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Afghan Women Who Fought With U.S. Military Seek Legal Immigration Status

Members of an all-female tactical combat unit in Afghanistan, who were evacuated during the United States withdrawal, are asking Congress to grant them permanent legal status.

By Luke Broadwater and Ava Sasani

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WASHINGTON — Before her country and her life were suddenly and fundamentally changed in 2021, Mahnaz Akbari was the trailblazing commander of the Afghan National Army's Female Tactical Platoon, an all-female squad that accompanied elite U.S. Special Operations troops as they carried out daring mountain missions, hunted ISIS combatants and freed captives from Taliban jails.

Ms. Akbari, 37, and her soldiers did so at great personal risk. One woman was shot through the neck, suffering a fractured skull. Another was killed shortly before the fall of Kabul. And after the Taliban took over the country, many members of the platoon were forced to flee to the United States.

Now, Ms. Akbari and other members of the Female Tactical Platoon are embarking on another mission: working to convince Congress that their service in Afghanistan has earned them the right to stay in America permanently.

“Our missions were for big targets: a Taliban commander or a Da’ish leader,” Ms. Akbari said, using another name for ISIS during a recent interview at her Silver Spring, Md., apartment.

On Thursday, Ms. Akbari and a group of other women from the Female Tactical Platoon met with lawmakers on Capitol Hill to try to revive stalled legislation to address their and other Afghans’ precarious immigration status. The soldiers are in the United States under a two-year humanitarian parole that is set to expire in August. That would end the women’s work permits, forcing their new employers to terminate their jobs and leaving them in a legal limbo.

The meetings on Thursday ran the gamut from liberal to conservative lawmakers.



Ms. Akbari and a group of other Afghan women from the Female Tactical Platoon met with lawmakers on Capitol Hill. Kenny Holston/The New York Times

Senator Ted Cruz, a Texas Republican who has backed hard-line immigration policies, left his encounter with the women sounding impressed and sympathetic.

“Brave Afghans risked their lives to keep American soldiers safe, and we have a responsibility to them,” Mr. Cruz said after the meeting.

That sentiment was echoed by Representative Michael Waltz, a Florida Republican who just endorsed former President Donald J. Trump for re-election but has been a champion of helping Afghan refugees who aided American troops during the decades-long war in Afghanistan.

“You’re all fellow soldiers; we all fought together,” Mr. Waltz, a former Green Beret, told the women at a meeting hosted by Representative Seth Moulton, a Massachusetts Democrat who served in the Marines. “What is ingrained in us and in every soldier is you never leave a fellow soldier behind — ever. So we’ll keep fighting for those who were left behind.”

Senator Amy Klobuchar, Democrat of Minnesota, said she was taking the lead on a revision of the Afghan Adjustment Act, which died in the last Congress for lack of Republican support.

That bill, which would have created a legal pathway for permanent residency for Afghans who had risked their lives to help Americans during the conflict in Afghanistan — as translators, drivers and fixers — stalled out amid Republican concerns about vetting. About 82,000 Afghans were evacuated to the United States after the fall of Kabul. Since then, most have been living in legal limbo, with no long-term authorization to remain.

The measure, which required additional security checks, was modeled off laws enacted after other humanitarian crises, like the Vietnam War. Similar statutes were also enacted after crises in Cuba, Nicaragua and Iraq.

It also would have created a pathway to permanent authorization for four specific groups: the Afghanistan National Army Special Operations Command, the Afghan Air Force, the Special Mission Wing of Afghanistan and the Female Tactical Teams of Afghanistan.

Ms. Klobuchar is working on an update of the bill with hopes of gaining enough allies on the right to pass the legislation. She said she had spoken several times with former President George W. Bush about his support of the effort.

“In the Senate we have growing Republican support,” Ms. Klobuchar said. “They can’t be in limbo for this long. Those women are part of tens of thousands of Afghans who stood with our country.”

Should the effort fall short, however, some proponents said Congress could consider a narrower bill that would help just the dozens of women in the special forces squad stay in the United States.



An image of the Female Tactical Platoon on a mug is displayed at Ms. Akbari's home. Anna Rose Layden for The New York Times

During a meeting with the women, Erin Chapman, senior counsel to Ms. Klobuchar, said the legislation already contained changes requested by Republican senators last Congress for “additional vetting” of the Afghans to be conducted by the Defense Department.

Mary Kolars, an Army captain who led the Cultural Support Team in Afghanistan and worked closely with the Afghan women, asked Ms. Chapman about safety concerns for the family members of the platoon, most of whom were left behind in Afghanistan.

“These women, their families are being targeted — their siblings, parents,” Ms. Kolars said.

As his meeting with the soldiers got underway on Thursday, Representative Greg Stanton, Democrat of Arizona, was trying another tactic. Mr. Stanton had sent a letter to Alejandro Mayorkas, the secretary of homeland security, asking him to personally ensure that members of the Female Tactical Platoon would have their asylum cases promptly adjudicated through U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Only three of nearly 45 female soldiers have thus far been granted asylum, Mr. Stanton said, and he raised concerns that they were being treated differently because of their gender.

“I am concerned that this group of courageous women is receiving disparate treatment from your department,” Mr. Stanton wrote to Mr. Mayorkas. “After all, many male Afghan soldiers, including pilots, have received their asylum within the 180-day time period.”

The effort to get the women a pathway to permanent residency is in some ways simply closing a loophole, their allies say. Contractors such as translators and fixers who worked directly for the U.S. government are eligible for Special Immigrant Visas, while soldiers who were paid directly by the Afghan government are not.

The story of how the Female Tactical Platoon was created, and then evacuated from the country, goes back more than a decade.

About 10 years into the war in Afghanistan, the U.S. military determined it needed female troops to assist as it patrolled rural villages in the country.

It was considered culturally insensitive for the male soldiers to talk to Afghan women in some parts of the country, so Ms. Akbari and her troops would lead the conversations. They carried guns in case they encountered enemy combatants, but also chocolate, in case they encountered children.

While they were primarily serving as cultural ambassadors, the work placed them in great danger. When one platoon member was conducting a search, the woman she was searching pulled out a gun and opened fire, wounding her badly. During some firefights between U.S. troops and ISIS, the sky would light up with what looked like fireworks, Ms. Akbari recalled.

“These were really dangerous missions with high-value targets at stake,” Ms. Kolars said. “When we talk about why they deserve our help, it’s very personal to me, because Mahnaz might as well be my sister. They’ve sacrificed for their country and for ours. The bond between our two units is pretty inseparable.”



Ms. Akbari at her home with Mary Kolars, an Army captain who led the Cultural Support Team in Afghanistan. Anna Rose Layden for The New York Times

Most of the women are Hazara, an ethnic minority that has faced violent persecution under Taliban rule. Living as a Hazara in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan doubles the risk posed by having female family members who worked with U.S. troops. Ms. Kolars said many of the platoon members have had relatives killed, tortured or threatened by Talibs.

After the fall of Kabul, the Taliban confiscated the women's paperwork so the group could track down their families, Ms. Kolars said, but the information remained in Afghan government files because the women had been so thoroughly vetted.

A network of mostly female American soldiers rallied to help the Afghan women evacuate from the country quickly.

Now, members of the female platoon find themselves working at Chick-fil-A, as baristas and in grocery stores.

"In one night, they went from being these powerful, incredible soldiers with a direct purpose to suddenly, in the Taliban's eyes, you're barely human," Ms. Kolars said.

They are scattered through the country, but many wish to once again enter the field of combat.

Ms. Akbari said on Thursday that she was ready to do it all over again. If she is granted her green card, she said, she will join the U.S. Army.

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