



On August 15, 2021, I doom-scrolled through social media feeds that tracked Kabul's fall. By August 31, my phone had thousands of messages from hundreds of people I didn't know two weeks before, and we'd helped some Afghan allies leave Afghanistan.

The in-between emphatically wasn't me. It was (a) a coalition of ad-hoc networks that sprang into existence to help Afghans access (b) the herculean DoD/DoS evacuation effort in Kabul. I was on the grassroots side of things—a desk jockey armed with social media and email.

We did some things I'm deeply proud of; I did some things I am conflicted about. Acknowledging the incredible efforts of those who were boots-on-ground, to whom I offer my awe and gratitude, below are five lessons-learned from a supporting effort.

I cannot pretend the below are comprehensive or generalizable to everyone's experience in

the patchwork coalition. The only two things I can say with high confidence are: (1) we must document lessons-learned during the Kabul evacuation while memories are fresh, and (2) there are many Afghan allies still in Afghanistan to whom we owe a debt.

### **Lessons Learned:**

- **Flat comms work when (1) the mission is narrow, (2) people are on-boarded, and (3) there are few OPSEC concerns:** A chat room was the main venue for my part of the network. At its peak, the chat had hundreds of participants—military, former military, State Department, NGOs, and ad-hoc veterans’ organizations. It was hectic, and it was beautiful. Need to get someone manifested on an NGO flight? Done. Wondering whether P1 visa applicants can get through the gates right now? It’s probably already in the chat, but if not, just ask.

It worked because the chat’s focus was narrow: get at-risk Afghans into Kabul International Airport before US forces left. The mission’s simplicity meant every piece of information posted was relevant to everyone and created shared understanding about processes/resources. That self-reinforcing understanding was supplemented by periodic SITREPs and onboarding posts to help newcomers contribute faster. When supporting efforts organically arose in a chat, they moved to a new chat room to avoid overloading the main room.

The utility of the room decreased when it began operating by the implicit rule, “If you wouldn’t want a bad guy to see it, don’t post it.” While much stronger in terms of OPSEC, it pushed most conversations to direct messages (DM). The room became a long series of questions without answers. Some were surely answered via DM, but no one else in the room had any awareness of the answer’s content or existence.

- **Don’t shut yourself up if you can contribute.** The last two weeks of August were

an unending stream of increasingly befuddling and unexpected circumstances. How on earth am I a trusted agent for complete strangers on social media? What happened that I am in position to liaise between X important official and Y low-key evacuation effort?

During those moments of “what the...”, it was tempting to pump the brakes and get back in a corner commensurate with my formal position. But, I learned that wasn’t necessarily the right call. If I was out of my depth, I absolutely needed to step back and shut up. If I wasn’t, I needed to help, to include things way outside my normal job description and responsibility level. If a job needs to be done, and you can help, do it.

- **You can get people killed when you let it become about you.** I was digitally guiding two Afghan families I didn’t know when they were caught up in the complex attack that killed 13 U.S. servicemembers and at least 170 Afghans (the two families were uninjured). After the fact, I nauseously realized I didn’t know if either family was tracking the specific warning for the gates that day. Sure, the families knew the previous warnings and were maybe willing to accept that day’s risk, but I hadn’t asked.

The reason I hadn’t asked was because I had mentally transitioned from “helping” to “needing to help.” Several of my unrelated evacuation attempts had recently been frustrated, and I was so happy I could directly help someone get to the airport that I just didn’t think to ask. Looking back, I could have caught my shift to “me” if I had had my radar up for it. I especially could have caught it if I had someone else there to call me on it. I also might have avoided it altogether if I had known the families on a human level—impersonality didn’t result in objectivity.

- **Sometimes you’ll do everything possible and still lose.** On August 30, the final

group of people I worked with tried for Kabul's airport one last time. They didn't get in. They couldn't get around a final Taliban checkpoint. We leveraged every resource; we had all available information, and it still wasn't enough. Some of the Afghans' response was anger and blame, and I can't say my response would have been any different in their shoes.

That situation was not unique over the two weeks; we had many failed attempts to get people through gates. Such situations drove home that you can do everything you can and still fail, even when there is nothing different you could have done. On that note...

- **Don't hang on to what you can't control.** Though I marveled at the networks' resources, we couldn't accomplish everything we wanted. We couldn't get everyone through the gates, as mentioned above. Moreover, between 15-30 August, most of us received more help requests than we could action or even respond to. Those messages bothered me.

Similarly, some uncomfortable questions remain. Did we help more Afghans get out than otherwise, or did we just increase our Afghan friends' share of total evacuees? How effective were efforts to identify and prioritize those most at-risk? Did our mass leveraging of resources slow the official DoS/DoD response in Kabul and visa-processing in Washington?

I don't know. Arguments regarding the above and other questions will be made in coming months and years. Regardless, if anything like the above is troubling you, let it go. We are taught as leaders to radically own things, and we should. But we hurt ourselves and those around us when we hang on to things that were beyond our power to shape.

A mentor shared this unattributed quote that helped me, and so I offer it here: *you made the best call you could with the information you had.*

I hope the experiences related above will help spur discussion at small unit levels about responsibility, decision-making, systems, and communication, and encourage efforts to examine the truly novel grassroots phenomenon that happened.

Primarily, though, I hope the above lessons-learned are useful to others in the movement as they reflect on their experience and continue to help Afghan allies. They deserve the best we can give them, and for some of us, that may require processing the first two weeks of this effort. It was a bizarre world consumed by life-and-death scenarios intermittently interrupted by tonally dissonant “normal life.” While the networks had a deployment-like sense of community and advocated good mental health practice, most participants remained strangers and there wasn’t always time to talk.

If you were or remain in the movement, reach out to someone. If you know someone in the movement, ask how they’re doing. We’ll be better equipped to help if we identify our own lessons-learned and talk through what happened. We can do that through community.

*The author is one of the no-doubt thousands who supported the varied grassroots efforts to assist Afghan allies during the Kabul evacuation between August 15 and August 30, 2021.*

*This article’s title uses “Digital Dunkirk” to refer in a general sense to the grassroots evacuation support effort. It is not intended to imply the author is speaking on behalf of “Digital Dunkirk,” an Afghan evacuation and support organization.*

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