

MEMORANDUM

TO: REPUBLICAN HSGAC MEMBERS
FROM: HSGAC MINORITY STAFF (RANKING MEMBER PORTMAN)
DATE: OCTOBER 25, 2021
RE: SUMMARY OF SITE VISITS RELATED TO OPERATION ALLIES WELCOME

Since August 31, 2021 when the Biden administration withdrew all U.S. assets from Afghanistan, HSGAC Minority staff has pursued oversight of the process employed to screen and vet Afghan evacuees prior to entering the United States. This memorandum summarizes interviews conducted by HSGAC staffers with federal agency officials tasked with screening, vetting, or processing Afghan evacuees at Dulles Airport; the Dulles Expo Center; Fort Lee, Virginia; Ramstein Air Base, Germany; and the Rota Naval Base, Spain. The information and findings in this memo are based solely on Committee staff interviews.

Based on staff interviews with federal officials, it appears the standard security screening and vetting process that the U.S. Government conducts for refugee or visa applicants, which includes validating identification documents and an in-person interview by a trained official, is not being followed for the Afghan evacuees. In fact, federal officials relayed information about the process to Committee staff that raised a number of questions about the adequacy of the screening and vetting being conducted.¹

During interviews with Committee staff, federal officials identified minimum requirements for an Afghan evacuee to enter or travel to the United States, even with no identification.

- Afghans without any identification or records were approved for travel to the United States as long as their fingerprints or other biometrics were not already in a U.S. Government database and connected to derogatory information (*e.g.*, a known terrorist, terrorist affiliate, or criminal).
- If an evacuee did have identification (*e.g.*, an Afghan ID card or passport), federal officials told Committee staff the screening process did not include the validation of identification documents beyond a visual inspection.
- Federal officials logged Afghans into U.S. tracking systems based on the name and biographical data included in the identification document, or, if identification documents were not available, based on the evacuee's stated name and date of birth. Federal officials relayed that few Afghans know their birthday, which has resulted in a number of evacuees' date of birth logged as January 1. This new record of the evacuee can serve as the basis for receiving a Real ID in the United States.

¹ For purposes of this memo, "screening" generally refers to the process used to determine an individual's identity. Here, federal officials used both identification documents provided by evacuees (*e.g.*, Afghan identification cards or passports), as well as biometrics (*e.g.*, fingerprints, facial recognition). Screening also refers to a federal official determining if a U.S. database contains derogatory information about the evacuee. "Vetting" generally refers to an interview by a federal official to determine if the evacuee is who they purport to be, including whether that individual poses a national security risk.

- It was unclear if federal officials overseas were coordinating with their domestic counterparts sufficiently. A federal official who worked at the Rota lily pad site told Committee staff that he believed security vetting occurred when evacuees arrived in the United States. However, a federal official at the Fort Lee evacuee housing site told Committee staff any vetting interviews occurred at the lily pads overseas before the evacuee boarded a plane for the United States.

Additional information learned during staff interviews with federal officials during these site visits is relayed below.

I. COMMITTEE STAFF INTERVIEWS OF OFFICIALS RESPONSIBLE FOR LILY PAD PROCESSING SITES AT RAMSTEIN, GERMANY AND ROTA, SPAIN

From October 12 to 15, 2021, HSGAC Minority and Majority staff participated in a staff delegation to the Ramstein Air Base in Germany and the U.S. Embassy in Madrid, Spain to interview federal officials involved in OAW (previously named Operation Allies Refuge at the beginning of the evacuation). At the time of travel, the Rota Naval Base lily pad had completed its processing of Afghan evacuees, so Committee staff interviewed the federal officials in charge of the Rota operation at the U.S. Embassy in Madrid. Committee staff was only able to tour the lily pad site at Ramstein to inspect the processing, temporary housing, and manifesting of the evacuees on their way to the United States. The federal officials interviewed by staff were selected by the federal agencies involved.

What staff learned:

Federal officials created new identification records in key U.S. databases for evacuees who arrived without identification documents. While federal officials stated many evacuees lacked identifying documentation, they were unable to provide Committee staff the total number of such evacuees. Federal officials stated they created new records in U.S. databases based solely on information the evacuees told them for evacuees who lacked identification and were not identified through biometric records. These databases included the Department of Defense Automated Biometric Identification System (ABIS) and the corresponding biometric identification system at DHS called IDENT (not an acronym). Federal officials explained these two biometric systems are the primary databases used to clear or deny an Afghan evacuee for travel to the United States. Federal officials confirmed that these new records would then be used for all further screening and processing, including for application for asylum and the provision of Real IDs. Real IDs are now available to all Afghan evacuees as required by the continuing resolution passed by Congress in September 2021.

U.S. officials processing Afghans with ID cards stated they lacked any training to identify fraudulent Afghan documents. Federal officials told Committee staff that most of the staff processing evacuees with identification were not trained to recognize fraudulent documentation from Afghanistan. One federal official noted, “We aren’t experts in Afghan ID cards.” As such, it is unclear if federal officials could spot an evacuee using a fraudulent ID card.

Federal officials stated that vetting interviews were only conducted with evacuees whose biometrics or phone records were linked to derogatory information. Federal officials

told Committee staff that all evacuees ages 14 to 79 were screened using biometrics, including a fingerprint check and facial recognition. Federal officials, including an official representing the FBI, confirmed that in-person interviews were only conducted for evacuees who had derogatory information associated with their biometrics or phone records. Federal officials acknowledged that this is not the standard immigration process, which includes an in-person interview for all refugees and visa applicants from countries like Afghanistan that require enhanced scrutiny prior to coming to the United States.

Federal officials did not appear to be coordinating across domestic and international locations with regard to vetting interviews. A federal official who processed evacuees at the Rota lily pad believed that evacuees would receive security vetting in the United States. A federal official at Fort Lee managing evacuees' arrival in the United States told Committee staff he believed vetting interviews of evacuees occurred at the lily pads abroad prior to an evacuee boarding a plane to the United States.

Federal officials stated their mission in processing the Afghan evacuees did not include a determination of immigration status for evacuees without a visa. Federal officials stated that their mission was to evaluate the security risk of the evacuees, not to determine immigration status. At no point at either military base was there any formal screening or determination as to what connection the Afghan evacuees without visas had to the United States. Federal officials stated that their mission did not include a requirement to determine if the Afghans without visas had worked for the United States or an ally. U.S. citizens and Lawful Permanent Residents (LPR)² were segregated from the general evacuee population, but Afghans without visas who worked for the United States were treated the same as other evacuees.

A federal official raised concerns with Committee staff regarding evacuees receiving Real IDs based on the vetting in place. A federal official overseeing the evacuee processing at the Rota lily pad stated the screening and vetting being conducted was insufficient to clear evacuees as individuals who did not pose a security risk prior to entering the United States or as a basis to provide a Real ID. Furthermore, when the federal official was asked if the vetting was sufficient to be confident in America's security since evacuees can and have left the bases in the United States at will, the federal official said, "no."

Federal officials told Committee staff a "pause" in the screening of evacuees due to a measles outbreak led to an improved process; the process still did not meet the standard vetting for refugee applicants. Federal officials told Committee staff they used the 21-day pause in operations due to the discovery of measles in the evacuee population already in the United States to re-enroll individuals still present on the bases outside of the United States into the DOD/DHS system and to ask for information not previously requested, such as cell phone numbers which allowed for additional opportunities to screen for national security risks. This additional screening, however, did not apply to the 10,000 to 15,000 evacuees who had already left Ramstein and approximately 1,000 evacuees who had already left Rota for the United States prior to the measles pause.³ Based on information provided by DHS to Committee staff on September 8th, at least 60,000 of the 125,000 evacuees were already in the United States (as of September 8th) prior to the

² Lawful permanent residents (LPR), also known as "green card" holders, are non-citizens who are lawfully authorized to live permanently within the United States

³ This number includes many children who would not have been screened due to their age.

additional screening that resulted from the measles pause.

Citizens and LPRs were not screened against U.S. criminal records prior to entry to the United States. Federal officials stated that American Citizens and LPRs were segregated and subjected to less screening and security due to their approved immigration status. This led to at least one case of an individual who was previously deported for a serious crime flying back to the United States and only being apprehended at the U.S. Port of Entry upon arrival, as reported at the time by several media outlets and confirmed by the federal officials.

Federal officials stated that if they had concerns they could not resolve regarding an evacuee, they could send the evacuee to Camp Bondsteel in Kosovo for further vetting. Committee staff learned that Camp Bondsteel in Kosovo played a key role in the screening and vetting process by accepting Afghan evacuees who could not pass an initial screening through the DOD or DHS databases. Both Germany and Spain placed soft time limits on how long the United States could hold evacuees on base (10 days and 14 days, respectively), although they granted flexibility, particularly for the measles pause. Federal officials stated when they could not resolve derogatory information regarding an evacuee within the given time, they could transfer the Afghan evacuee (and their family) to Camp Bondsteel for further review. According to federal officials at both Ramstein and Rota, this relieved any pressure to send an evacuee to the United States based on uncertain information.

Afghan military were among the evacuees. A significant number of Afghan military personnel came through Ramstein, but the total was not available at the time of the briefing.

II. VISIT TO DULLES AIRPORT AND THE DULLES EXPO CENTER PROCESSING SITE

On September 8, 2021, HSGAC Minority staff visited the port of entry for Afghan evacuees at the Dulles International Airport (IAD) and Dulles Expo Center. At IAD, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) leadership managing IAD operations briefed Committee staff. At the Dulles Expo Center, State and DOD leadership managing that location briefed Committee staff.

What staff learned:

Evacuees received standard screening for all international visitors. Federal officials told Committee staff that when an evacuee arrived in the United States, the only screening that was conducted was the standard CBP screening that all international visitors go through at the airport. Specifically, evacuees provided their biometric information at the CBP booth and, if there were no flags, they were immediately paroled into the United States for two years. Evacuees who could not pass the screening entered a secondary screening to resolve their status or possibly be transferred to ICE.

Committee staff learned that HHS and DHS declined to participate in setting up and managing the Dulles Expo site. While visiting the Dulles Expo Center, federal officials told Committee staff that HHS and DHS declined to coordinate in the set up and management of the evacuee processing center. Federal officials told Committee staff that HHS required several weeks before they would be able to participate in setting up the Dulles Expo site despite the fact that

evacuees were already in the air on flights to the United States. The Dulles Expo site was managed by State and DOD with varying support from USAID (volunteer staff), FEMA (operating a COVID-19 vaccination effort), and CBP (handling unaccompanied minors).

III. VISIT TO TEMPORARY HOUSING AT FORT LEE, VIRGINIA MILITARY BASE

On October 1, 2021, HSGAC Minority staff participated in a staff delegation to Fort Lee, Virginia to tour one of the seven OAW sites for housing and supporting evacuees from Afghanistan.⁴ The staff delegation included minority staff from SFRC and Judiciary Committee. The staff delegation was hosted and briefed by Fort Lee OAW senior leadership from DHS, DOD, and State.

What staff learned:

Federal official at Fort Lee stated vetting interviews are only done at the overseas lily pads. When asked, a federal official at Fort Lee stated that there are no in-person vetting interviews at any of the seven domestic military bases housing evacuees. The same federal official stated that the only in-person vetting interviews were conducted at the lily pad military bases overseas prior to evacuees being flown to and released into the United States.

Evacuees were not detained and some evacuees had left the base. Federal officials interviewed by Committee staff confirmed media reports that some evacuees independently left Fort Lee and that evacuees paroled into the United States are not detained, but free to leave under the conditions of their parole. The only conditions of parole that must be met prior to leaving the military base is receiving vaccinations for such things as measles and COVID-19 and must update any change of address with DHS within 10 days.

Fort Lee is housing almost exclusively former Afghan allies. Federal officials indicated that the 2,593 evacuees they have housed to date at Fort Lee are almost exclusively those who are eligible for Special Immigrant Visas and their families. Of that number, only 72 are evacuees with no record of working with the United States or our ally partners. At the time of the Committee staff visit, the base housed 1,750 evacuees, including 70 pregnant women. The average age of evacuees at Fort Lee was 20 (45 percent are under 18).

⁴ The other OAW sites include Camp Atterbury, Indiana; Fort McCoy, Wisconsin; Fort Pickett, Virginia; Fort Bliss, Texas; Marine Corps Base Quantico, Virginia; Holloman Air Force Base, New Mexico; and Joint Base McGuire-Dix, New Jersey.