



OIG's Review of the Department of State's Evacuation of U.S. Embassy Kabul, Afghanistan

INTRODUCTION

The Office of Inspector General (OIG) conducted a classified review,¹ which is summarized in this information brief, to determine whether U.S. Embassy Kabul, Afghanistan, followed established Department of State (Department) guidance in preparation for and execution of the evacuation of U.S. government personnel, private U.S. citizens, Afghans at risk, and other individuals from Afghanistan in August 2021.

Because of the classified nature of the details included in the report, this unclassified summary information brief does not contain everything OIG previously reported. However, the complete, unredacted report was provided to the Department and Congressional committees, as required by law.²

REVIEW OVERVIEW

- In the months prior to and following President Biden's April 14, 2021, announcement of U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, Taliban forces took large swaths of land, capturing their first provincial capital on August 6, 2021, and culminating with their August 15, 2021, entry into Kabul. As the Taliban entered Kabul, the Afghan president fled the country, and with his departure, the government, along with its security forces, collapsed.
- OIG found that Embassy Kabul developed its emergency action plan (EAP) in accordance with established guidance. OIG also found that despite having an approved EAP, Embassy Kabul was not adequately prepared for the full scope of challenges it would encounter while executing the evacuation in the final weeks of August 2021.
- After the evacuation of the embassy compound, Department personnel who remained at the Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) to assist evacuation efforts faced huge, uncontrollable crowds that formed daily. Amid the chaos, on August 26, 2021, a suicide bomber detonated an explosive device in the crowd outside Abbey Gate—one of the entrances to the airport—killing 13 U.S. service members and many Afghans.
- OIG made 10 recommendations in the report.
 - The Department concurred with the intent of the recommendations, which OIG considered resolved, pending further action.
- Since the issuance of the final report, the Department has taken action to implement some of the recommendations, including the following:
 - The Bureau of Consular Affairs launched its "Travel Smart from the Start" campaign, aimed at U.S. travelers and U.S. citizens who live and work abroad to better highlight the resources and benefits of enrolling in the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program.³
 - The Under Secretary of State for Management has worked in coordination with the Office of Crisis Management and Strategy to improve the process of obtaining more accurate personnel accountability data.
- The Under Secretary of State for Management provided comments to a draft of this report, and noted that "[t]he Department mourns the loss of the thirteen U.S. service members who made the ultimate sacrifice during the evacuation at Hamid Karzai Airport." He further stated that "the Department is fully committed to applying lessons learned from this evacuation, with a focus on improved communications, resources, and preparedness."
 - The Under Secretary's comments are reprinted in their entirety at the end of this information brief.

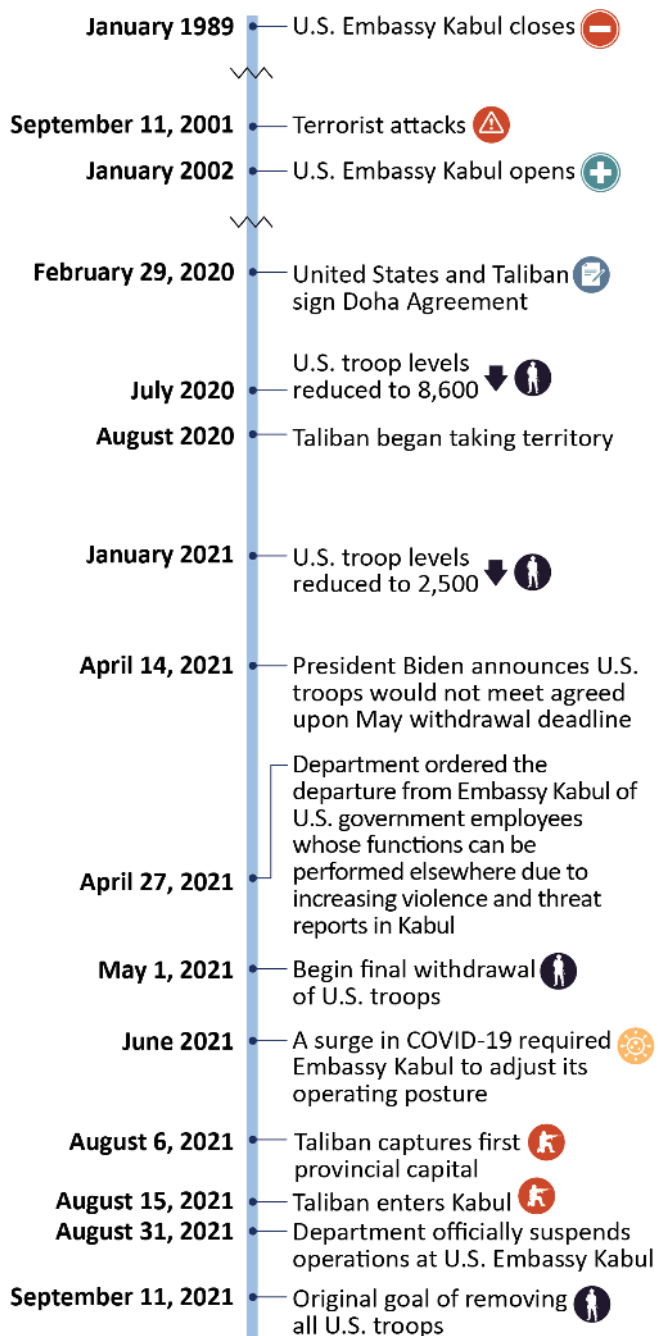
BACKGROUND

“U.S. policy in Afghanistan—and the work of Embassy Kabul—are grounded in the fundamental objective of preventing attacks on the United States by terrorists enjoying safe haven or support in Afghanistan.”

(Source: Department of State, Integrated Country Strategy for Afghanistan, dated November 2020)

U.S. MISSION AFGHANISTAN

TIMELINE OVERVIEW



EMERGENCY PLANNING GUIDANCE

The Department’s responsibilities for developing and implementing policies and programs to provide for the evacuation of U.S. government personnel and private U.S. citizens from dangerous situations abroad are codified in law and executive orders. In addition, the Department’s policies and procedures for preparing and conducting evacuations of U.S. government personnel, private U.S. citizens, and other individuals are described in multiple sections of the Foreign Affairs Manual (FAM) and the associated Foreign Affairs Handbook (FAH).

EMERGENCY PLANNING GUIDANCE

- The United States Code (U.S.C.) requires the Secretary of State to develop and implement policies and programs to provide for the safe and efficient evacuation of U.S. government personnel, dependents, and private U.S. citizens when their lives are endangered.⁴
- The State Department Basic Authorities Act of 1956, as amended, authorizes the Secretary of State to incur expenses for the evacuation of (1) U.S. government employees and their dependents, and, on a reimbursable basis to the maximum extent practicable, (2) private U.S. citizens, and (3) third-country nationals.⁵
- Executive Orders 12656 and 13074 charge the Department with the “[p]rotection or evacuation of United States citizens and nationals abroad and safeguarding their property abroad, in consultation with the Secretaries of Defense and Health and Human Services,” and charge the Department of Defense (DoD) with “the deployment and use of military forces for the protection of United States citizens and nationals and, in connection therewith, designated other persons or categories of persons, in support of their evacuation from threatened areas overseas.”
- The FAH states that “The act of emergency planning provides a systematic way to engage the community at post in thinking through the cycle of a potential crisis, determining required response capabilities, and establishing a framework for roles and responsibilities. Post

should develop their Emergency Action Plan (EAP) using a deliberative planning process.”

- Memoranda of agreement between the Department and DoD establish a shared planning and decision-making framework to enhance cooperation on scenarios requiring security augmentation for overseas posts. The memoranda provide guidance in response to a noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO), in which the Department can request assistance from DoD.

DEPARTMENT ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES RELATED TO EMERGENCY PLANNING AND EVACUATIONS

An emergency that affects U.S. foreign relations usually commands the attention of numerous Departmental offices and other Federal agencies, as well as the post(s) involved.

(Source: Foreign Affairs Handbook)

The Department of State Operations Center maintains a 24-hour watch for any emergency worldwide.

The Office of Crisis Management and Strategy “serves as the crisis monitor/advisor for the Department’s senior leadership and the Departmental coordinator for evacuations.”

The Under Secretary of State for Management is “responsible for all matters involving the allocation of Department resources,” including decisions regarding:

- Drawing down or closing certain types of posts.
- Emergency movement of Department personnel and dependents.
- Eligibility of and funding for evacuation of U.S. citizens in times of crisis.

The Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs is the Department’s “crisis manager” and is responsible for developing policy guidelines to respond to a given crisis. They are the day-to-day manager of overall regional and bilateral policy issues, assisting the

Secretary in giving foreign policy guidance to other departments and agencies, coordinating interdepartmental activities of the U.S. government abroad, and providing general policy direction on political-military and intelligence matters.

The Chief of Mission (COM), according to the FAM and FAH, is responsible for “[a]dvising, protecting, and assisting U.S. citizens abroad;” and “oversees the efforts of post personnel to prepare for crises.”

The Emergency Action Committee (EAC) at an overseas post is a group of subject-matter experts designated by the COM to provide guidance in preparing for and responding to potential changes in risk that might impact the safety and security of the post and the American citizens in the country.

EMERGENCY ACTION PLAN

Each overseas post is required to prepare an EAP following the format and outline provided in Department guidance. The EAP is a planning document that contains background information about the post to help the reader understand the operating context at post, and response plans with checklists articulating the actions to be taken in response to various events.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

FINDING A: EMBASSY KABUL DEVELOPED ITS EAP IN ACCORDANCE WITH GUIDANCE

EMBASSY KABUL’S EAP INCLUDED REQUIRED PROVISIONS

The Department has designated most of the guidance applicable to overseas post preparations for emergency situations as not publicly releasable. Accordingly, OIG is not including related citations and quotes in this unclassified summary; however, these details are included in the classified report.

As part of its review, OIG compared applicable guidance with the 2021 Embassy Kabul EAP. OIG determined that sections of the EAP such as "Determining the Need for and Scope of Drawdown," "Implementation of Military Assisted Evacuation," and "Priorities for Evacuation" provided the required guidance. For example, Embassy Kabul's EAP included a list of actions that the EAC and the COM should take when determining the need for a drawdown of embassy personnel and organizing such a drawdown.

F-77 REPORT OF POTENTIAL EVACUEES

Embassy Kabul, like all overseas posts, was required to maintain a list of potential evacuees in its "F-77 Report of Potential Evacuees," which is also known as the F-77 Report. According to Department guidance, the report plays a central role in evacuation planning because it "provides the figures the Department and Department of Defense rely upon when planning for and conducting [NEOs]."

The purpose of the F-77 Report is to estimate the total number and location of U.S. citizens and other potential evacuees. Although it is an estimate, and only one of multiple planning tools used, it is intended to provide Department and DoD planners with the best chance at ensuring that all people who require evacuation assistance are accounted for in advance when planning for an evacuation.

In its review, OIG also found that Embassy Kabul's EAP included decision points and provisions for conducting drills and exercises, as required. The EAC was required to develop post-specific decision points to assist in risk assessment and mitigation processes, and to review them at each meeting of the EAC. OIG reviewed EAC cables and interviewed EAC members and found that the EAC discussed Embassy Kabul's risk indicators at every meeting.

Department guidance prescribes the type, method, and frequency of functional exercises and drills held at post to help prepare embassy personnel for emergency situations, including evacuation. OIG found Embassy Kabul completed the requisite drills and exercises in 2020 and 2021 until it suspended operations.

EMBASSY KABUL'S EAP WAS CERTIFIED AND APPROVED ANNUALLY

The Department requires overseas posts to "conduct a comprehensive review of their entire EAP and certify it annually." After which posts submit the EAP to the Bureau of Diplomatic Security, where it is then reviewed to verify that the certification meets the requirements.

EAP CERTIFICATION REQUIREMENTS

- **Viable.** The information in the EAP accounts for Embassy Kabul's unique circumstances, and those outlined procedures have been repeatedly drilled and exercised to confirm that they are likely to function as stated.
- **Accurate.** The EAP has been kept up-to-date to reflect changing information on operating locations, contacts, inventories, and procedures.
- **Useable.** The EAP includes the necessary information for the various audiences that need the information, but it is not bogged down with information and contacts that are not needed to prepare for, or respond to, emergencies.

EMBASSY KABUL EMERGENCY ACTION COMMITTEE TOOK EMERGENCY PREPARATION SERIOUSLY

OIG's review of Embassy Kabul's 2021 EAP found that it included the provisions outlined in Department guidance and was reviewed, certified, and approved as required. During interviews with OIG, embassy EAC members reported that they took emergency planning seriously and were attentive to EAP requirements. OIG determined that Embassy Kabul met the EAP's intent for emergency planning. However, as noted in the guidance and ultimately demonstrated in August 2021 during the evacuation of Embassy Kabul, "[h]aving a written Department-approved plan does not automatically mean the post is prepared for a crisis."

"Having a written Department-approved plan does not automatically mean the post is prepared for a crisis."

(Source: Foreign Affairs Handbook)

OIG **DID NOT MAKE** ANY RECOMMENDATIONS AS A RESULT OF ITS WORK FOR FINDING A.

FINDING B: EMBASSY KABUL WAS NOT FULLY PREPARED FOR CHALLENGES IT ENCOUNTERED IN EVACUATING INDIVIDUALS

When President Biden announced that the United States would fully withdraw its troops from Afghanistan, he stated that the withdrawal would begin on May 1, 2021, and would be completed before September 11, 2021. In its review, OIG found that in the intervening months, Embassy Kabul took some actions to prepare for potential emergencies.

Urged private U.S. citizens to leave. On April 27, 2021, Embassy Kabul posted an alert on its website noting the ordered departure from Embassy Kabul “of U.S. government employees whose functions can be performed elsewhere due to increasing violence and threat reports in Kabul” and advised U.S. citizens in Afghanistan to make plans to leave the country as soon as possible.⁶ In a press conference on August 25, 2021, Secretary of State Antony Blinken noted that since March 2021, the Department had issued 19 separate messages to Americans who had provided their contact information to the embassy, encouraging—and then urging—they to leave the country. The Department also issued “Level 4 – Do Not Travel” advisories on its website and social media platforms warning of the dangerous conditions for U.S. citizens in Afghanistan.

Entered into agreements with foreign governments. Throughout April 2021, Embassy Kabul signed memoranda of agreement with foreign embassies in Kabul to provide emergency evacuation support services, and the foreign embassies agreed to pay the costs incurred for the services and “indemnify and hold harmless the United States of America . . . including but not limited to the Department of State and the U.S. Embassy.”

Discussed NEO planning with DoD and other federal entities. In June, July, and August 2021, Embassy Kabul personnel met with military planners

and discussed the potential for a NEO. On August 6, 2021, officials from the Department (including officials from Embassy Kabul), DoD, and other federal entities conducted an in-person tabletop exercise in Washington, DC.

EMBASSY KABUL WAS UNPREPARED TO ACCOUNT FOR THE INDIVIDUALS EVACUATED

“Many of the U.S. citizens in Afghanistan are either contractors, non-governmental workers, or security personnel, who frequently travel in and out of the country, or Afghan-Americans, who enter on their Afghan passports. Any list or count of U.S. citizens in Afghanistan is unlikely to be very accurate.”

(Source: Embassy Kabul EAP)

According to Secretary Blinken, the U.S. government and its partners ultimately evacuated approximately 124,000 individuals, including 6,000 U.S. citizens, in the weeks prior to suspending operations at Embassy Kabul on August 31, 2021.

OIG was unable to confirm the number reported by Secretary Blinken. On multiple occasions throughout the review, OIG requested supporting data from Department officials to confirm the number and category of evacuated individuals (e.g., locally employed (LE) staff and family members, third-country nationals, and “at-risk Afghans”). According to a Department official, the number of evacuated persons reported by the Secretary “came from DoD.”

THE F-77 REPORT OF POTENTIAL EVACUEES WAS UNRELIABLE

OIG found that Embassy Kabul updated its F-77 Report of Potential Evacuees in June 2021 (the previous version was dated February 2021) and that the June update reduced the estimated number of potential evacuees. The numbers of individuals the embassy considered to be potential evacuees in both the February 2021 and the June 2021 F-77 Reports were far fewer than the number of individuals that Secretary Blinken later indicated had been evacuated.

In its review, OIG also found that one reason for the embassy's underestimation in the F-77 Reports was that the data used were unreliable. Embassy officials told OIG that the F-77 Report was created from sources that depended on user input and its reliability therefore depended on the accuracy and completeness of the data entry. For example, one source of data is the Department's Smart Traveler Enrollment Program, which contains information provided from U.S. citizens directly.

SMART TRAVELER ENROLLMENT PROGRAM

The Smart Traveler Enrollment Program is an internet-based service operated by the Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs that allows U.S. citizens traveling or living abroad to enter their travel information, address, emergency contact number, and itinerary, enabling the Department to track the number of U.S. citizens traveling within or visiting foreign countries, including Afghanistan. However, enrollment in the program is voluntary.

According to embassy officials, the Afghan government was another data source for the number of U.S. citizens coming into Afghanistan using their U.S. passports. However, the officials told OIG that they did not trust the accuracy of the data received because many U.S. citizens were dual citizens who entered Afghanistan using their Afghan passports rather than their U.S. passports.

Finally, during the review embassy officials told OIG that they used information from an internal Embassy Kabul personnel system to account for personnel working at the embassy. The system relied on individual embassy sections and agencies inputting correct and up-to-date information, which embassy officials said made for very uncertain numbers. Embassy officials suggested that there should be a universally accepted program for tracking employees at overseas posts. OIG's report noted that adding such controls would help ensure that embassy sections and agencies under COM authority accurately account for their personnel.

OIG MADE **TWO RECOMMENDATIONS** TO BETTER PREPARE OVERSEAS POSTS TO OBTAIN AN ACCURATE

ACCOUNTING OF POTENTIAL EVACUEES BY IMPROVING THE ACCURACY AND COMPLETENESS OF THE DATA USED TO COMPILE THE F-77 REPORT OF POTENTIAL EVACUEES.

EVACUATION CRITERIA WERE NOT CLEARLY DEFINED

In its review, OIG found that the criteria for eligible Afghans were unclear at the start of the evacuation and that the criteria expanded as the evacuation evolved. Embassy officials told OIG that they were not provided a clear definition of "Afghans at risk" or "vulnerable Afghans" or the criteria for determining their eligibility for evacuation.

AFGHANS AT RISK

In statements made to the media during the evacuation, President Biden and Secretary Blinken broadly referred to "Afghans at risk" using the following terms:

- LE staff
- SIV "participants"
- Women
- Women organizations
- Journalists
- Non-government organizations
- Afghan allies and partners
- Afghans who might be targeted because of their association with the United States

According to Department officials, an official definition for "Afghans at risk" was never provided to Embassy Kabul. Moreover, embassy officials told OIG that as the evacuation in August progressed, they were under pressure to evacuate as many eligible Afghan nationals as possible. For example, during the evacuation, the embassy was fielding numerous requests from members of Congress and special interest groups to evacuate different groups of Afghan nationals.

Without clear criteria the embassy was unable to holistically plan for potential Afghan evacuees, which may have contributed to the underestimation of potential evacuees in Embassy Kabul's F-77 Report.

(Source: OIG conclusion in AUD-MERO-23-15)

EMBASSY KABUL DID NOT ESTABLISH A PLAN TO EVACUATE THE LOCALLY EMPLOYED STAFF

LOCALLY EMPLOYED STAFF

U.S. embassies around the world hire third-country nationals and host-country nationals (i.e., Afghans in Afghanistan), referred to as locally employed (LE) staff, under a variety of mechanisms to achieve their missions and maintain operations.

LE staff are the continuity staff of U.S. missions abroad; they provide institutional knowledge and perform vital mission program and support functions.

In its review, OIG found that the Department generally does not evacuate locally employed staff during an emergency; however, exceptions under certain limited circumstances are permitted. In Afghanistan, safety and security concerns for LE staff prompted the passage of legislation in 2009 that allowed LE staff with at least 1 year of service at Embassy Kabul to qualify for the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program.⁷ OIG found inconsistencies in Department policy on determining the exact range of exceptions that could result in the evacuation of LE staff.

Former Embassy Kabul staff told OIG that there was no direction from management to prepare lists of Afghan LE staff and their families to be evacuated until weeks before the evacuation (although names were being collected for future SIV processing). OIG found that Department guidance did not include procedures for evacuating LE staff.

On August 15, 2021, when the evacuation began, Embassy Kabul had no plans to get its Afghan LE staff to safety; instead, LE staff were sent home and told to wait for further instructions. Department staff then worked until the end of the August evacuation to get Afghan LE staff out of Afghanistan.

*OIG MADE **FOUR RECOMMENDATIONS** RELATED TO ESTABLISHING CRITERIA, AND SUBSEQUENT IMPLEMENTATION, FOR EVACUATION OF HOST COUNTRY NATIONALS, INCLUDING LE STAFF.*

EMBASSY KABUL LEADERSHIP WAS EXECUTING THE ADMINISTRATION'S STATED POSITION THAT DIPLOMATIC OPERATIONS WOULD CONTINUE FOLLOWING THE WITHDRAWAL OF U.S. MILITARY FORCES AND HAD CONCERNS THAT OVERT EVACUATION PLANNING WOULD CAUSE PANIC

"While we will not stay involved in Afghanistan militarily, our diplomatic and humanitarian work will continue."

– President Biden, April 14, 2021

According to multiple officials OIG interviewed during the review, one of the reasons why the Ambassador did not prompt the additional drawdown of personnel or initiate NEO procedures sooner was, at least in part, due to his execution of the Administration's stated position that diplomatic operations would continue following the withdrawal of U.S. military forces.

On April 15, 2021, while in Afghanistan meeting with the Afghan president, Secretary Blinken reiterated the Biden Administration's commitment to "strong diplomatic engagement" and stated that "even when our troops come home, our partnership with Afghanistan will continue" and "the United States will remain Afghanistan's steadfast partner."

In remarks to the media on July 8, 2021, President Biden stated, "I intend to maintain our diplomatic presence in Afghanistan."

OIG reviewed an after-action report from Embassy Kabul Management Section officials prepared following the suspension of operations, which explained that because of the administration's plan to continue diplomatic relations, the embassy dedicated considerable effort to planning for projects involving enhanced security and developing capacity, including alternatives to DoD supply chains and support platforms, absorption of assets, and support for the augmentation of embassy defensive capacity.

In its review, OIG also found that, for a brief time, the embassy allowed some personnel who were ordered to depart in April to return, increasing the overall number of employees at the embassy. In addition, the embassy

continued to allow the routine “onward assignments”⁸ process to proceed, which, according to personnel OIG interviewed during the review, may have reinforced the notion that embassy operations were continuing as usual and that there was no reason for concern.

Despite the reported worsening security conditions, the Senior Regional Security Officer and two deputies (who had been at post for the prior year) departed in early August 2021, leaving the responsibility for security to individuals who had just arrived in July and August 2021.

The Consular Chief, who had also been at the embassy for a year, departed on August 5, 2021, and other Consular Affairs officers—those who were responsible for issuing passports and other documentation to citizens and nationals and facilitating legitimate travel to the United States—also rotated out of Kabul after their tour of duty ended and were replaced with newly arrived officers.

Furthermore, OIG found that embassy leadership expressed apprehension about taking overt actions in preparation for an evacuation, concerned that such actions would undermine diplomatic support for the government of Afghanistan and cause panic within that government, the broader Afghan population, and Embassy Kabul. In their after-action report, management officers wrote, “Embassy Leadership did not wish to create panic and . . . ensured that Management Notices and informational emails did not address the truly dire situation.”

Because of this effort to avoid signaling a lack of support for the Afghan government, communication with embassy personnel about the timing and scope of a potential evacuation was unclear. In one example, an official told OIG that the Ambassador reprimanded embassy personnel during a meeting when they expressed concerns about their safety given the deteriorating security environment.

Embassy personnel also told OIG during the review that the lack of clarity caused confusion and made some personnel less prepared for an evacuation. In interviews, Embassy Kabul staff gave a wide variety of responses as to when the decision was made and how the evacuation message was communicated. For

example, some embassy personnel learned about the evacuation from their superiors, while others learned about it from embassy loudspeakers.

WORSENING SECURITY CONDITIONS

According to Department guidance, EAPs should include indicators that reflect events, threats, or changes in circumstances that potentially increase risk to the health, safety, and security of the mission personnel, private U.S. citizens, and other U.S. government interests.

OIG's review included an evaluation of the embassy's execution of various steps related to the risk factors and actions taken as the security conditions in Afghanistan worsened. The details related to this evaluation are included in the full report issued on the review, but are not included in this information brief due to their classified nature.

*OIG MADE **TWO RECOMMENDATIONS** RELATED TO ENSURING ALL POST PERSONNEL ARE SUFFICIENTLY AND APPROPRIATELY INFORMED OF THE SECURITY SITUATION AT POST.*

EVACUATION FROM HAMID KARZAI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT AFTER LEAVING EMBASSY KABUL WAS CHAOTIC

Following the evacuation of the embassy compound, most Department staff traveled to Doha, Qatar, where they assisted Afghan evacuees; however, a small group remained in Afghanistan with embassy leadership to continue evacuating U.S. citizens and others until August 31, 2021.

To assist with Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) evacuation operations, a second senior official, also with the rank of Ambassador, was sent from Washington, DC. According to embassy and DoD personnel, responsibilities were divided between the two “Ambassadors” and two command centers.

AIRPORT OPERATIONS

According to embassy consular staff, establishing consular operations at HKIA was extremely difficult because there was immense pressure to evacuate as many people as possible. In an effort to create an identification system at the airport, the Department sent different “passes” and documents via email to Afghan nationals. However, the system was unsuccessful because the emails were often forwarded by Afghans to many other email addresses.

During the review, some Department officials told OIG that the “pass” idea made the airport crowds worse by incentivizing even more Afghans to come to the airport if they received an email. Department officials were also inundated with special requests to help specific individuals or groups and spent large amounts of time trying to locate those individuals among the crowds outside the airport gates.

The Chargé d’Affaires to Afghanistan (i.e., the Chief of Mission) took the lead in communicating with Washington, while the second senior official with the rank of Ambassador worked with military personnel on ground operations at HKIA.

Although Department staff told OIG that the presence of the second “Ambassador” was an asset, Department staff also said that having two people perform the role of the Chief of Mission caused confusion about leadership among DoD officials leading the NEO.

“With [multiple “Ambassadors”] both on deck it was not initially clear who was the lead providing us the support we required to execute the NEO” and “there wasn’t an authority on who was specifically in charge.”

(Source: DoD personnel)

OIG MADE **ONE RECOMMENDATION** RELATED TO CHIEF OF MISSION AUTHORITY AND **ONE RECOMMENDATION** RELATED TO COMMUNICATIONS WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE.



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UNDER SECRETARY OF STATE FOR MANAGEMENT RESPONSE



United States Department of State

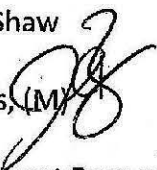
Washington, DC 20520

UNCLASSIFIED

September 20, 2023

MEMORANDUM

TO: OIG – Diana Shaw

FROM: U/S John Bass, (M) 

SUBJECT: (U) Department Response to OIG Draft Information Brief –
*OIG's Review of Department of State's Evacuation of U.S.
 Embassy Kabul, Afghanistan*

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to OIG's draft information brief – *Review of Department of State's Evacuation of U.S. Embassy Kabul, Afghanistan*. The Department appreciates the work OIG has put into developing this unclassified brief, highlighting areas where the Department performed well and areas where further improvement is needed.

As the report acknowledged, the Department largely followed existing guidelines for crisis preparation. In addition, Department employees, partners from other agencies, and the U.S. Military served with distinction in the most challenging circumstances. Many individuals faced dangerous and difficult conditions to protect U.S. interests, safeguard our personnel, and assist our allies. The Department mourns the loss of the thirteen U.S. servicemembers who made the ultimate sacrifice during the evacuation at Hamid Karzai International Airport.

As the brief notes, the withdrawal from Afghanistan and evacuation of over 120,000 people from Kabul in two weeks was an extraordinary event. Some of the circumstances surrounding the evacuation would have been difficult or impossible to plan for, and these exceptional circumstances precipitated negative outcomes. Nevertheless, the Department is fully committed to continuing to apply lessons learned from this evacuation, with a focus on

improved communications, resources, and preparedness. These efforts have already strengthened our response to subsequent crises around the world, aided the protection of U.S. citizens abroad, and enabled the Department to offer support to foreign nationals who work within and assist our diplomatic missions. Tens of thousands of people – our dedicated professionals and family members, other embassy employees, American citizens, and nationals of many other nations – have benefited from these improvements as we responded to unfolding crises in Sudan, Ukraine, Ethiopia, and Niger.

The Department coordinated closely with the interagency and our foreign partners to make every effort to assist in the evacuation of US citizens from Afghanistan. As the brief indicates, the Department carried out a sustained public messaging campaign to alert U.S. citizens of the security situation prior to the withdrawal and closure of U.S. Embassy Kabul. As the president of Afghanistan fled the country and government rapidly collapsed, the Department coordinated an unprecedented effort to bring as many people as possible to a safe location, including our locally employed staff, their families, and Afghan allies who had supported the United States during twenty years of engagement in Afghanistan. These efforts far surpassed the statutory requirements the Department must provide during an evacuation, and efforts are ongoing. The Department and our interagency partners remain committed to a large-scale effort to relocate Afghan allies to the United States.

We continue to have tremendous gratitude and admiration for our dedicated global workforce, including the thousands of Department employees who served in Afghanistan over the course of two decades. The Department will continue to use the recommendations of this and other reports to ensure that we are in the best possible position to safeguard our workforce and operations.

APPENDIX

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

OIG prepared this information brief in accordance with the Council of Inspector General for Integrity and Efficiency's *Quality Standards for Federal Offices of Inspector General*, which accounts for adherence to professional standards of independence, due professional care, and quality assurance, including procedures to ensure the accuracy of the information presented.

OIG conducted the classified review covered in this information brief to determine whether U.S. Embassy Kabul, Afghanistan, followed established Department guidance in preparation for the evacuation of U.S. government personnel, private U.S. citizens, Afghans at risk, and others from Afghanistan prior to and following the suspension of operations at Embassy Kabul.

This information brief and the original review report relate to the overseas contingency operations Operation Freedom's Sentinel and Operation Enduring Sentinel and were completed in accordance with OIG's oversight responsibilities as described in Section 419 of the Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended (see 5 U.S.C. § 419). OIG conducted the original review from January 2022 to April 2023 in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area and in Doha, Qatar. The scope of the review was evacuation planning at Embassy Kabul beginning in 2020 through the evacuation operation conducted in September 2021. OIG did not examine other aspects of the evacuation such as the disposition of firearms, sensitive materials, and medical supplies in the review. OIG faced challenges in completing its work because of the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges included limitations on international travel and in-person meetings, difficulty in accessing information, and related difficulties within the Department that affected its ability to respond to OIG requests for information in a timely manner. OIG conducted the original review in accordance with the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency's *Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation*. These standards require that OIG plan and perform the review to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for the findings and conclusions based on the evaluation objective. Despite limitations it faced, OIG believes that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for the information presented in this report.

To answer the objective of the review, OIG conducted interviews with numerous Department, DoD, and intelligence community officials. Those officials included former Embassy Kabul personnel; officials from the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts, the Afghanistan Affairs Unit, and the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs; representatives from the Departments of the Army, Air Force, and Navy; and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. OIG reviewed Embassy Kabul's EAP and Department guidance with respect to emergency planning and evacuation preparation including the Foreign Affairs Manual and the Foreign Affairs Handbook. OIG also reviewed relevant U.S. law and memoranda of understanding between the Department, DoD, and foreign governments. OIG reviewed after-action reports prepared by the Department and DoD. Lastly, OIG coordinated with Offices of Inspectors General from various other federal agencies on work related to Afghanistan, including DoD, the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of the Treasury, the United States Agency for International Development, and the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction.

In response to technical comments received from the Department regarding a draft of this report, OIG added additional information, when appropriate, to provide greater clarity and context.

ABBREVIATIONS

COM	Chief of Mission	HKIA	Hamid Karzai International Airport
DoD	Department of Defense	LE	Locally Employed
EAC	Emergency Action Committee	NEO	Noncombatant Evacuation Operation
EAP	Emergency Action Plan	OIG	Office of Inspector General
FAH	Foreign Affairs Handbook	SIV	Special Immigrant Visa
FAM	Foreign Affairs Manual	U.S.C.	United States Code

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Visit OIG’s Afghanistan Oversight website, <https://www.stateoig.gov/afghanistan-oversight-0>, to follow our work or contact us at publicaffairs@stateoig.gov for additional information. Beverly Jean Charlton O’Neill, Mike Vennemann, and Bonnie Stephens were key contributors to this information brief. OIG would also like to recognize the team that conducted the original review: Latesha R. Turner, Heather J. Kinsman, Trina H. Lee, Mike Vennemann, Tinh T. Nguyen, and Daniel Leffler.

END NOTES

¹ OIG, *Review of Emergency Action Planning Guiding the Evacuation of U.S. Embassy Kabul, Afghanistan* (AUD-MERO-23-15, May 2023).

² Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended, codified at 5 U.S.C. §§ 404(a)(5),(e); 405(f)(3).

³ The Smart Traveler Enrollment Program is a voluntary, internet-based Service operated by the Department’s Bureau of Consular Affairs, that allows U.S. citizens traveling or living abroad to enter their travel information, such as their passport number, address, emergency contact, and itinerary, enabling the Department to track the number of U.S. citizens traveling within or visiting foreign countries and contact them in the event of a crisis.

⁴ 22 U.S.C. § 4802(b), Responsibility of Secretary of State, Overseas Evacuations.

⁵ 22 U.S.C. § 2671(b)(2)(A).

⁶ “Security Alert – U.S. Embassy Kabul, Afghanistan,” April 27, 2021, <https://af.usembassy.gov/security-alert-u-s-embassy-kabul-afghanistan-14/>.

⁷ In 2009, Congress passed the Afghan Allies Protection Act, codified at 8 U.S.C. § 1101 note.

⁸ According to the FAH, an “assignment” is a tour of duty to a Foreign Service position that exceeds 6 months, and a permanent change of station is an “onward assignment.” However, more commonly, an “onward assignment” is the next tour of duty or post for Foreign Service personnel.