

By withdrawing from Afghanistan, Biden could spark the world's next refugee crisis

Between the end of 2019 and 2020, 416,630 asylum-seekers arrived in the European Union. A large number, to be sure, but hardly sensational compared to 2015, when 1.2 million asylum-seekers arrived.



AFTER TROOPS WITHDRAWAL, ASYLUM-SEEKER BOATS ARE LIKELY TO SET SAIL... FOR EUROPEAN SHORES -© Provided by Crikey

That period, of course, was the so-called refugee crisis. Now, Europe is facing a new refugee crisis as a result of President Joe Biden's decision to pull US forces out of Afghanistan. Washington's international allies have no choice but to pull out too.

"In together, out together" has been the mantra because the war was built around US manpower and equipment. Although Biden claims to have ended the Afghanistan War, nobody — especially not Afghans — is fooled, and Washington's best friends are being left to pick up the pieces. That task will affect ordinary Europeans, who will face the political fallout of an inevitable new refugee crisis, and it could force European governments to send their troops back.



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"We did not go to Afghanistan to nation-build. And it's the right and the responsibility of the Afghan people alone to decide their future and how they want to run their country," Biden said on July 8, announcing the US military is on track to meet its target of completing the withdrawal by August 31.

America's allies didn't go to Afghanistan to nation-build either. Indeed, it was

unclear to many citizens of EU and NATO member states and partners why, precisely, their troops were being sent there.



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But for nearly two decades, allies as different in size as Germany and Estonia have loyally been providing troops to a war that is called a multinational effort but is really Washington’s war. One year ago, for example, Germany provided 1300 of Resolute Support Mission’s 15,937 troops, making it Afghanistan’s second-largest troop provider after the US. The United Kingdom was third at 950 troops, followed by Italy at 895 troops. Virtually every US ally has lost soldiers in this war.

Precisely because it has been America’s war, it was perhaps unsurprising that Biden could simply decide it was over. Now, allied troops are pulling out alongside their US colleagues. On June 30, the last Bundeswehr soldiers to leave Afghanistan arrived in Germany. In his July 8 statement, Biden said he’d “made the decision to end the war”. He also promised that the US “will continue to provide civilian and humanitarian assistance, including speaking out for the rights of women and girls”.

But what matters isn’t whether Biden believes he’s ended the war: it’s whether Afghans feel he’s done so. Many seem to have made up their minds, and their decision could have a major impact on US allies in Europe.

Afghans are already fleeing to neighbouring countries; they include more than 1000 Afghan soldiers who have escaped to Tajikistan, causing that country to mobilize reservists to patrol the border. “The brunt will be felt in the neighbouring countries: Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan,” noted Stefano Stefanini, a former ambassador of Italy to NATO and former national security adviser to the Italian president.

“To some extent, the US is sheltered by distance — though Washington is providing special visas to the many Afghans who translated, drove, and worked for the Americans. But many refugees, at great cost and risk, will try to get to Europe. It might not be the most direct route, but Italy, via Libya, will be the main landing point. Then the new flow from the Hindu Kush will work its way north to Germany, Sweden, Norway, and the UK.”

In 2015, Germany and Sweden were the two most popular countries for asylum-seekers from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Although the recipient countries have since worked hard to integrate the asylum-seekers, the challenge has been made more difficult by the fact that many asylum-seekers arrived alone. In Sweden, more than 35,000 asylum-seekers who arrived in 2015 registered as unaccompanied minors; 92% of them were men and two-thirds were Afghan.

Europe’s proximity — compared to the US — is, of course, another reason so many Afghans have fled there. The same goes for Syrians and Iraqis, who escaped there when the Islamic State conquered their home towns, another outcome of failed US wars. Vietnamese boat people, in turn, made the perilous journey not just to the US but also towards Europe when America lost the war in Vietnam.

Picture yourself as a European policymaker now facing a massive refugee challenge not of your own making. As Stefanini pointed out, “at NATO, European allies were the least enthusiastic about leaving Afghanistan unconditionally — for a reason”.

Pal Jonson, the chairperson of the Swedish parliament’s defense committee, is equally worried about the international pullout’s implications, which was triggered by the United States. Sweden is already struggling to integrate the more than 160,000 asylum-seekers who arrived during the 2015 refugee crisis among others who came in subsequent years. (In 2019, the US, with a population more than 30 times larger than that of Sweden, admitted 29,916 refugees.)

“If the security situation deteriorates further, it could certainly create a very complicated situation for us,” Jonson said. “We already have over 60,000 Afghan nationals living in Sweden, and that number has doubled since 2015. Thousands of Afghans have been living in Sweden illegally since their asylum applications were turned down by the Swedish Migration Agency.”

While the majority of refugees are law-abiding, sadly some of them have started

to show up in crime statistics; 58% of people convicted for rape in Sweden between 2013 and 2018 were born in other countries, with Afghans the second most common nationality among perpetrators after Swedes.

The challenge is not just housing and looking after the hundreds of thousands of Afghans who successfully make it to Europe; it's also handling the ones who don't qualify for asylum. (There's general consensus that Afghan military interpreters and their families should be granted asylum by the countries whose soldiers they worked with.)

Over the past few years, various European countries have strengthened their asylum rules, making it harder for people from Afghanistan to be approved. In Denmark, for example, 46% of Afghan asylum-seekers were approved in 2007; by 2017, the figure had fallen to 16%. That's the lowest acceptance rate in the EU; Italy has the highest at more than 90%. Denmark and the Netherlands are also the only EU member states to return families to Afghanistan, the Norwegian Organisation for Asylum Seekers notes. But with Afghanistan now edging back toward civil war, it may no longer be safe for asylum-seekers to return — if it ever was.

Biden has put his closest allies in a bind. Closing their doors to most Afghans would very possibly be a violation of international human rights law. Even if doing so is legal, it's almost a moot point: on July 11, the Afghan government announced it will no longer allow Afghans who've been denied asylum in the EU back into the country. This will, of course, stop repatriation flights from the EU. But Sweden, Germany, Italy, and others also can't accommodate large numbers of new arrivals, and even a less-than-dramatic increase would strengthen populist parties' already strong position against immigration.



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I asked Mohammad, a young Syrian who arrived in Sweden in 2014 and asked that I not use his surname because he's now a public servant, about the prospect of a new wave of Afghans. "It would be difficult," he said. "Sweden has already received large numbers of refugees, and society hasn't yet managed to include and integrate these people and get them to stand on their own two feet." Mohammad would know; he now works as an integration coordinator for a Swedish municipality.

European governments will thus unsurprisingly try to prevent a new Afghan refugee wave. "It's obviously of strategic interest for the West in general — and countries such as Sweden and Germany in particular — that Afghanistan does not implode," Jonson said. "We need some form of plan B to assure that this does not happen."

There seems to be only one way out: for America's allies to deploy a new stability mission to Afghanistan. Realistically, such a mission would have to be led by the UK. I put the question to retired General Richard Barrons, who served in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other conflicts before going on to lead the UK's Joint Forces Command.

It won't happen, he said: "There's no public pressure for such a mission. It would be massively expensive, very difficult to do without Pakistan's full cooperation with logistics, and Europe doesn't even have the equipment or enablers ready for such an act at sufficient scale and endurance. There is not even a secure point of entry now that Bagram and Kandahar [air bases] have gone."

Instead of fighting to keep refugees in Afghanistan, Barrons predicted, European countries will try to keep them out of Europe. "Europe's only martial role will be to use specialist resources to bear down on sources of terrorism arising in Afghanistan that could threaten European homelands and interests. That is classic intelligence/special forces/Afghan partner work," he explained.

Under such a scheme, European special forces and intelligence officers could, if invited by Kabul, apply Band-Aids to help stem terrorism. As it happens, a number of European countries have excellent special forces. Small numbers of Europeans without military muscle trying to stave off the worst in Afghanistan may seem a feeble hope — but countries facing not just refugee waves but voter unease are

likely to leap at even the feeblest options.

“It’s time to end America’s longest war,” Biden said on April 14. For ordinary Americans, it may feel like the war is over when the last US troops leave Afghanistan on August 31. But it won’t feel like it for ordinary Swedes, Germans, Italians, Greeks, and other Europeans, especially with their countries and public finances already weakened by COVID-19.

Should their budgets become overstretched, integration programs fail, and populist parties sail to victory, Biden may have to extend a helping hand to America’s friends just as they did to the US 20 years ago.

Elisabeth Braw is a columnist at Foreign Policy and a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, where she focuses on defence against emerging national security challenges, such as hybrid and grey-zone threats. She is also a member of the UK National Preparedness Commission. She tweets at @elisabethbraw

The post By withdrawing from Afghanistan, Biden could spark the world’s next refugee crisis appeared first on Crikey.

Source:

<https://www.msn.com/en-au/news/australia/by-withdrawing-from-afghanistan-biden-could-spark-the-worlds-next-refugee-crisis/ar-AAMatpb>

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