

## *In Washington, recriminations move as quickly as the Taliban.*



By Jonathan Weisman

Aug. 15, 2021

A conference call between members of Congress and the Biden administration's top diplomatic and military leaders on Afghanistan turned contentious on Sunday, as lawmakers pressed the administration on how intelligence on the Taliban could have failed so badly and how long the military will secure the Kabul airport.

Lawmakers said the 45-minute call with Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III and Mark A. Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was not particularly revelatory.

"It was, I would say, a rote exercise in telling us what we had already learned from the media and social media," said Representative Peter Meijer, Republican of Michigan and a former Army reservist who did conflict analysis in Afghanistan.

The questioning was pointed and at times contentious. Much of it centered on which Afghans the United States would get out of Afghanistan — and how.

Representative Tom Malinowski, a New Jersey Democrat who was a State Department official in the Obama administration and a former leader of Human Rights Watch, pressed for answers on how long the U.S. military would be able to keep its hold on the Kabul airport, so that charter and commercial flights can continue.

Lawmakers also asked whether the Afghans that Americans are trying to help leave would go beyond those who worked for the embassy, interpreters for the military and others with special immigrant visas. The briefers assured them that the United States would try to help a broader group, including human rights and women's rights activists, journalists and students at the American University of Afghanistan.

"I want to make sure we don't pick up and leave when all the Americans and S.I.V.'s are out," Mr. Malinowski said, referring to the special visa holders.

But there is no guarantee that all Afghans who want to get out will be able to do so.

"It is overwhelmingly clear to me that this has been a cascade of failures at the Defense Department, with the intelligence community and within our political community," Mr. Meijer said. "And nothing on the call gave me the confidence that even the magnitude of the failures has been comprehended."

Jonathan Weisman is a congressional correspondent, veteran Washington journalist and author of the novel "No. 4 Imperial Lane" and the nonfiction book "(((Semitism)))": Being Jewish in America in the Age of Trump." His career in journalism stretches back 30 years. @jonathanweisman