we discussed this before; I don't think it's going to be something that happens from a Friday to Monday."

The Taliban seized two of Afghanistan's largest cities — *Kandahar* and *Herat* — on 13th August 2021 and took Kabul two days later.

FOR AFGHANS ARRIVING the US:

Now see inside America....**FOR AFGHANS ARRIVING** there: During the last two weeks of August 2021, the US continued to run emergency

1 flights from Kabul airport using mostly the military air-carriers picking
2 up as many '*Afghani friends*' as they could. Media still keeps hundreds
3 of images and videos showing thousands of people gathered at the
4 airport, many of them were simply hanging with the air-crafts in despair;
5 some died by falling from when the air-crafts caught speed on ground
6 or in air; some died in stampede; about 100 killed in IS's ambush on
7 27th August 2021 etc etc.

8
9 The aspired Afghans were holding and waving documents in their hands
10 – as a proof of their associations with the US forces as contractors,
11 suppliers, paid or voluntary intelligence workers or former recruits. No
12 one yet has details of those Afghanis who, by share luck, succeeded in
13 catching their flights and landed somewhere in the US territory.

14
15 The US policy was clear that evacuees who were ordered deported
16 or who withdrew their applications to enter the US would not be
17 returned to Taliban-controlled Afghanistan; the plans were to remove
18 those individuals to a third country. However, the people who once
19 landed in the US were probably not leaving even if they failed the vetting
20 process.

21
22 The US Department of Homeland Security [DHS] flagged 44 Afghan
23 evacuees as potential national security risks who were facilitated by the
24 US during the two weeks after Taliban's take over of Afghanistan.

25
26 Within three weeks after take-over by Taliban, about 60,000 evacuees
27 who have arrived on US soil, 13 Afghans remained in US Customs and
28 Border Protection custody awaiting additional screening and review,
29 including interviews with FBI and counter-terrorism teams.

30
31 Another 15 evacuees were considered security concerns; they were given
32 back to US Immigration and Customs Enforcement [ICE]; some were
33 sent back to transit sites in Europe or the Middle East. Another batch of
34 16 Afghans were not cleared to travel in the US and thus kept at US
35 transit camps abroad. Two Afghan nationals were previously deported
36 but they returned as evacuees; both were deported after convictions: one
37 for sexual assault [2010] and the other for an armed robbery [2011].

38
39 President Biden planned to resettle 95,000 Afghans in the US, asking
40 Congress for \$6.4 billion in emergency funding to support the effort.
41 White House officials confirmed that the vetting would be rigorous; will
42 be tightly scrutinised by military, intelligence, law enforcement, and
43 counter-terrorism agencies before their release.

After **17th August 2021**, within three weeks, as many as 5,000 Afghans 1 per day arrived at Dulles, using a United Airlines hangar as an arrival 2 hall for flagged passengers in waiting. Relief organizations provided 3 them meals, clothing and other provisions; most of whom were 4 temporarily housed at eight military bases around.

Till ending first week of September 2021, amongst the 65,000 evacuees 7 who had arrived, 11% were already the US citizens and 6% were legal 8 permanent residents; the remaining 83% were considered '**Afghans at-Risk**' 9 who either qualified for special immigrant visas as they had 10 worked for the US government, or were keeping provisional immigration 11 status known as 'humanitarian parole'.

They received work authorization, and their parole status was renewed 14 for two years, but the White House asked Congress to approve benefits 15 for them similar to the US refugee status-holders. American authorities 16 had planned to allow them to apply for legal permanent residency 17 after a year.

Several Afghans were flagged for suspected associations with terrorists, 20 or whose phones and electronic devices contained dubious information. 21 Afghan passengers were made to land at the two designated arrival 22 sites only; Dulles [in Virginia] and Philadelphia Airports. DHS deployed 23 400 officers and agents to collect evacuees' biometric and biographical 24 information and oversee the vetting process at transit sites in Europe and 25 the Middle East. For the main criteria the US policy was: '**If we are assured it is not in fact derogatory information that is of concern to us, we will admit the individual.**' 27

NO-ONE ACCEPTED AFGHAN REFUGEES:

Look at some of the obstacles Afghan asylum seekers faced around the 32 world.

Pakistan and Iran: According to the UNHCR, Pakistan and Iran in 35 the past had hosted the largest numbers of Afghan refugees, with 36 nearly 1.5 million and 780,000, respectively, till ending 2020 at least. 37 However, the interior ministry of Pakistan holds the different figures. 38 They claimed that 3 million Afghanis were welcomed through formal 39 two border passages during 1970s and 1980s after Soviets occupation 40 of Afghanistan. Additionally, the same numbers of Afghanis were those 41 who had crossed the border via traditional, non-controlled mountainous 42 passages. 43

Pakistan had already shut the border crossings before the Taliban took over, but later doors were partially reopened. The Taliban were letting those with legal travel documents – but the Pakistani government ministers were issuing contradictory statements. One minister said refugees could stay in isolated, in temporary camps near the border, while Pakistan’s interior minister said in mid-August: **‘No Afghan refugees are coming to Pakistan’** – a traditional irresponsible behavior of Pakistani ministers since long; no one is ever sure about what they should say.

Iran’s border with Afghanistan extends nearly 600 miles — mostly through desert — and Afghans have been long crossing freely to work there. Up to 3 million registered and unregistered Afghans were estimated to live in Iran. Afghans seeking to head further west often cross through Iran into Turkey or Greece.

Amid expectations of a new influx, the Iranian government instructed their border guards not to admit Afghans in 2021 whatsoever. At the same time, they set up temporary camps in border provinces for those who do cross over, though the government announced that they all would be repatriated when conditions improve. Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said in a briefing in ending August 2021 that Iran and Pakistan were not able to handle another surge of refugees.

Turkey and Greece: On the subject of potential asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Turkey and Greece shared their common stance – **‘keep them out’**. Turkish President Erdogan called Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis after Kabul fell to the Taliban to discuss their concerns over a potential refugee wave. Turkey has been an attractive destination country for refugees — in the past it hosted nearly 4 million Syrian refugees — and a stop on the way to Europe. Erdogan told the press:

“Turkey has no duty, responsibility or obligation to be Europe’s refugee warehouse. The European Union should assist Afghans to prevent a migration surge [through other strategies / plans].”

Afghans who had fled to Turkey in the past traveled over the mountains from Iran. In recent months, Turkey scaled up border patrols and fortifications. Afghans seeking to cross into the country faced a recently extended 10-foot-high wall, ditches or barbed wires and other hurdles. Turkish border guards pushed back Afghans attempting to enter during

weeks of American exit, leaving thousands of Afghans massed in the Iranian border region.

Greek officials didn't allow a repetition of 2015's refugee surge, when hundreds of thousands of migrants reached Greek islands by boat from Turkey. Greece then extended a wall on its border with Turkey, and the government pledged to turn Afghans back.

European Union: Human Rights Watch called on European countries to lead efforts to facilitate safe passage of at-risk civilians from Afghanistan. The International Rescue Committee urged the EU to resettle at least 30,000 Afghans in the next 12 months. EU member states didn't agree to a common approach amidst divisions on policy making.

EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen called the resettlement of vulnerable Afghans '**our moral duty**' and said the commission would provide funds to EU countries that resettle refugees - but could not get consent of a single EU member country.

EU's Chief Diplomat Josep Borrell suggested applying the temporary protection directive, a never-used mechanism since 2001 that could grant immediate, temporary protection to displaced people. A group of some 80 members of the European Parliament supported using the measure; but the idea of welcoming Afghan refugees to Europe had already been met with opposition from right-wing movements that gained support on the heels of the Syrian refugee crisis. Some EU member states, such as Slovenia and Austria, **categorically rejected the idea of taking in Afghan refugees into their territories.**

Austria, contrarily suggested, setting up '**deportation centers**' in countries neighbouring Afghanistan where European countries would send Afghans having denied asylum. EU home affairs ministers held an emergency meeting on the situation in Afghanistan, and afterwards released a statement making clear that the EU's approach would revolve around helping Afghanistan's neighbours to take in refugees and keep them there – **as if the neighbouring countries were fool nations.**

The ministers emphasized that the EU would remain determined to prevent unauthorized migrants from crossing the bloc's external borders. EU Home Affairs Commissioner Ylva Johansson said after the meeting that she would convene a forum in September 2021 to discuss resettlement priorities with member states '**and provide sustainable solutions to those Afghans who are most vulnerable**' – however, that dawn never appeared.

Germany: After Pakistan and Iran, Germany hosted the largest number of Afghan refugees. German Chancellor Angela Merkel had opened Germany's doors in 2015 to nearly a million refugees, mainly from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. That move drew immense criticism from nationalist groups and ire from the right, in Germany and across Europe. Merkel, who was set to leave office soon after, said in July [2021]: ***'We cannot solve all of these problems by taking everyone in - there should be NO REPEAT of 2015'***.

The far-right Alternative for Germany [AFD] party rallied against the prospect of a 'new refugee wave.' Germany was among six EU nations that wrote to the European Commission in Brussels on 5th August 2021, calling on it to urge Afghanistan to cooperate on returns of Afghan migrants. Germany showed greater humanitarian inclinations than Austria and other such like signatories from EU.

France: French President Macron proposed creating a UN-led safe zone in Kabul to facilitate the departure of Afghans attempting to leave. He said several thousand remain on France's list of people in need of protection, including judges and female leaders, and pledged to try to work with partners and the Taliban to secure their departures. He also said that:

"We will help them as it is the honour of France to be side by side with those who share our values as much as we can - efforts would be on to evacuate Afghan human rights defenders, artists, journalists and activists."

"But Europe cannot alone assume the consequences of Afghanistan's fall to the Taliban."

Dozens of French mayors offered to welcome more refugees while others spoke with a more hostile tone. Christian Estrosi, the mayor of Nice, told radio RTL: ***'I am not ready to receive refugees here; that's clear.'***

THE AGONY OF THE LEFT OVERS:

The US policy was clear that evacuees who were ordered deported or who withdrew their applications to enter the US would not be returned to Taliban-controlled Afghanistan; the plans were to remove those individuals to a third country. However, the people who once landed in the US were probably not leaving even if they failed the vetting process.

The day Afghanistan's capital fell, a contractor who had worked at the US Embassy for six years was dismissed from work early. Embassy staff collected his family's information weeks before in preparation for a possible evacuation. But after he was told on 15th August to leave the embassy's grounds – *'nobody called, nobody emailed'* – perhaps the insiders knew the whole game. The contractor, who used to run a shop at the embassy, said:

"Everyone knows where I worked, that I worked with the Americans; I gave my mother my embassy badges and told her to put them in a box and bury it in the garden."

The contractor eventually fled to the home of a relative in a neighbouring province. Roughly 2,500 US Embassy employees were among the 120,000 people the US evacuated by air from Afghanistan, according to President Biden. But the operation left many of America's longtime partners behind. One person familiar with the matter told they included about 2,000 US Embassy contractors and immediate family members, some of whom who had worked at the embassy for more than a decade.

On 1st September 2021; Under-Secretary of State Victoria Nuland said at a news conference that:

"For those who were not evacuated, we're looking at all possible options, but we're also conveying to them that their safety and security is of paramount concern to us."

Most people kept the view that it was all an eye-wash. Biden described the operation as an ***'extraordinary success,'*** but thousands of Afghans considered vulnerable and eligible for evacuation fell through the cracks. They included students of American University of Afghanistan and graduates, applicants for special immigrant visas and members of Afghanistan's Special Forces who had fought on behalf of the US and luckily survived – c60,000 of their companions died in operations and ambushes.

The weapons the Taliban captured from the US camps might not be an international threat, but they gave the group more ways to control their Afghan population in its own way. With the departure of US forces from Afghanistan, many Afghans who felt threatened by the Taliban take-over were correct saying that they were in greater danger. Among the tens of thousands who managed to reach the airport and got on planes were 5,500 Americans, thousands of citizens and diplomats

of US allies, thousands of Afghans who worked for the US as interpreters, translators etc.

Planning for the evacuation had begun weeks before Kabul fell to the Taliban in mid-August, but the effort began to stumble almost as soon as it started. The US officials did not expect Afghan President Ashraf Ghani to flee the country so cowardly & quickly; leaving Kabul's Security Forces to collapse; leaving the civilian side of the airport unguarded.

Stooge President Ghani's departure as the Taliban entered Kabul on 15th August 2021 was really disappointing for all policy makers in the White House and Pentagon. The Americans made every effort to know who they were dealing with and what the numbers were, making sure they had proper resources on the ground to assist them. But the whole situation had spiraled into uncertainty, frustration and ambiguity.

When the airlift was complete, the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken assured that other evacuation efforts were ongoing. It was a white lie for the whole civilized world. Many were still there; the Pentagon knew it. It was a shallow assurance that the US would keep working to help them; in fact the US commitment to them had no deadline. When the last American evacuation plane left Afghanistan, one of the embassy employee said: ***'.....she became a prisoner in her own home.'***

The 23-year-old lady had recently graduated from American University of Afghanistan in Kabul with distinction - she feared for being on Taliban's 'KILL LIST' - she was too afraid even walking down her street. Referring to **the Washington Post** dated 30th August 2021:

"For the second time in four days Sunday, a major media outlet reported that the Taliban had been provided with a list of names of those seeking to evacuate Afghanistan. This has led critics to accuse the Biden administration of endangering those people."

American University, funded largely with American finances, attempted to evacuate thousands of students, faculty members and graduates but was mostly unsuccessful. Afghans associated with the school were considered at risk and were eligible for US evacuation flights. A deadly 2016 Taliban attack on this institution had killed 15 at least and left dozens wounded. But those connected to the university were not prioritized; meaning it was up to the school to navigate Taliban

checkpoints without US or NATO help and make it into the military side of the airport.

Ian Bickford, president of American University of Afghanistan, once told that efforts to relocate students, graduates and faculty members were continuing but all they were in the process for the long haul - And they continued to appeal for the US support. However, the State Department spokesman though couldn't speak about specific cases but had affirmed the US evacuation was aimed at addressing the needs of those most at risk, including women and girls, journalists, members of religious and ethnic minorities, and such like others.

[On 15th August 2021; the day Kabul fell to the Taliban, an engineer who worked for the US Army was scheduled to have his final interview at the US Embassy for an expedited visa. The interview was set for 10:45 am, but the embassy had started dismissing its staff an hour before, as news broke that the militants had reached the city's gates.]

The engineer, in the final stages of processing for a special immigrant visa, should have been eligible for an evacuation flight. His family camped outside the airport for three nights, sleeping in an open park littered with garbage. He managed to reach the airport gates twice but was turned away both times. Taliban leaders had barred Afghans who didn't hold foreign passports or green cards from leaving Afghanistan.

[Neighbours had warned him that local Taliban fighters were asking questions about whom he worked for. The inquiries were enough to scare him off the streets. But unable to leave his home, his family was running dangerously low on food - for days, all they had was bread, tea and sugar. But the evacuation process prioritized the US citizens, legal permanent residents, special immigrant visa applicants and other Afghans at risk - not him.]

Another Afghan Special Forces officer was on the list of people to evacuate but wasn't able to get inside the military side of the airport. US forces tried to extract him and a few hundred other Afghan commandos, but the logistics repeatedly fell apart. The officer held:

"The Americans call us and tell us to gather here. And then they say, 'No, that is the wrong place. Go to another location.' And then they say, 'Come back tomorrow'.

History of a Disgraceful Surrender [2021]

1 *Of course I'm angry. We were on the front line for the United States*
2 *in this war. They told us you will be the best of the best in the Afghan*
3 *army, and now look.*

4
5 *When Kabul fell, I didn't want to flee. I called my [foreign] sources*
6 *and told them, if you support us, we can fight against the Taliban in*
7 *Kabul. We have the training, we have the ability, and we can be the*
8 *resistance."*
9

10 But there was no response to his offers. As the Taliban tightened its grip
11 on his neighbourhood, he fled to a friend's house and then, a few days
12 later, to another home. The night the last US evacuation plane took off,
13 he and a friend went to watch the Taliban gunfire from the roof – ***'Every***
14 ***hope is finished now; he can't imagine trusting the US enough to partner***
15 ***with its military again;'*** the officer desperately cried.

16
17 Another US Embassy employee said:

18
19 *".... the silence from his longtime employer is unnerving. We are still*
20 *waiting to see what they will do for us, we don't know, exactly."*
21

22 Ultimately, there was a sun-set of 31st August 2021, hopeless for many.
23