

U.S.

Lawmakers push bill to help Afghan evacuees, allies still in Afghanistan 2 years after US withdrawal

By MATTHEW ADAMS
STARS AND STRIPES • September 14, 2023



Rep. Mariannette Miller-Meeks, R-Iowa, attends a briefing on the House side of the U.S. Capitol on Thursday, Sept. 14, 2023, as several members of Congress called for support and assistance for Afghans who risked their lives in working with the U.S. military and other allies serving in Afghanistan prior to the Taliban takeover of the country in 2021. (Carlos Bongioanni/Stars and Stripes)

WASHINGTON — Six House lawmakers said Thursday that they are still pushing for legislation that would help Afghans now in the U.S. gain citizenship and assist allies who remain in Afghanistan, two years after U.S. forces withdrew from the country.

"We have miles to go to fulfill our promise to those who fought and died with our soldiers in Afghanistan. Their bravery deserves more, so much more than legislative gridlock," said Rep. Mariannette Miller-Meeks, R-Iowa, who sponsored the legislation in the House.

Miller-Meeks was joined at a news conference in front of the U.S. Capitol by Reps. Zach Nunn, R-Iowa, Jeff Jackson, D-N.C., Michael Waltz, R-Fla., Seth Moulton, D-Mass., and Brian Fitzpatrick, R-Pa., to stress the need for legislation to be passed soon to help these Afghans.

The <u>Afghan Adjustment Act</u> was first introduced in the House and Senate in August 2022 but failed to pass. The bill was reintroduced in both chambers on July 13. Miller-Meeks is the sponsor for the House's version, while Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., is the sponsor in the Senate.

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, which ended Aug. 31, 2021, concluded 20 years of war in Afghanistan for the United States. It also marked the return of Taliban rule in the country, rolling back many human rights in the past 20 months, particularly for women.

The American pullout included the evacuation of thousands of Afghan nationals who fled the country with the U.S. military. The chaotic withdrawal also led to the deaths of 13 service members who were killed at the Kabul airport by suicide attackers.

"After every major conflict, we've passed an adjustment act to make sure that we honor the obligation to the people who put their lives on the line to help us," said Jackson, one of 35 co-sponsors on the bill.



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Rep. Jeff Jackson, D-N.C., takes the podium during a news conference on the House side of the U.S. Capitol on Thursday, Sept. 14, 2023, as several members of Congress called for support and assistance for Afghans who risked their lives in working with the U.S. military and other allies serving in Afghanistan prior to the Taliban takeover of the country in 2021. (Carlos Bongioanni/Stars and Stripes)

Jackson, who is a major in the Army National Guard, enlisted in the Army Reserve in 2002 and served in the Kandahar province in Afghanistan. He said Thursday that his missions in Afghanistan always included an interpreter. Everyone knew if something went wrong and they found themselves in an ambush, the interpreter would be the first person shot or killed.

"[The interpreter] also knew that when he decided to help us, he put his entire family at risk ... and he was willing to do that because he felt it was the right thing for his country — helping us," Jackson said. "The reason he was confident in doing that was because we told him that we would have his back. Having his back means not just what happens when you're out there on a mission, [it] means what happens after the fight is over."

There are more than 80,000 Afghan allies now in the U.S., said Rye Barcott of With Honor Action, the co-founder and CEO of the nonprofit that looks to promote and advance veteran

leadership in public service.



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Rye Barcott, co-founder of With Honor Action, attends a news conference on the House side of the U.S. Capitol on Thursday, Sept. 14, 2023, as several members of Congress called for support and assistance for Afghans who risked their lives in working with the U.S. military and other allies serving in Afghanistan prior to the Taliban takeover of the country in 2021. (Carlos Bongioanni/Stars and Stripes)

Miller-Meeks said lawmakers are open to getting this bill in the 2024 National Defense Authorization Act, the annual Pentagon policy and spending priorities bill, or possibly adding it to another bill to get it passed. She said the bill is gaining momentum and hopes that the more exposure it gets, the more pressure it puts on members of Congress to act.

"We have to separate the people who came over in the airlift ... and separate that from the botched withdrawal," the congresswoman said. "These are people in the United States who we need to help, and we still have Afghan interpreters and allies who are in the Middle East ... who we need to extract."



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