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House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Sub-Committee on Asia and the Pacific
March 8th, 2023
Afghanistan Withdrawal Hearing

Written Testimony

On August 16, 2023, I received a phone call from a friend that crushed me.

“I am not afraid to die, sir. I just don’t want to die alone.”

Those were the words that dragged me back into Afghanistan.

His name was Sergeant First Class Nezamudin Nezami, but I knew him just as Nezam. He came from poverty. His father, a Mujahideen fighter, was killed by the Soviets when Nezam was only four months old. He had no family, money, or hope—yet he survived.

Shortly after September 11, 2001, Nezam witnessed NATO soldiers expel the brutal Taliban from his town. Inspired by the military men that had freed his country, he joined the fledgling Afghan National Army when he turned 18, wearing women's platform shoes so that he could pass the height requirements. A short time later, he volunteered for Afghan’s elite Commando forces. And in 2009, he tried out for the brand-new Afghan Special Forces.

During my third Afghanistan Tour, I was the keynote speaker at his Afghan Special Forces graduation ceremony in the spring of 2010. That’s where I met him.

Shortly after that, we worked together in Southern Afghanistan. Nezam quickly built a reputation for courage, fighting side by side with me and other American Green Berets against the Taliban.

Over the following years, Nezam would be in countless firefights and was even shot through the face protecting U.S. Green Berets on a patrol, only to return to duty three weeks later. He would eventually be one of the few Afghans selected to attend the U.S. Special Forces Qualification Course in Fort Bragg, NC, an honor that only a handful of Afghans were ever granted. He graduated and was an official member of the U.S. Special Forces Regiment.

Although I'd wanted to be a Green Beret since I was 14, I decided to retire in 2013 after we abandoned hundreds of Afghan villagers we had sworn to support. Nezam and I stayed in contact over the years, and he eventually left the Army after severe trauma and injuries and applied for a Special Immigration Visa (SIV).

Afghanistan came back on my radar in the Spring of 2021. Nezam sent me a near-daily play-by-play as district by district fell across Afghanistan. "The Taliban are texting me, telling me they will kill me," he told me somberly, his voice cracking. Most

U.S. special operators and veterans I spoke with were hearing similar things from their Afghan friends and knew something was dreadfully wrong.

On August 15, 2021, the Taliban poured into Kabul, and I watched, eyes glued to my TV, as they paraded around in U.S. military body armor, brandishing U.S.-made carbines with high-performance optics, and driving U.S.-made tactical vehicles. Tens of thousands of Afghans rushed to the Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) as word quickly spread that this small airport was the only way out, and NATO would be leaving soon. It was one of the most devastating things I ever witnessed.

As gutting as it was to watch the Taliban return to power, the abandonment of our allies, particularly our Special Operations Forces (SOF) allies, was far worse. These men and women had carried over 95% of the combat load since 2014. As things fell apart in Kabul, no one in the USG picked up the phone, so those Afghan Special Operators called us: the veterans who had stood at their shoulder year after year.

Despite applying for an SIV visa more than a year prior, Nezam received no word from the State Department in these challenging days. Our dozens of inquiries were met with bizarre voice recordings or instructions that were out of touch and didn't reflect the reality of the increasing stakes faced by at-risk Afghans like Nezam.

Nezam could not have been more worthy of an SIV as an Afghan in duress due to his combat service. The Taliban were closing in on him. He was hiding in his uncle's house, and the Taliban were on his street. The texts from them continued to pour in. "My uncle is about to throw me out of his house," Nezam told me. His world was crumbling before his eyes.

Nezam was in trouble. No one was coming. And he was out of time.

I reached out to a handful of fellow special operators—active duty and retired—who had known Nezam. With the help of a few Washington insiders, over 96 hours and with little sleep, we guided Nezam across the city, through the massive crowd of flesh at the HKIA airport, up to the guards, and ultimately onto a flight out of the country with his family.

I thought that was it, but boy was I wrong. After Nezam gained entry on August 19th, 2021, the notification alert on my newly installed Signal app vibrated every 5 to 10 seconds. Fellow veterans and active-duty members trying to help their Afghan friends reached out to connect and work together.

Navy SEAL Jay Redman who had been shot multiple times in the face and was now an inspirational speaker. Rob, an Iraq combat veteran who was operating as a contractor in Iraq and Ukraine. Will, a medically retired, double amputee desperate to rescue the interpreter who had saved his life in 2010. Jane, a Gold Star wife fighting to honor the death of her husband Chris in Afghanistan by saving a young, single Afghan woman who was abandoned in the Presidential Palace. Dozens more.

I found myself on a Signal Call with a congressional staffer and an active duty Green Beret discussing the fate of over 100 National Mine Reduction Group Members who had walked in front of Green Berets on missions and removed IEDs so we could do

our mission. They were our brothers. They knew our names, our families, and our tactics. And that was the problem, because what if the Iranians, or the Russians, or the Chinese captured them? Their abandonment was a national security risk.

These Afghan Special Operators were the only remaining antibody to violent extremism after we left the country. Veterans and active-duty members knew this. That's why they were on this call. We had bled for this capability, and now we were just leaving them on the side of the road to be slaughtered.

Jumping back feet first into the quagmire of Afghanistan was not part of my military retirement plan. I'm sure that nearly all of the veterans involved in the withdrawal from Afghanistan will tell you the same thing.

This was a much larger undertaking than evacuating one stranded commando. We tried to solve this Uncle-Sam-sized problem with cell phones and pension funds. I could feel the ticking clock in my chest cavity. We had mere days left because the Administration had already signaled the impending NEO departure.

I really didn't want to get involved. I had faced my demons about Afghanistan years before, and it might have been selfish, but I had retired to spend time with my family, continue to fight for my business during the pandemic, and stay away from the stresses of military life. I had succeeded in getting Nezam out. I had done my duty and, this problem was bigger than me.

In the end though, I couldn't turn my back and let everything alone because I had made a promise to those guys a long time ago, and to break it would violate everything I had fought for, everything my friends had died for.

I opened up the Signal chat room built for Nezam and named it Task Force Pineapple. We had a single purpose: *To help at-risk Afghan Partners and their families find safe passage out of Afghanistan.* I want to be clear here. This was not a pre-designed plan of intervention. Most of us were out of the military and trying to move on with our lives. Our friends called us, and we answered the phone and did the best we could to help them. That's it.

We felt the government would step in at some point. That certainly seemed to be what our Commander in Chief was saying on national television. We just needed to hold the line by keeping our Afghan Partners safe, calm, and organized until the cavalry came.

But they never came.

Using designated communicators and military tactical discipline, our veteran network connected with select overwhelmed NATO forces and expeditionary diplomats on HKIA attempting to sort out the sea of human chaos screaming across the sewage canal for salvation. Our value proposition started to come into focus: We knew who our at-risk allies were, we knew where they were, and they trusted us to guide them while the NATO forces trusted us to responsibly present our partners at the right place and

right time within the sea of chaos with bona fides and pictures of pineapples on their cell phones.

It was a very unconventional effort. Veterans across the country sat at breakfast tables, backyard barbecues, military squad bays, and corporate break rooms, eyes locked into their cell phones instead of on their kids and spouses. They were on Signal and What'sApp, transported back into the war they'd known for years, trying to look through a digital soda straw to help their Afghan Partners.

True credit for the evacuation effort goes to the men and women on the ground at HKIA. While I disagree with the empty boasting of Senior Leaders in the Administration and military that this was the "greatest airlift in modern history," the courage and work of that non-combatant evacuation force was epic.

And we will never forget the courage of the 13 service members who fell at Abbey Gate.

I also give utmost respect to the at-risk Afghans, like Nezam and their families, who risked everything for freedom.

But, the final days leading up to the ISIS suicide bombing on August 26 took a terrible physical and mental toll on our Afghan Partners and their veteran guides. Remember, many of these veteran volunteers already carried severe combat injuries, trauma, TBIs, and survivor's guilt.

One of my dearest friends screamed into his pillow with his children in the next room as he listened to his former interpreter on a live cell call from a Taliban checkpoint: "Steve, they are beating my wife. My children are watching. Can I fight them? Please tell me what to do!"

A Signal text to Jay, a former Navy SEAL, read: "My daughter has been trampled. I know we are going to miss our chance to escape, but she is unconscious. It's okay, my friend. Thank you for trying."

In our Pineapple Chat Room, someone sent: "I have three families carrying small children. They've been here for 72 hours. Do we have anyone nearby with water? The children are going into shock."

Pineapple and other groups pushed until the end, but it was a suicide bomber on August 26, 2021, who closed the gates for our partners. Still, the phone calls with our Afghan Allies didn't stop. Despite the best efforts of our volunteers, it was ultimately an effort that was doomed to fail. While we helped hundreds escape, but thousands more were left behind.

Pineapple was not unique. There were dozens, if not hundreds, of ad hoc volunteer groups like ours. These groups were unified in Signal chat rooms with names like Dunkirk, Allied Airlift 21, Flanders Fields, Sacred Promise, and Aces and Eights. They were distributed across the country and the globe, composed of active-duty members, veterans, government employees, and civilian volunteers collaborating over seven thousand miles in near real-time to guide these desperate Afghan Partners to

safety. We all shared the challenge of having no authority. No resources. No access to the battlefield. No time. But we had something that no one else did; relationships and trust.

Many of us banded together to pool our resources, share information and best practices on safe passage and resettlement issues, as well as amplify our voices to our government until we were responsibly relieved of our watch over our Afghan Partners. Going into our second year, we're still here advocating for our Afghan Partners and we aren't going anywhere. That's because veterans seem to know something about the impact of the Afghan withdrawal that our country seems to ignore:

- Our national security is at risk as Afghanistan re-emerges as a terrorist safe haven facilitated by the Taliban.
- Our reputation for potential partnership with other nations in confronting near-peer threats like China and Russia is at risk due to our multi-generational, systemic abandonment of our allies.
- There have been no discernible institutional efforts within the Administration, DOS, or DOD to take responsibility for or learn lessons from this Afghan Partner abandonment; or to put measures in place to prevent it from happening again.
- Public trust in the military as one of the most-trusted institutions in our civil society has dropped to 56% following the Afghan Abandonment.
- Junior officers and sergeants (particularly in the SOF community) are dropping separation paperwork in large numbers as a result of moral injury and abandoning our partners.
- Our military recruiting numbers are abysmal, and a major reason is that veterans are discouraging their young loved ones from joining.
- TVeteran mental health is plummeting as a result of the Afghan Abandonment
- The only remaining antibody to the growing violent extremist threat in Afghanistan is the National Resistance Front, and similar to pre-9-11, they are receiving no support from the USG.
- It is immensely sad that on International Women's Day, humanitarian atrocities against Afghan women and girls are taking place with impunity. These atrocities are also directed against children, ethnic minorities, and at-risk members of Afghan society who stood with us are occurring in broad daylight.

What does a promise mean in America today?

There is a promise in the military, certainly in special operations, that is both explicit and implicit: "I have your back." We were trained that way. In a 20-year war, we were held to a standard that you don't leave a partner force hanging. And then the very leaders who held us to that standard went silent while our partners were abandoned and, in many cases, killed in cold blood. I never in my adult life thought I would see this kind of gross abandonment followed by career-preserving silence of senior leaders, including military senior leaders.

America has always had a social contract with our veterans, to honor and respect their sacrifice in how Americans live our lives. For as long as we've been a nation, our veterans have been a moral compass for doing the right thing, especially in hard times.

In August 2021, our government walked away from our Afghan allies with no warning, men and women who fought alongside us for 20 years. But our veterans did not walk away. And they will not.

Relinquishing Afghanistan back into the hands of 20 other violent extremist groups undoes the intelligence and partner capacity we fought for, and it takes us back to pre-9/11 vulnerability. Every veteran knows it, even if no one in our government understands it.

It has become a moral injury on our veterans and military families.

A moral injury is an injury to the soul. A violation of what we know to be right by leaders whom we trusted.

Since the collapse of Afghanistan in August 2021, I have interviewed and met with scores of Afghan Combat veterans, Gold Star family members, and military family members. The wounds of this withdrawal run deep. In fact, 73% of Afghan War Veterans feel betrayed, and 67% feel humiliated. Reporting also indicates a 81% increase in calls to the VA hotline. As the stress of unresolved suffering of our partner force continues, the impact on our veterans becomes more personal.

The abandonment hit my friend and fellow Green Beret Brad very hard. He texted me as Kabul fell, "Are you surprised by what happened in Afghanistan today? I feel like we never had a clear strategic endstate given to us." Later he wrote to me: "Is there a way for me to get close to Afghanistan and be on the ground to help get our people out?" His wife Dana said to me after a long silence, "There is no doubt that Brad started to spiral downwards as the Afghan collapse happened." A few months ago, he was found dead in a hotel room, leaving his wife Dana, his 20-year-old daughter Hannah, and his 16-year-old son Chad. "The demons got him," she said in a whisper. I personally know of three more Afghanistan War veterans who had managed to put the war behind them until the failed evacuation, but took their own lives due to the Afghan Abandonment.

There are 22 veteran suicides every day, and that number is growing. Many veterans have asked me, "How could our government knowingly put this on the backs of this small, vulnerable component of our population who has already given so much? Where are the institutional leaders stepping in and stepping up?"

We might be done with Afghanistan, but it's not done with us. We are on the front end of a national security crisis and veteran mental health tsunami, and our veterans know it. This is not a Democrat issue. It's not a Republican issue. It's an American issue. There is deep responsibility on both sides of the political aisle for Congress to set politics aside and:

- * determine accountability for this abandonment of our allies,
- * put measures in place to prevent it from happening again,
- * encourage our political and military leaders to address the moral injury and mental health challenges manifesting in our active duty and veteran communities;

* implement measures to overhaul Department of State Policies for providing safe passage to our most at-risk Afghan Allies who are being hunted. 76% of Afghan veterans say their mental health would improve with Afghan allies resettling in the U.S.,

* bring renewed security focus on the re-emergence of violent extremist groups in Afghanistan and look for ways to support those resisting the Taliban.

In conclusion, America is building a nasty reputation for multi-generational, systemic abandonment of our allies that we leave as smoldering wreckage from the highlands of Vietnam to the deserts of Syria. If Congress does not address these issues, this colossal foreign policy failure will follow us home, expand far beyond the veteran ranks, and haunt our society for decades.

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