



BRIEFING GUIDE:

U.S. GOVERNMENT-FACILITATED “LILY PAD” SITES ABROAD CONTINUE DECADES-LONG POLICY OF VIOLENCE TOWARDS THE AFGHAN PEOPLE

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BACKGROUND

Investigations by [Abolitionist Law Center](#), [Center for Constitutional Rights](#), and [Muslim Advocates](#) reveal disturbing policies and circumstances surrounding the U.S. government's nebulous practice of arbitrarily detaining evacuated Afghans in dozens of prison-like processing and holding sites abroad commonly referred to as "lily pad" sites by U.S. government officials. [Recent litigation by the groups](#) against the Departments of Defense, State, and Homeland Security yielded government records confirming – and further outlining – chilling details previously undisclosed to the public about the U.S. government's facilitation and knowledge of, and operations at, these sites.

OVERVIEW OF KEY FINDINGS

Records produced to our organizations thus far confirm disturbing trends and data:

- 1. Three dozen countries – and possibly far more – may be implicated in the detention of Afghan civilians.** Documents produced during the course of litigation reveal the existence of at least 36 countries where Afghan civilians are being detained, held, or otherwise forced to remain in limbo in, for months and, in the most egregious cases, years.
- 2. The Biden Administration was made aware of the disturbing conditions at Emirates Humanitarian City (EHC) - reported to be arbitrarily detaining thousands of Afghans by Human Rights Watch –yet did nothing:** Afghans at the EHC site appealed to senior executive officials as far back as February 2022, urging for an improvement in conditions.
- 3. The U.S. government has repeatedly misled and downplayed to the public and Afghan rights groups the level of federal government activity related to these sites,** maintaining that it lacks authority, presence, and decision-making at the sites. Contrary to government obfuscation, records obtained reveal U.S. government officials negotiated the creation of these sites with the governments of the sites' host countries.
- 4. Repeated requests by Afghan civilians for individualized processes have gone unanswered, as hundreds to thousands of arbitrarily detained or stranded Afghans continue to await resolution of their refugee, humanitarian parole, or other pending applications for entry into the U.S.** Rather, correspondence from Afghan civilians and investigations by human rights groups confirm uncertainty for months up to years on end.

FACTUAL CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUNDING SITES

In 2021, the United States evacuated over 124,000 Afghans to locations around the globe, many of them secret or unknown until recently. Since the U.S. withdrawal, concerning reports have emerged regarding conditions at what are known as "lily pad" sites – third-country locations the U.S. government has coordinated, facilitated, or otherwise organized to process and hold Afghan evacuees. Investigations in 2023 by Human Rights Watch and other non-governmental organizations revealed that thousands of Afghans are *arbitrarily detained* in EHC – one of these sites in the United Arab Emirates – and subjected to intensive and around-the-clock surveillance, constraints on their movements, denial of individualized case processing, denial of access to legal counsel, visitors, and journalists, and inadequate medical care resulting in life-threatening medical complications.

Afghans have also reported experiencing severe mental health and physical health crises as a result of their prolonged, arbitrary detention. Most of these civilians have not been told the reason for their detention, and in certain sites, if Afghans choose to leave the confines of the facility, they would effectively forfeit their right to seek Humanitarian Parole in the United States. Other reports indicate Afghans have been forcefully coerced to return back to Afghanistan, despite fears of persecution.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Three dozen countries – and possibly far more – may be implicated in the detention of Afghan civilians.

Although partially redacted and incomplete, records produced by U.S. government agencies reveal that the United States has been tracking the movement of thousands of Afghans in at least three dozen countries.

Processing Locations

Camp As Sayliyah (CAS) - Doha, Qatar

2,834 Current Population	Immigration Pathway	Current Population	Arrivals Past 7 Days	Departures Past 7 Days	Stay > 30 Days
Last 7 Days: -10 Ideal Capacity: 2,600	Total	2,834	394	404	1,705
	U.S. Citizens/LPR	21	0	1	17
	SIV or IV	1,888	304	284	1,020
	Refugee	925	90	119	668

Camp Bondsteel - Pristina, Kosovo

259 Current Population	Immigration Pathway	Current Population	Arrivals Past 7 Days	Departures Past 7 Days	Stay > 60 Days
Last 7 Days: -1 Ideal Capacity: 600	Total	259	0	1	247
	U.S. Citizens/LPR	7	0	0	7
	SIV or IV	0	0	1	0
	Refugee	252	0	0	240

Emirates Humanitarian City (EHC) - Abu Dhabi, UAE

1,256 Current Population	Immigration Pathway	Current Population	Departures Past 7 Days
Last 7 Days: -10	Total	1,256	10
	SIV or IV	67	1
	Refugee	1,189	9

The population of 1,256 excludes 1,024 Afghans at EHC who do not appear at this time to meet criteria for U.S. resettlement.

Albania

11 Current Population	Immigration Pathway	Current Population	Arrivals Past 7 Days	Departures Past 7 Days	Stay > 30 Days
Last 7 Days: +0	Total	11	0	0	11
	Refugee	11	0	0	11

Processing for Refugee Status, Visas, or Government-REFERRED Parole 1,601

Albania	660	France	33	Kazakhstan	9	Romania	28
Australia	46	Germany	189	Kyrgyzstan	108	South Korea	5
Belgium	14	Hungary	25	Malaysia	2	Spain	19
Brazil	29	Iceland	6	Mexico	9	Switzerland	1
Bulgaria	1	India	6	Netherlands	9	Tajikistan	12
Cote d'Ivoire	2	Iraq	27	North Macedonia	119	Turkey	52
Czech Republic	6	Italy	60	Poland	75	Ukraine	3
Denmark	5	Japan	4	Portugal	5	Uzbekistan	32

Department of State data report tracking movements of Afghan evacuees, dated April 7, 2023. BATES #STATE00363. The United States is also tracking the movement of Afghan evacuees in Pakistan, which is not included in the above record.

2. The Biden Administration was made aware of the disturbing conditions at Emirates Humanitarian City (EHC) - reported to be arbitrarily detaining thousands of Afghans by Human Rights Watch – yet did nothing.

The flagrant inconsistency between what the United States has pledged to do to ensure Afghans' safety and well-being, and the real, long-term conditions Afghans detained at EHC face, is severe. Email correspondence between government officials acknowledge that the conditions reported by detainees themselves are "serious" yet the government continues to maintain the status quo.

- [Correspondence from Detained Afghans to U.S. Government Officials Reveal Deteriorating Conditions and Lack of Access to Lawyers, Humanitarian Organizations, and Immigration Agencies.](#)

DHS produced 100 pages of information relating to concerns raised by threatened Afghan groups - including judges, prosecutors, and defense lawyers – detained at EHC. However, out of these 100 pages, only eight letters were produced with minimal or no redactions, requesting from the government transparency and progress updates on the status of their immigration applications. Additionally, the correspondence from at-risk Afghans expressed frustrations with the length and conditions of their detention, deteriorating mental health, inadequate facilities, inability to interact with society at large, and danger of repatriation.

You might be well aware of the situation here and the restrictions we have in the City. We do not have access to other countries' embassies, UNHCR, or any immigration agencies in Abu Dhabi to contact for processing our status. Of course we knocked many doors in these 7 months via emails and letters including huge organization advocating for lawyers but received no assistance. We can only contact the US embassy and we have shared the list and details with them but have not heard of any hope raising news about us.

Let us ask you, just imagine our situation here and what stress, anxiety, and frustration we are going through at the moment.

We have old , ill, kids, and single women, and women with their kids but no adult men with them. Some of us left our families, single women, mothers, and children behind in Kabul. As we were hoping that we can resettle soon and support them financially and immigration but we can not do anything for them that is the most annoying thing.

Letter signed by "lawyers [c]ommunity staying in Emirates Humanitarian City, Abu Dhabi" dated May 27, 2022. BATES #[USCIS00019-22](#).

Conditions at the EHC have become untenable as residents struggle to understand their futures. Many reports experiencing severe depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress, haunted by the fear of being deported back to Afghanistan and to their deaths. The community is collectively traumatized by the Taliban's violent resurgence and the subsequent loss of homes, livelihoods and loved ones and also by extending the uncertain situation without any specific planning in EHC, the families particularly women and children will be getting mentally disturbed and there will be families' disputes, conflicts amongst EHC residents, suicides, psychosocial personality disorders, basic human rights violation and even chaos.

We are concerned with the disparate treatment Afghans are receiving based on the date or organizer of the flight that brought them out of Afghanistan, factors that are largely outside of their knowledge and control.

Letter signed by "EHC Afghan Evacuees Based [in] Abu Dhabi United Arab Emirates UAE" dated February 18, 2022. BATES #[USCIS00045-48](#).

- Records also reveal email communications between government officials discussing cases of egregious [family separation](#) at EHC. In one instance, an Afghan forced to leave Afghanistan arrived at the [National Conference Center](#) (“NCC”) in Leesburg, Virginia for processing and resettlement into the United States, but “[his vulnerable mother and brother were left behind in EHC.](#)” In another case, an elderly woman who was transported to NCC while awaiting processing and resettlement was separated from her caregiver, who too was left behind at EHC. As a result of her situation and the absence of her caregiver, she was slated to enter a nursing home, which email correspondence between government officials themselves acknowledged was “[cruel.](#)”

3. The U.S. government has repeatedly misled and downplayed to the public and Afghan rights groups the level of federal government activity related to these sites.

Records produced by U.S. government agencies as to their role in coordinating and facilitating these sites have been minimal, delayed, and heavily redacted. However, even the limited records produced thus far confirm the participation of agencies and high-level federal officials in the establishment and oversight of these prison-like facilities.

- ***Records confirm the role of U.S. government officials in facilitating and coordinating the detention and prolonged holding of Afghans.***
 - The Department of State produced 6 [Memoranda of Understanding](#), or agreements, between the U.S. government and host countries, outlining the host countries’ agreement to temporarily detain or otherwise hold Afghans on behalf of the U.S. at makeshift holding facilities: [Qatar](#), [Qatar amended](#), [Oman](#), [Kuwait](#), [Italy](#), and [Germany](#).
 - ◆ In every agreement our organizations have reviewed, the United States made lofty promises to ensure Afghans’ “[safety and comfort](#),” including by providing for their education needs, medical care, and local transport. For instance, in its original agreement with [Qatar](#), the United States agreed to “provide the necessary services and support to ensure [Afghans’] safety and comfort, including meals, non-emergency medical care, security, and local transport as needed, as well as educational needs.” Art. III, ¶ 1, BATES #[STATE00173](#).
 - ◆ Further, each agreement between the United States and the named host country we received confirmed the involvement of high-level federal officials in coordinating and overseeing these holding facilities and the treatment of Afghans. Many of these officials - such as Antony Blinken - are featured as the signatories on agreements stipulating the terms, policies, and conditions of the establishment or continuation of third-country facilities. Others are named as points of contact.
- ***Despite the United States’ promise to ensure the “[safety and comfort](#)” of Afghan civilians and its well-documented awareness and recognition of the [abysmal conditions at these makeshift holding facilities](#), the U.S. government overcrowded these facilities, and continues to pursue opaque practices of arbitrary detention and abuse.***
 - Violating its own assessments of “safe and humane accommodations” (as displayed in the following screenshot), the U.S. government facilitated the holding of between 3,700 - 4,000 Afghan evacuees in Qatar:

10. ~~(SBU)~~CARE in Doha received a stable inflow of relocation flights from Kabul and Islamabad since March 2022. However, CAS is facing a substantial backlog of cases. Although our agreement with the Qatari government allows up to 8,000 Afghans on base, U.S. and Qatari officials have agreed that 2,600 is the ideal capacity to ensure safe and humane accommodations for families. Currently, the Afghan population is hovering around 3,700, but at its peak has breached 4,000. We reduced the pace of flights into CAS at the GOQ's request, to allow CAS out-processing to work down the number of Afghans on base.

Selected text from Embassy of Doha Memorandum dated August 28, 2022.

¶ 10, BATES #[STATE01134](#).

- ***Notably, the United States government assured host countries that it will coordinate security measures to maintain “order” and ensure Afghan refugees cannot leave these facilities, committing to subject Afghans to intensive surveillance and detention on the mere basis of their nationality and status as refugees – conditions inimical, and contrary, to assurances of Afghans’ wellbeing.***
 - The agreement between the United States and [Italy](#), for instance, explicitly states that the United States will partake in “coordinat[ing]” with Italian authorities “regarding measures to ensure the maintenance of good order.” ¶ 5, BATES #[STATE00146](#). The United States’ original agreement with [Qatar](#) includes an identical stipulation ensuring order and security at the detention facility, but further clarifies that this “may include joint static security...and/or conducting joint community patrols.” Art. II, ¶ 6, BATES #[STATE00173](#).
 - Other agreements include differently worded, but similar terms regarding potential security concerns and measures. In [each agreement](#), the United States agrees to provide “security” to assist the host country in enforcing order at the sites, demonstrating its commitment to, and intimate role in facilitating, the invasive surveillance of Afghan civilians.

4. Repeated requests by Afghan civilians for individualized processes have gone unanswered, as hundreds to thousands of arbitrarily detained or stranded Afghans continue to await resolution of their refugee, humanitarian parole, or other pending applications for entry into the U.S.

Records confirm that the United States is well-aware of prolonged arbitrary detention, human rights abuses, and inhumane conditions Afghan civilians continue to be subjected to, and maintains meticulous tracking of Afghans’ entry and exit from each of the sites.

- ***The United States ensures placement of Afghans in sites abroad would be short-term, yet amended inter-state agreements extend the duration of Afghans’ indefinite detention at third-party sites.***
 - Agreements show that third-party countries agreed to detain Afghans only for a short period of time – ranging from under a month to a year. Daily data reports from the Department of State seem to suggest that in the years since the agreements were originally signed, they have been extended, as Afghans remain stranded at these same holding sites.
 - This has been made evident especially in the case of Qatar: records obtained from the Department of State include two U.S. agreements with the Qatari government, an [original](#) and an [amended](#) agreement. In the first agreement, signed in Washington, D.C. and entered into force on November 12, 2021, the U.S. committed to resettling Afghans within the first 30 days of their arrival to Qatar.

The first agreement also emphasized that the hosting of Afghan refugees would be temporary: “*Not later than September 1, 2022, all such relocated individuals should reside in the United States of America or in such other place outside of the State of Qatar, as the United States shall arrange.*” Art. II, ¶ 3, BATES #[STATE00172](#). However, signed in Doha, Qatar and entered into force on September 19, 2022, the United States amended its agreement with Qatar, extending the end date in Article II, ¶ 3-4 and Article III, ¶ 4 to September 1, 2023 - by nearly one additional year. Art. (1), BATES #[STATE00122](#). The parties also agreed to make the amended agreement renewable for another one-year period. Art. (2), ¶ 10, BATES #[STATE00122-23](#).

- While our organizations have not received any other amended agreements between the U.S. government and host countries, [other produced records](#) reveal Afghans remain stranded in what has now become “longer-term operations” at these countries despite the short-term nature of the original agreements:

Largest Noncombatant Evacuation Operation in History

9. (SBU) Since the onset of the U.S. evacuations of Afghans starting in summer of 2021, U.S. Army base Camp As Sayliyah (CAS) has served as a landing pad for Afghans being relocated from Afghanistan and then resettled – primarily to the United States. Over time, CAS’s “lily pad” role has expanded to a longer-term operation, although the duration of operations, the role of each U.S. agency, and CAS’s threshold for safe and efficient operations are all key issues currently under consideration.

Selected text from Embassy of Doha Memorandum dated August 28, 2022.
¶ 9, BATES #[STATE01134](#).

The U.S. government has maintained near silence regarding its role in the continued detention and holding of Afghan civilians in third country “lily pad” facilities, providing minimal to no information as to the immigration statuses and determinations of Afghans awaiting entry into the United States. As our investigations and court-ordered document productions from U.S. government agencies continue to reveal, Afghan civilians are subjected to restrictions on their freedom of movement, denial of individualized case processing, denial of access to U.S. embassy officials, legal counsel, and human rights organizations, and inadequate medical care.