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**Canadian Veterans' Advocacy
and the Governance of Afghan
Refugees**

Kushan Azadah

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Kushan Azadah
*York University and Toronto
Metropolitan University*

Series Editors: Anna Triandafyllidou, Richa Shivakoti and Zhixi Zhaung

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Abstract

The fall of Kabul in August 2021 marked a consequential moment in Canadian refugee governance, one in which Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) veterans emerged as unusually visible and influential actors in advocacy, policy engagement, and, in some cases, direct evacuation and protection efforts. Drawing on Critical Policy Discourse Analysis, this paper examines how veterans-led civil society organizations intervened in Canada's response to Afghan displacement between 2009 and 2023, and how their claims were taken up, limited, and ultimately contained within existing governance frameworks.

My analysis shows that veterans' advocacy operated through a militarized moral economy that framed Afghan interpreters and other locally engaged staff as deserving of protection on the basis of service, loyalty, and reciprocity. This framing proved politically effective, generating sustained public attention and formal policy commitments. At the same time, it articulated a narrow field of obligation by tethering protection to proximity-based wartime relationships rather than to vulnerability alone. The paper further demonstrates that state recognition and authorization did not reliably translate into evacuation or access to protection. To account for this discrepancy, I introduce the concept of *non-sortie* to describe a mode of crisis governance in which departure was affirmed in principle while obstructed in practice through discretionary, securitized, and extraterritorial control over mobility at or near the point of origin. Finally, I trace how veterans-led organizations moved beyond advocacy to engage in direct operational intervention—what I refer to as *civil society keyword*—only to encounter legal and procedural containment through strict interpretations of antiterrorism law and, later, a permissions-based regulatory framework.

The Afghan case illustrates how crises can generate limited openings within otherwise restrictive refugee governance systems. Veterans' interventions enabled meaningful and, at times, life-preserving action, but these openings remained selective, conditional, and ultimately subject to state discretion. The paper contributes to debates on refugee governance and civil society by showing how proximity to militarized state logics can both enable influence and delimit the scope and durability of protection.

Keywords: veterans' advocacy; civil society; refugee governance; Afghan resettlement policy; Canada

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The people who had the most courage and stood up to the Taliban are the ones who are now in most danger ... We were in Kandahar telling the Afghans to trust us, and they shouldn't have.

— Tim Laidler, CAF veteran and co-founder of *Veterans Transition Network*, September 3, 2021 (as cited in Blackwell, 2021e)

Why did you turn these people away? ... No one has an answer for you ... How would you know Canada is the champion of human rights?

— Unnamed former Afghan interpreter for CAF, August 28, 2021 (as cited in Hoekstra, 2021)

If we ever get another option to get my interpreter and his family out, how do I convince him to listen to our advice after what he's been through ... I'm so embarrassed to be a Canadian.

— Siobhan Calnan, CAF veteran, August 25, 2021 (as cited in Blackwell, 2021a)

Introduction

The fall of Kabul in August 2021 created an unusually consequential moment in Canadian refugee governance—one in which actors typically absent from humanitarian or migration politics moved decisively into the centre of the national debate. *Canadian Armed Forces* (CAF) veterans became some of the most visible, vocal, and operationally engaged figures pressing the federal government to evacuate and resettle Afghan nationals at risk. In Parliament, in media interviews, across social media, and through independently coordinated rescue operations, veterans publicly demanded that Canada act with urgency, criticizing the delays in policymaking and implementation, stringent eligibility requirements, and inaccessible application processes. Unsatisfied with government (in)action, veteran-led and veteran-affiliated civil society organizations (CSO)—such as *Aman Lara* and the *Veterans Transition Network* (VTN) (Aman Lara, n.d.-b; Semple, 2022; VTN, 2022c)—mobilized capacities and resources that exceeded those typically available to CSOs more commonly involved in refugee governance and, in specific moments, appeared to operate parallel to or in tension with the state itself. They organized safe houses in Kabul, financed and coordinated rescue missions, and coordinated land convoys to facilitate refugees' exit from Afghanistan.

This was an unprecedented development. Veterans rarely occupy central roles in refugee governance, nor do they typically serve as catalysts for expanding humanitarian protections. At the same time, however, their efforts were not directed toward all Afghan nationals but toward a narrowly defined subgroup—those who had worked directly with Canada during its mission in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2014—interpreters, guides, cultural liaisons, locally engaged staff, and other individuals embedded in military-adjacent operations. Their emergence as influential actors thus presents a compelling case for research.

Veterans' prominence in this moment was neither accidental nor simply the product of an organic humanitarian awakening prompted by crisis. It reflected the political and institutional afterlives of Canada's war in Afghanistan, and the particular forms of obligation generated through it. Many veterans framed the threat facing Afghan partners as a question of responsibility, that

these were people on whom Canadian forces had depended, often for their own survival, and whose exposure to violence was inseparable from Canada's military presence. In this framing, failure to evacuate Afghan interpreters and other locally engaged staff was more than a humanitarian failure, but a breach of trust that risked undermining Canada's credibility, both internationally and within its own military community.

This mode of normative claim-making proved effective in part because it drew on institutionally familiar and politically resonant narratives about service, loyalty, and reciprocity. At the same time, it established a narrow grammar of refugee deservingness. Protection was articulated less in universal terms than through proximity to Canadian military objectives and wartime relationships. Veterans' advocacy thus did not speak for Afghan displacement as such, but for a specific subset of displaced civilians whose risk could be causally linked to Canada's intervention. The result was a stratified field of obligation in which some lives became urgently legible to the Canadian state, while others remained peripheral.

This paper examines veterans-led CSOs as influential, but constrained, actors in Canada's response to Afghan displacement. It argues that veterans' interventions mattered not because they stood outside state power, but because they operated in close proximity to it—drawing on militarized authority, institutional familiarity, and moral claims forged through state-driven wartime narratives about the nation's identity and values. Their advocacy generated political pressure, sustained media attention, and formal policy commitments. Yet these gains were uneven and fragile. Authorization did not reliably translate into movement, and recognition of obligation did not ensure timely protection.

To make sense of this discrepancy, I advance three related arguments. First, veterans mobilized a militarized moral economy that framed Afghan interpreters and other locally engaged staff as uniquely deserving of protection. This framing enabled selective policy openings while simultaneously narrowing the scope of humanitarian concern. Second, the 2021 evacuation efforts reveal a distinct mode of crisis governance in which departure is affirmed in principle but obstructed in practice. I conceptualize this condition as *non-sortie*: a form of mobility control exercised by destination countries at or near the point of origin, through discretionary and securitized practices that render exit formally authorized yet practically unattainable. Third, when veterans and allied organizations moved beyond advocacy and assumed direct operational roles—a practice I call *civil society keywork*—the state did not institutionalize these practices. Instead, it reasserted authority through legal and procedural containment, most notably via strict interpretations of antiterrorism law and, later, a permissions-based regulatory framework.

By foregrounding veterans' interventions, this paper contributes to scholarship on refugee governance and civil society by showing how novel forms of advocacy can generate meaningful, even life-preserving openings without displacing the deeper logics that regulate admission and mobility. This case study shows how crises can produce limited flexibility within otherwise restrictive refugee and asylum systems, allowing certain claims to gain traction without altering the underlying structures that govern mobility, admission, and belonging. Veterans' interventions were capable of opening pathways, but those pathways remained conditional and subject to state discretion. Their effectiveness depended on alignment with securitized and militarized logics that ultimately constrained what could be achieved, and for whom.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 outlines the methodological approach and data sources, drawing on *Critical Policy Discourse Analysis* (CPDA) to situate veterans' interventions within its broader political and institutional context. The discussion section traces four interconnected themes: the construction of militarized deservingness; the translation of advocacy into policy pathways and their limits; the governance of evacuation through *non-sortie*; and the emergence of civil society keywork followed by the reassertion of state authority. The conclusion reflects on what this case suggests about the possibilities and limits of civil society interventions in contemporary refugee governance.

Methodology and Context

This study adopts a multi-scalar and conjunctural approach to critically examine the advocacy and mobilizations of Canadian veterans' groups in Afghan refugee governance and policy. It applies Critical Policy Discourse Analysis (CPDA) to publicly available texts from across government and civil society. CPDA builds on the broader tradition of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which examines how language and discourse both reflect and constitute relations of power. CDA conceives discourse not as a neutral medium of communication, but as a social practice through which power circulates, legitimizes, and naturalizes particular worldviews. They function as "systems of signification" that construct social realities through processes of categorization and differentiation, producing binaries such as "moderate" versus "radical," or "deserving" versus "undeserving" (Milliken, 1999). Under this view, power is not simply enacted by individuals or institutions but rather embedded within discourse itself, working through its "ideological effects" to make particular assumptions, hierarchies, and exclusions appear natural or self-evident (Parker, 1990). CDA, thus, approaches discourse as open-ended and historically contingent, always subject to change, reinterpretation, and struggle (Milliken, 1999).

Within this broader lineage, CPDA offers a more policy-oriented adaptation of CDA, emphasizing the constitutive role of discourse in the making, implementation, and legitimation of policy. Rather than treating policy texts as objective reflections of social reality, CPDA views them as discursive artifacts that emerge within, and in turn reshape, specific political and institutional contexts (Carlaw & Azadah, 2024; Montesano Montessori et al., 2019). This approach enables a relational analysis that foregrounds how discourse, power, and policy interact dynamically; how certain meanings become stabilized as policy "truths," while others are contested, marginalized, or erased. The analytical focus thus extends beyond textual interpretation to the broader social, institutional, and historical fields in which discourse is produced, circulated, and transformed.

While the primary focus remains on the events between 2021 and 2023—which constitute Canada's largest initiative for Afghan resettlement—the analysis is situated within a longer global-historical trajectory extending from the War in Afghanistan from 2001 onward, tracing how successive waves of conflict and displacement have prompted Canadian CAF personnel to become active and influential figures in Afghan refugee advocacy. Understanding their interventions during this conjuncture requires a broader analytical that is attentive to the evolving ways in which Afghan refugees in general, and those assisting the Canadian mission in Afghanistan, in particular, have been rendered legible among the Canadian military spaces, and then extended across public, media, and institutional channels to produce selective openings for protection and resettlement.

Social and Policy Context: Militarized Nationalism and Refugee Governance in Canada

Canada's participation in the War in Afghanistan had consequences that extended beyond foreign and defence policy. It also reshaped how the Canadian state articulated its national role and identity. In the period following September 11, 2001, political discourse increasingly linked overseas counterterrorism operations to a renewed domestic narrative of Canada as both a reliable military ally and a principled defender of liberal democratic values, including freedom, justice, and women's rights and education. As then-Prime Minister Jean Chrétien's stated at the House of Commons following the 9/11 attacks:

The House must... address the threat that terrorism poses... These cold-blooded killers struck a blow at the values and beliefs of free and civilized people everywhere... Canada, a nation founded on a belief in freedom, justice and tolerance, will be part of that response.

... If laws need to be changed they will be. If security has to be increased to protect Canadians it will be. We will remain vigilant but will not... undermine the values... which have made Canada a beacon of hope, freedom and tolerance in the world... a nation of immigrants from all corners of the globe, people of all nationalities, colours and religions... We will continue to offer refuge to the persecuted... no one will stop this. (*House of Commons Debates, No. 79, 2001*)

This reorientation carried important implications for refugee governance, as developments in Canada's foreign policy contributed to protracted conflict and displacement in Afghanistan, while parallel shifts in domestic policy narrowed refugee admissions and humanitarian pathways at home.

With regards to foreign policy, International Relations and Security Studies scholars have documented how the absence of a coherent reconstruction strategy, combined with fragmented international coordination, contributed to renewed instability and displacement as early as 2005 (Crews & Tarzi, 2009; Ibrahimi, 2022; Klassen, 2013a). As NATO counterinsurgency operations intensified in response to a resurgent Taliban, civilian casualties increased and individuals perceived to be assisting international forces—including interpreters and locally engaged staff—faced escalating risk (Human Rights Watch, 2021; UNAMA, 2021). Canada was a central actor in this phase, leading one of NATO's most intensive military engagements in Kandahar between 2005 and 2014, a strategic stronghold of Taliban activity (Veterans Affairs Canada, n.d.).

Critical scholars characterize this period as a departure from Canada's post-1960s peacekeeping-oriented "middle power" identity and the consolidation of a more overtly militarist nationalism (Kellogg, 2013; McKay & Swift, 2012). Within this literature, the "Canada as warrior" narrative figures prominently, anchored in representations of a disciplined, masculinized, and combat-ready military (Mutimer, 2016, p. 217; Wegner, 2015, p. 117). This remilitarization privileged warfighting over development, weakened civil–military coordination, and further strained already fragile humanitarian and state-building efforts (Dorn & Varey, 2008; Klassen, 2013b; Podur, 2013). As Justin Podur (2013) argues, the subordination of humanitarianism and diplomacy to combat-centric imperatives reduces them to "instruments of military victory," rendering development efforts "distorted, limited, and incoherent" under conditions of ongoing warfare (p. 341). Genuine and sustainable development, he contends, requires sustained commitments to sovereignty and peace.

While IR and Security Studies scholars have focused primarily on the foreign policy and security dimensions of Canada's engagement, the literature within migration and refugee studies has documented parallel developments within Canada's domestic governance regime. Despite escalating conflict and displacement in Afghanistan—particularly after 2007—Afghan immigration to Canada declined steadily, reaching its lowest post-2001 levels during the Harper Conservative period (see Figure 1). Rather than responding to worsening conditions with expanded humanitarian pathways, Canada's immigration and refugee system became increasingly restrictive during the same years in which its military involvement was most pronounced.

Researchers have shown that this contraction was not merely administrative, but ideological. The neo-conservative tenor of Canada's emergent militarist and civilizational nationalisms permeated reforms to citizenship tests, guides, and ceremonies, which increasingly foregrounded a valorized military past and rebranded Canada as a "Warrior Nation" (Abu-Laban et al., 2022, pp. 241–248; Carlaw, 2018, pp. 797–801). These symbolic shifts were accompanied by substantive policy changes that narrowed humanitarian access, expanded ministerial discretion, and intensified security screening. Discourses surrounding the "bogus claimant," appeals to "Canadian values," and the vilification of so-called "barbaric cultural practices" played a central role in stigmatizing refugees and asylum seekers, particularly those associated with Muslim and racialized identities (Carlaw, 2018, pp. 797, 801). Even as the post-2015 Liberal

government under then-Prime Minister Justin Trudeau sought to distance itself from the overt militarized nationalism neoconservative rhetoric associated with the Harper-era Conservatives (Winter & Carlaw, 2024), my findings in the discussions below show that many of these discourses retained political and cultural salience across Canadian state and civil society, and the advocacy networks formed during the war-time period remained active. The resulting tension—between relational obligation and institutional risk management—would resurface with far greater intensity during the 2021 Afghan displacement crisis.

Although these literatures have largely developed in parallel, reading them together clarifies how militarist and civilizational nationalisms operated across Canada’s foreign and domestic policy domains in mutually reinforcing yet ultimately contradictory ways. Abroad, these narratives justified a warfighting posture that contributed to strategic incoherence, civilian casualties, and protracted displacements, including among Afghan nationals directly supporting Canadian forces. At home, the same ideological currents narrowed access to protection for those displaced by the conflict and violence in which Canada was directly implicated. This contradiction contributed to a specific set of moral, political, and institutional tensions within which responsibility for Afghan displacement was simultaneously acknowledged and disavowed. The context reviewed here is therefore not intended to explain refugee advocacy outcomes in a deterministic sense, but to identify the conditions under which certain claims could gain traction while others remained marginalized. It is within this uneven terrain—marked by militarized national narratives, securitized discretion, and selective humanitarianism—that CAF veterans would later emerge as prominent and consequential actors in Afghan refugee governance. The discussion section further below examines how these structural conditions shaped the form, reach, and limits of their interventions.

Data Sources

I compiled a corpus of publicly available texts produced between 2020 and 2024 by key state and civil society actors (Table 1). The dataset includes federal departments central to admissions, evacuation, and security decision-making (IRCC, GAC, DND, PSC); parliamentary venues where policy was debated and scrutinized (House of Commons and Senate debates; committee notes, transcripts, and reports from CIMM, NDDN, and AFGH); and political party communications (CPC, NDP) that help situate partisan framing and accountability claims. To capture veterans’ distinct role in this advocacy landscape, the corpus also includes veterans-linked and interpreter-connected organizations that actively intervened in public discourse and, in some cases, operational evacuation work (ACI, Aman Lara, CHF, H2H, VTN).

Texts were selected for their relevance to Afghan resettlement, evacuation, Afghan allies (interpreters/locally engaged staff), and related governance questions (eligibility, risk, security screening, mobility/exit, and implementation). Where organizational search functions were available, documents were located using combinations of “Afghan,” “Afghanistan,” and “refugee,” supplemented by “interpreter,” “evacuation,” and “resettlement” when needed. For sources without effective internal search tools, I manually reviewed press release archives over the study period and retained items that met the inclusion criteria. This corpus provides a cross-institutional record of how obligation, deservingness, and security were narrated and operationalized across government, parliamentary, partisan, and veterans-linked civil society sites.

Among veterans-linked CSOs, particular analytical attention is given to VTN and Aman Lara, as these two groups generated the largest and most sustained volume of public-facing texts during the study period and were uniquely involved not only in advocacy but also in independently coordinated rescue missions and protection efforts, making them especially well suited to examining how veterans’ moral authority and operational capacities translated into both policy engagement and direct intervention.

Table 1. Actor Documents Selected for Analysis

Actor Name	Texts Selected from 2020-2024	Number of Texts
Canadian Government		
Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC)	Backgrounders, News Releases, Policies, Reports, Speeches, Statements	46
Global Affairs Canada (GAC)	Backgrounders, News Releases, Project Profiles, Statements	29
Department of National Defense (DND)	Backgrounders, News Releases, Reports, Statements	30
Public Safety Canada (PSC)	Backgrounders, News Releases, Statements	5
House of Commons Canada	Debates, Petitions	151
The Senate of Canada	Debates	47
Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration (CIMM)	Notes, Meeting Transcripts	24
Standing Committee on National Defence (NDDN)	Notes, Meeting Transcripts	9
Special Committee on Afghanistan (AFGH)	Notes, Meeting Transcripts, Reports	40
Canadian Political Party		
Conservative Party (CPC)	News Releases	9
New Democratic Party (NDP)	News Releases	8
Veteran-linked Civil Society Organizations		
Afghan-Canadian Interpreters (ACI)	News Statements, Press Releases	5
Aman Lara	Campaign Updates, News Statements, Press Releases	31
Canadian Heroes Foundation (CHF)	News Statements, Webpage	6
Helmet to Hardhats (H2H)	News Statements, Press Releases	3
Veterans Transition Network (VTN)	Campaign Updates, Individual Stories, News Statements, Press Releases, Reports	35

Undertaking CPDA

Rather than surveying the full range of Afghan resettlement pathways introduced during this period, the analysis focuses on six measures that were most closely shaped by, or repeatedly invoked within, veterans-led advocacy (Table 2), particularly *Special Immigration Measures* (SIMs) for interpreters, locally engaged staff (LES) provisions, and related family and status-adjustment pathways.

These policies were analyzed with attention to how eligibility criteria, amendments, intake caps, and timelines framed responsibility, risk, and obligation. The purpose is not to construct a comprehensive typology of Afghan resettlement policy, but to trace how recognition of obligation was articulated, deferred, and re-contained as it moved through policy instruments and administrative practice. Reading these pathways alongside veterans' advocacy makes visible a recurring theme of disjuncture between authorization and movement or, put differently, between formal commitments to protection and the practical governance of exit and mobility under crisis conditions.

Table 2. Refugee Policies for Afghan Nationals Linked to Canada's Military and Diplomatic Mission (2009-2023)

Policy #	Policy Measure	Start Date	End Date	Amendment #	Amendment Date	Eligibility Criteria	Resettlement Cap & Outcome
1	Individuals who assisted Canada in Kandahar	9 Oct 2009	12 Sep 2011	—	—	Employment in direct support of Canadian government in Kandahar for at least 12 months since October 9, 2007	Approximately 500 resettled (IRCC, 2009a)
			2012 (exact date unspecified)	1 (reopened)	20 Apr 2012	—	Additional 300 resettled
2	Individuals who assisted Canada	22 Jul 2021	31 Jan 2022	—	—	Significant and/or enduring relationship to Canada, identified on DND or GAC referral lists, and physically present in Afghanistan	Cap: 2,500 (IRCC, 2021a)
				1	9 Aug 2021	Clarified temporal scope: must have been in Afghanistan on or after 22 Jul 2021	Cap raised to 5,700 (IRCC, 2021d)

	2		22 Aug 2021	Expanded household scope: includes “other household members”	Cap raised to 9,500 (IRCC, 2021e)
	3		10 Nov 2021	—	Cap raised to 14,000 (IRCC, 2021k)
31 Mar 2023 (extended)	4		8 Jun 2022	Shift to IRCC Invitation-to-Apply intake; eligibility narrowed to principal, family, and <i>de facto</i> dependents (no new household entrants)	New intake cap of 5,000, to help reach 18,000 total admissions (IRCC, 2022a)
30 Sep 2023 (extended)	5		29 Mar 2023	—	Program cap replaced with single consolidated cap of 20,600 across all programs dedicated to Afghan nationals with a significant relationship to Canada

(IRCC, 2023a)

			31 Dec 2023 (extended)	6	8 Sep 2023	—	—
3	Canadian Embassy Locally Engaged Staff (LES)	22 Jul 2021	31 Jan 2022	—	—	LES Canadian Embassy & accompanying family/household members	No fixed numerical cap (IRCC, 2021b)
4	NATO Locally Engaged Staff	19 Sep 2021	31 Jan 2022	—	—	NATO-listed Afghan local staff & family	Cap: 150 (IRCC, 2021g)
				1	18 Oct 2021	Contractors added to NATO staff	Cap raised: 472 (IRCC, 2021h)
5	Foreign nationals airlifted from Afghanistan	25 Aug 2021	—	—	—	Airlifted by Canada or allies from HKIA or transit countries	5,000 Temporary Resident Permits (TRP) (IRCC, 2021f)
			25 Oct 2023	1	25 Oct 2021	Evacuees holding TRPs in Canada; in-Canada family	TRP to Permanent Residency (PR) (IRCC, 2021i)

6	Families of Individuals who came under previous SIMs	25 Oct 2021	—	—	—	Extended family of individuals resettled under SIMs in 2009-2012	Cap: 1,000 (IRCC, 2021j)
				1	23 Jun 2022	—	Cap raised: 5,000 (IRCC, 2022b)
				2	12 Oct 2022	—	Cap raised: 6,100 (IRCC, 2022c)
				3	28 Oct 2023	—	Cap raised: 7,200 (IRCC, 2023b)

Discussion

This discussion examines how veterans-led advocacy shaped Canada's response to Afghan displacement by exerting forms of political, moral, and operational pressure that differed markedly from those of established humanitarian organizations. Veterans' interventions were not simply louder or more visible versions of conventional refugee advocacy. They drew on militarized authority, proximity to state institutions, and wartime relationships to generate policy urgency, public accountability, and institutional permeability in ways rarely available to other civil society actors in refugee politics. At the same time, these interventions were tightly circumscribed by selective discourses of deservingness and were met with distinct forms of state response, revealing both the reach and the limits of veterans' influence within Canada's refugee governance regime.

The four sections that follow trace how responsibility toward Canada's allies was articulated, institutionalized, obstructed, and ultimately re-contained across different sites of governance. First, I examine how veterans' advocacy operated through a unique moral economy that framed certain Afghan nationals as deserving of protection on the basis of loyalty, sacrifice, and proximity to a militarized vision of Canadian identity and values, producing a narrow and stratified field of obligation. Second, I show how these claims translated into temporary SIMs, where veterans' pressure compelled repeated state engagement and formal commitments, even as service-based deservingness was institutionalized through securitized administrative criteria that limited scope and delayed implementation. Third, I shift the focus to the governance of mobility, introducing the concept of *non-sortie* to capture how evacuation was authorized in principle while obstructed in practice through discretionary and extraterritorial control over exit. Finally, I analyze what occurred when veterans' groups moved beyond advocacy to direct operational intervention, conceptualized here as *civil society keyword*, and how the state responded not by institutionalizing these openings, but by reasserting authority through legal and procedural containment, most notably via antiterrorism law.

Together, these sections help elucidate how veterans-led advocacy was capable of generating forms of pressure, access, and intervention that were largely unavailable to established humanitarian CSOs, but its effectiveness depended on alignment with militarized and securitized state logics that simultaneously constrained its scope and durability. The case of Canada's Afghan allies thus demonstrates that militarist and civilizational nationalism can paradoxically create openings for novel forms of civil society action, yet these openings remain conditional, selective, and vulnerable to the state's (re)assertion of sovereign authority over entry and admissions. Veterans' advocacy did not fundamentally challenge the deeper structures of refugee governance, but it illuminated new ways that obligation, mobility, and authority can be negotiated—and ultimately contained—within them.

Militarized Moral Economies of Deservingness

What is particularly salient about the emergence of veterans as refugee advocates is the normative and institutional terms through which their interventions were articulated. As my research shows, their advocacy was not primarily grounded in the universalist human-rights language typically employed by Canada's established refugee and humanitarian sector. Rather, it was organized through a distinctly militarized moral economy structured around norms of loyalty,

sacrifice, reciprocity, and obligation embedded within Canadian military culture.¹ Within this framework, Afghan interpreters and other locally engaged staff were rarely positioned as refugees in the conventional legal sense of international protection. Instead, they were framed as “allies” who served alongside Canadian forces, protected Canadian lives, and thereby generated a moral obligation that the Canadian state was understood to have incurred and to be bound to honour (see Blackwell, 2021e; CBC, 2011; VTN, 2022b).

I argue that the unique moral authority underpinning this advocacy drew upon the same wartime discourses that had legitimized Canada’s military mission in Afghanistan. Veterans were able to mobilize and repurpose elements of the state’s own justificatory language—particularly those associated with Harper-era civilizational and militarist nationalisms—in support of targeted and selective refugee admissions. This moral economy of obligation, however, presupposed a sharply delineated landscape for deservingness. To understand how the persecution of Afghan *allies* was recognized and translated into claims of refugee deservingness, it is therefore necessary to examine how the *enemy*—and by extension the persecutor—was constructed within Canada’s wartime and crisis discourses.

Throughout the conflict, Canadian personnel frequently emphasized the difficulty, and at times the “near impossib[ility],” of distinguishing Taliban “terrorists” from civilian “supporters,” a problem exacerbated by counterinsurgency strategies that blurred conventional boundaries between combat operations and humanitarian engagement (Dorn & Varey, 2008, p. 975). These operational ambiguities were further problematized at the level of senior military leadership through the deployment of civilizational language that framed the mission as a defence of liberal-democratic values against an ill-defined and morally absolute enemy. Rick Hillier, then-Chief of the Defence Staff—the highest-ranking position in the CAF—characterized Canada’s enemies as “detestable murderers and scumbags... [who] detest our freedoms... our society... our liberties” (CBC, 2005). Such representations consolidated a binary opposition between Canadian values and Afghan threat. As such, the Taliban—and those suspected of affiliation with the Taliban or other designated terrorist organizations—came to be constructed not merely as armed opponents but as the embodiment of terrorism itself. Afghan Muslim society, by contrast, was frequently rendered as a diffuse and indeterminate space of suspicion rather than as a politically heterogeneous civilian population differentiated by varying forms of agency, affiliation, and vulnerability.

These constructions were further intensified by a series of moral and institutional failures that destabilized an already fragile civilian–combatant distinction. Canada’s implication in civilian casualties, the transfer of detainees to Afghan authorities known to employ torture, and repeated breakdowns in aid delivery contributed to widespread resentment among Kandahar’s civilian population, including protests directly targeting Canadian forces (BCCLA, 2012; Berthiaume, 2021; CBC, 2007a, 2007b; CityNews, 2009). At the same time, these events generated growing unease within the CAF itself, as soldiers confronted dissonance between the mission’s stated objectives and its lived consequences on the ground. Allegations by former special forces personnel concerning the killing of unarmed civilians and the bombing of civilian homes—alongside claims of retaliation against those who reported such incidents—point to a deeper crisis of moral and institutional accountability.²

¹ For a detailed articulation of the values, principles, and ethical framework underpinning CAF institutional culture, see *Canadian Armed Forces Ethos: Trusted to Serve* (Department of National Defence, 2022), which outlines core commitments including duty, loyalty, integrity, and service to Canada, as well as expectations of reciprocal obligation between the institution, its members, and the state.

² Former JTF2 Sergeant Claude Lepage’s lawsuit alleged that he was forced out of the military after reporting the execution of unarmed Afghan civilians by Canadian personnel. The case is exemplary of the mission’s ethical controversies and civilian toll, as well as the disillusionment experienced by some soldiers,

It was within this fractured moral and institutional terrain that Afghan “allies” emerged as exceptional figures of deservingness. Partnerships with interpreters, guides, cultural liaisons, and other locally engaged staff were widely understood by Canadian personnel to be operationally indispensable and, in many cases, integral to their personal safety (Blackwell, 2021e; CBC, 2011; Red T, 2016, 2020). As the NATO mission faltered and the Taliban regained momentum, Canadian soldiers became increasingly aware that these relationships placed their Afghan colleagues at heightened risks for reprisals. This exposure extended well beyond interpreters to include cooks, drivers, cleaners, and others occupying non-combat roles (Human Rights Watch, 2021; IRB, 2011; UNAMA, 2021). As one veteran explained, “Our job was to take out the leadership of the Taliban, so it made everybody [who worked with us] a target” (Corbella, 2021b). Within this framework, persecution by the Taliban functioned as a necessary but insufficient condition for deservingness, as recognition and protection were mediated by whether such risk could be causally attributed to prior alignment with Canadian military objectives.

These constructions of proximity and risk were translated into advocacy discourse as veteran-led organizations, interpreters’ networks, and allied CSOs lobbied the federal government under the premise that their allies had served Canada and, in doing so, assumed extraordinary personal risk on its behalf. Oliver Thorne, CEO of the VTN, articulated this moral logic succinctly when he observed that Afghan interpreters “served [and] protected our men and women in uniform at great risk to themselves and their families” (“Afghan Refugees,” 2022). Wendy Long, founder of *Afghan-Canadian Interpreters*, similarly stated that Canadians “have a responsibility for those people, more so than anyone else, because of their connection to Canada... They protected our men and women and we are responsible” (Blackwell, 2021e).

At times, this moral economy negotiated deservingness beyond the securitized binary of *ally* and *enemy*. Advocates frequently distinguished between long-term interpreters embedded within Canadian units and individuals who had supported the mission in less visible, intermittent, or non-military capacities. As one veteran remarked in an interview with the *Calgary Herald*,

You could have somebody who worked for multiple years as an interpreter, wearing a Canadian military uniform and has letters of recommendation from all sorts of Canadian forces members... Then you've got folks who maybe work for, you know, a month... clean[ing] the toilets, doesn't speak English, doesn't have any record of employment... why are we treating them the same? (Corbella, 2021a)

Such distinctions suggest that prevailing neoliberal and securitized logics of refugeeness were negotiated rather than contested. References to wearing Canadian uniforms and possessing letters of recommendation from soldiers functioned as evidence of trust, loyalty, and alignment with Canadian identity and values, temporarily positioning some refugees as quasi-insiders. Civilizational and racialized framings were thus rendered flexible, operating as “floating signifiers” (Hall, 1997). At the same time, these exceptions were consolidated through deeper continuities with neoliberal valuations of productivity and worth.³

As such, veterans’ advocacy did not fundamentally challenge the exclusionary and hierarchal logics shaping refugee governance; it largely operated within them with the unique tenor of Harper-era neoconservative militarism. Its effectiveness stemmed from reinforcing, rather than contesting, the prevailing civilizational, neoliberal, and security-oriented frames of Canada’s

highlighting systemic issues and in the CAF’s mechanisms of accountability for alleged war crimes, and fault lines in its governance structure. For details about the case, see (Lapierre & Stevenson, 2024)

³ This selectivity mirrors broader dynamics in Canadian migration governance in which access to protection and membership is filtered through neoliberal valuations of skills, employability, and perceived contribution, producing differentiated moral economies of worth even within ostensibly humanitarian regimes. For a sample of this literature, see (Atak et al., 2023; Winter, 2021).

post-9/11 landscape. Afghan civilians who could not be situated within proximity-based narratives remained largely illegible within this mode of advocacy, even when they faced acute violence, displacement, or political persecution. Those without sustained affiliations to Canadian or NATO forces—including women activists, journalists, religious minorities, and other politically targeted civilians—were rarely incorporated into veterans’ claims unless their risk could be translated into a recognizable form of wartime military-adjacent service. Broader, albeit nonetheless liberal-democratically oriented, claims grounded in women and minority rights, and political repression were instead advanced since 2021 through parallel advocacy efforts led primarily by second-generation Afghan-Canadian women and youth organizations in coalition with national and international humanitarian actors (see AYEDI, 2021; CCAP, 2021; Draaisma, 2021)—a dynamic examined in detail in my larger dissertation project. Within a militarized moral economy, however, vulnerability alone was insufficient to generate protection. Deservingness depended on demonstrable alignment with Canadian wartime objectives, institutional practices, and national identity. While those who fell outside this moral grammar were not always framed as enemies, they were often excluded from its narrow and stratified field of obligation.

Translating Militarized Obligation into Policy

The militarized moral economy outlined above was first translated into formal refugee policy through Canada’s initial *Special Immigration Measures* (SIM) program for Afghan interpreters, implemented between 2009 and 2012, and then later reopened in July of 2021. I argue that while the SIMs represented significant moral and political concessions—acknowledging obligation toward Canada’s allies—they also exposed the institutional limits of service-based deservingness once routed through a securitized immigration apparatus. Crucially, veterans’ advocacy helped transform Afghan resettlement from a marginal policy issue into one that carried political costs for inaction, producing program expansion and repeated interventions even as underlying logics of restriction and control persisted.

When the program was first opened in 2009, it codified proximity and loyalty as eligibility criteria by privileging Afghan nationals who could demonstrate sustained employment in support of CAF operations, verified through continuity of service, documentary proof, and, in some cases, letters of endorsement from CAF personnel (IRCC, 2009a, 2009b; Levitz, 2012). Family reunification pathways were constrained, and many individuals who had supported the mission intermittently, earlier in the conflict, or in less visible roles were excluded (CBC, 2011; Gurney, 2012). Claims were assessed through a securitized lens, with applicants refused for failing to demonstrate sufficiently elevated risk or for allegedly “exacerbat[ing] the risks they claim to face by going to the press with their stories,” as stated in a September 2011 government briefing note (CBC, 2012). In essence, the program functioned as a narrowly bounded exemption within an otherwise regressive neoconservative refugee and immigration regime. That the SIM emerged when overall Afghan immigration had fallen to its lowest point during Canada’s wartime period (see Figure 1) further underscores the exclusionary selectivity of these Harper-era measures.

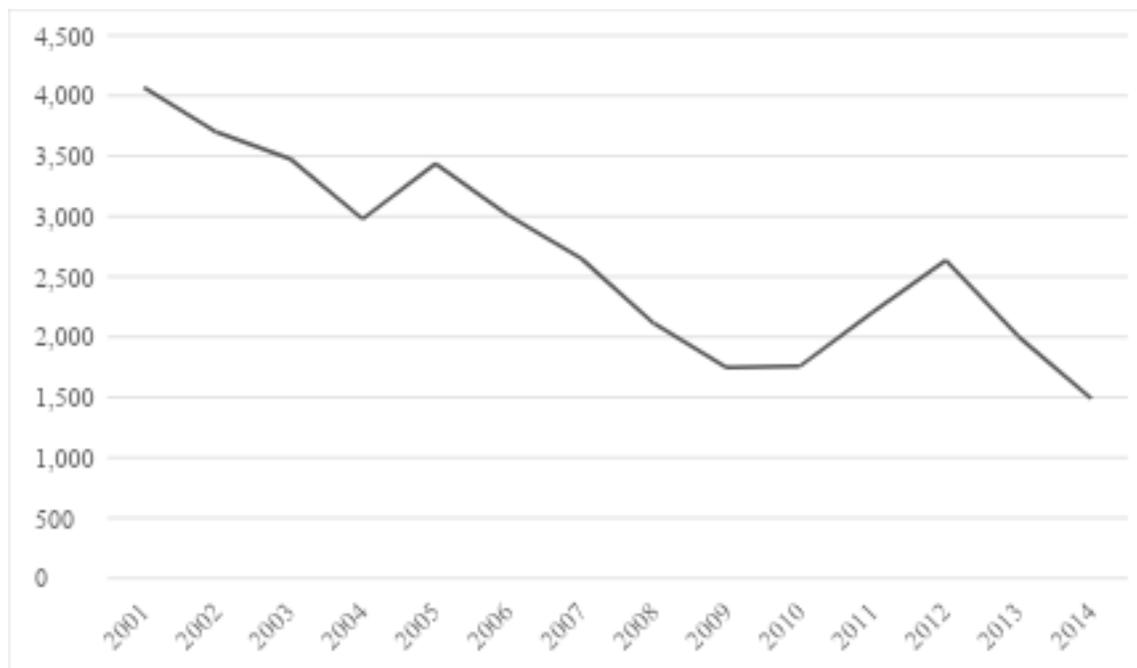


Figure 1. Immigration intake to Canada from Afghanistan, 2001-2014.⁴

Fault lines soon emerged, especially when the program first closed. While government officials maintained that “all eligible applicants... have had ampl[e] opportunity to submit an application” (CBC, 2012), advocates countered that hundreds of Afghan partners remained unprotected and at serious risk (Blackwell, 2021e; CBC, 2011; Red T, 2016, 2020). Notably, even actors without formal military affiliations adopted militarized discourses in their critiques, suggesting that such logics had permeated beyond the defence sector and into parts of wider civil society. One Toronto immigration lawyer, for example, denounced the program as “a disgrace and an embarrassment to Canada... bring[ing] our immigration and refugee program to an all-time low,” arguing that the country had “lure[d] desperate Afghans into service and sacrifice and then ‘thank[ed]’ them by refusing their claims for protection” (CBC, 2011). Yet these objections focused primarily on policy implementation, scope, and timing, rather than on the foundational distinction between deserving allies and residual others. Even the critiques from non-military actors largely reproduced the same militarized moral grammar, condemning the state for abandoning its partners without questioning why protection was so narrowly tethered to service-based affiliation.

Efforts to extend or revisit the SIM encountered consistent resistance from senior officials across both the Harper-Conservative and Trudeau Liberal governments, further highlighting the limits of this militarized moral grammar once articulated through refugee policymaking channels. While individual Members of Parliament (MP) periodically expressed support for renewed measures, such interventions were routinely contained. When one MP circulated an open letter in early 2019 calling for renewed attention to the issue, he was reportedly reprimanded by the Immigration Minister for “openly lobbying his own government” (Blackwell, 2021e). Even as the Liberal government rhetorically distanced itself from earlier neoconservative rhetoric (Winter & Carlaw, 2024), such instances illustrate that Afghan resettlement continued to be treated as a politically sensitive liability rather than as a site for inclusive or expansive humanitarian action.

These unresolved tensions and faultlines deepened under conditions of renewed crisis beginning in at least May 2021, as NATO’s withdrawal coincided with a renewed and increasingly

⁴ Adapted from IRCC data (IRCC, 2016, 2025)

coordinated Taliban offensive. A wide range of advocates repeatedly emphasized the escalating risks facing Afghan partners (AYEDI, 2021; Blackwell, 2021b; “Canada’s Afghanistan Humiliation,” 2021; *Special Committee on Afghanistan - Evidence 003*, 2022, p. 3; Corbella, 2021c; Laurie, 2021; The Canadian Heroes Foundation, 2021). Yet despite their sustained and intensifying pressure, federal government action remained intermittent and incremental.

It was not until July 23, 2021—approximately two months after the Taliban initiated their full-scale offensive—that Canada announced a new immigration program for Afghan allies (IRCC, 2021c). Formal approval for evacuations under *Operation Aegis* followed a week later, on July 30 (Department of National Defence, 2023). By this point, however, the Taliban had seized control of approximately half of Afghanistan’s 419 districts (Al Jazeera, 2021), and the conflict had already generated the internal displacement of nearly 300,000 people (UNHCR OCHA, 2021).

Compounding this delay, the newly announced SIMs were widely criticized by veterans and other advocates as “cumbersome” and “bureaucratic,” inhibited by a “red-tape filled process that is very slow,” and marked by “extreme centralized political micro-management” (Corbella, 2021a, 2021c; Fife, 2022a; Gollom, 2021). Critics increasingly argued that the federal government had “botched the process for months,” pointing to “unrealistic and confusing application requirements and complete silence from the department after paperwork ha[d] been submitted” (Corbella, 2021b; Gollom, 2021).

As conventional lobbying yielded limited success, advocacy strategies began to shift. Veterans-led CSOs and allied actors turned more deliberately toward public and media-facing interventions, organizing protests on Parliament Hill and issuing statements through major Canadian newspapers and media broadcasting outlets (Blanchfield, 2021; Corbella, 2021a; Fife, 2022a; Keung, 2021a, 2021b). This public-facing advocacy amplified pressure on Ottawa and forced the issue into national headlines.

Importantly, the influence of these interventions travelled back into formal state institutions, carrying with them new forms of evidentiary and moral authority. Parliamentary committees (AFGH, 2022a; Keung, 2022) and senate debates (*Debates of the Senate, No. 17*, 2022). A particularly illustrative example emerged during a February 2022 Senate debate, when Senator Salma Atallahjan explicitly linked government inaction to warnings raised by veterans’ groups well before the fall of Kabul. Drawing directly on reporting by *The Fifth Estate*, a CBC documentary program, Atallahjan argued that senior officials were aware of the risks facing Canada’s allies but failed to act decisively:

... an investigation by “The Fifth Estate” revealed that [IRCC] was aware of the urgency needed to take decisive action and bring our interpreters to safety in Canada... As early as February 2020... [he] was contacted by Liberal MP Marcus Powlowski... [who] had pushed to rescue Afghan interpreters weeks before Kabul fell, citing credible evidence of an imminent Taliban attack... and concerns brought to him by an Aman Lara co-founder. While strict paperwork rules and deadlines imposed by... IRCC, led to hundreds of desperate evacuees exposing themselves to Taliban collaborators by rushing to local internet cafés to complete the application, Jeff Valois, who was at the time an advisor to the Prime Minister, allegedly ordered Powlowski to stay in his lane and to let professionals in the ministries handle it... in light of the growing number of blunders committed by our government, many are losing faith in Canada’s rescue efforts. Why is our government playing political games instead of saving lives? (*Debates of the Senate, No. 17*, 2022)

Atallahjan’s remarks hint at the permeability of state institutions under conditions of effective and sustained public scrutiny. Information originating in veterans-led CSOs was mediated through investigative journalism and re-entered parliamentary spaces as politically authoritative knowledge, enabling legislators to formalize critiques of ministerial judgment, bureaucratic rigidity, and executive credibility.

The cumulative effects of pressures on the state were ultimately reflected in formal parliamentary assessment. In a June 2022 report, the Special Committee on Afghanistan delivered a pointed critique of the federal government's crisis response, emphasizing not uncertainty but the failure to act on mounting evidence of risk:

Even if the exact point at which the Taliban's ascendancy became inevitable could not have been predicted with certainty... greater prudence—and, therefore, a more proactive approach—was warranted in response to Afghanistan's clearly worsening trajectory... long before 15 August 2021, the risks associated with the Taliban should have compelled greater urgency and a more systematic policy and planning effort across the Canadian government to help people reach safety before it became much harder to do so. (AFGH, 2022a)

While government messaging consistently emphasized its commitment to Canada's allies, the practical pathways remained obstructed by procedural barriers, fragmented communication, and delayed execution.

The trajectory of Canada's SIMs for its Afghan allies thus reveals both the scope and limitations of militarized discourses of deservingness once translated into policy. Veterans' advocacy succeeded in compelling recognition, generating formal commitments, and keeping the issue politically salient across successive governments. Yet these gains repeatedly stalled at the point where moral obligation had to be converted into timely mobility, protection, and exit. As service-based deservingness was institutionalized through securitized administrative criteria, discretion, delay, and procedural rigidity became central features of implementation rather than anomalies. The result was not a wholesale rejection of obligation, but its containment within narrow, highly conditional pathways that proved fragile under conditions of escalating risk. My findings suggest that while militarized moral economies can open policy pathways, they offer limited leverage over how, when, and whether protection is operationalized. It is this gap—between authorization and movement, recognition and exit—that necessitates a shift in analytic focus from deservingness to the governance of mobility itself.

Non-Sortie

Although veterans' advocacy secured formal policy commitments, and sustained political attention to Canada's Afghan allies, these gains repeatedly failed to translate into timely evacuation or meaningful access to protection. This disconnect, I argue, reflects a specific mode of refugee governance in which the regulation of exit itself becomes a central site of control and containment. To explain why evacuation remained elusive even after approvals had been conferred, the analysis must therefore shift from questions of deservingness and program design to the governance of mobility. I conceptualize this mode of crisis governance as *non-sortie*—a condition in which departure is formally authorized yet repeatedly undermined in practice.

Non-sortie is analytically distinct from more familiar mechanisms of non-entrée, which operate by preventing prospective refugees from reaching a destination state through visa restrictions, carrier sanctions, and other forms of cooperation-based deterrence operating beyond the destination state's territory (Gammeltoft-Hansen & Hathaway, 2014; Hathaway, 1992). Non-sortie, in contrast, constitutes how destination states directly govern refugee mobility at or near the point of origin. It involves exercising influence over the timing, sequencing, and conditions of departure, beyond their territorial jurisdiction. This distinction is particularly salient in evacuation contexts, where formal authorization to travel does not ensure the practical capacity to do so, and where control over movement is exercised through securitized, extraterritorial practices rather than through standard admission procedures.

Foregrounding non-sortie allows for a more precise account of evacuation failure than explanations that emphasize miscommunication, administrative overload, or the unforeseen speed of the Taliban's advance. While such factors were undeniably present, my research indicates that constraints on movement were recurrent and structured rather than incidental. Humanitarian commitments and evacuation authorizations were repeatedly articulated, even as mobility was restricted through delay, discretionary decision-making, and selective recognition. Non-sortie thus captures how evacuation could be simultaneously authorized and inaccessible, producing a situation in which protection existed formally but remained unattainable in practice.

The principal site through which non-sortie was enacted was *Kabul International Airport* in the country's capital city. In the aftermath of Afghan state collapse, authority over evacuation was consolidated within a narrowly defined and heavily securitized airport perimeter administered by NATO forces (Chase & Fife, 2021a, 2021b; Gollom, 2021; LaFlamme, 2021a). Access to departure was governed not solely by documentation or eligibility status, but by discretionary, real-time determinations made at checkpoints and boarding points under conditions of heightened uncertainty and militarization (see Figure 2). In this context, Canadian authority over mobility was exercised beyond its national territory, as the airport effectively operated as an extraterritorial border where sovereign control over exit was enacted through selective recognition and managed access rather than through standard admission processes.

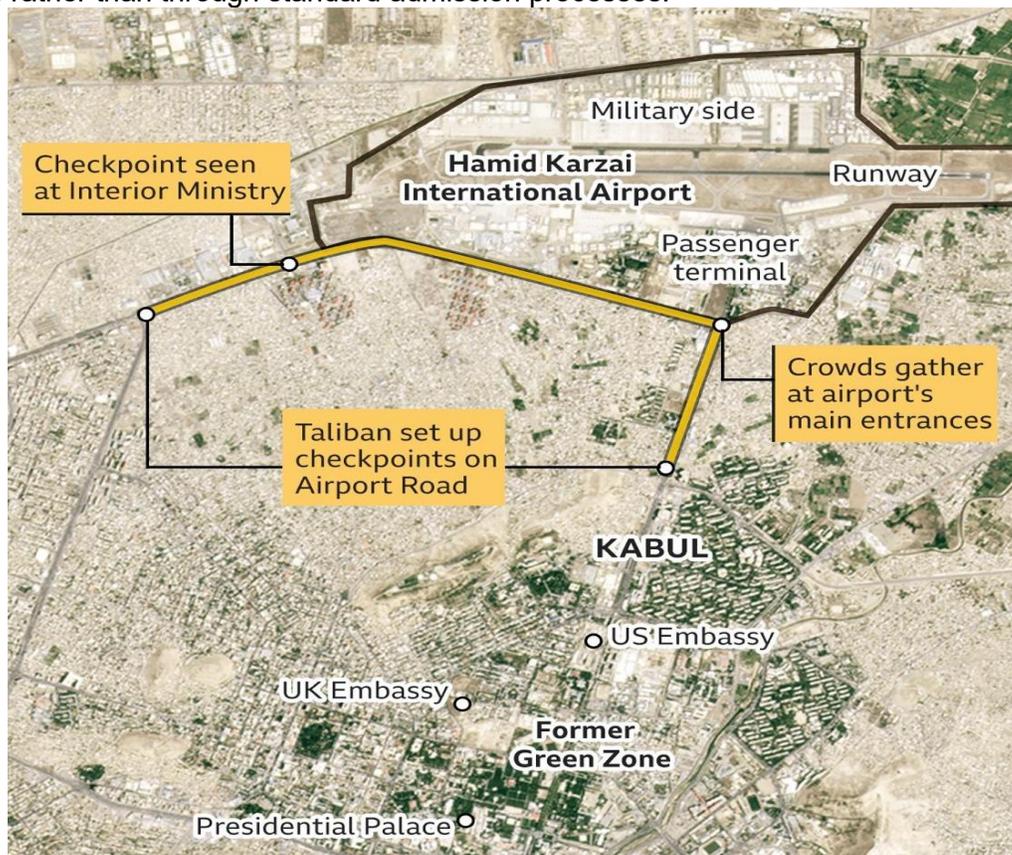


Figure 2. Satellite map of the area surrounding Kabul International Airport.⁵

Under these conditions, communications to Afghan partners were frequently fragmented and inconsistently implemented. Individuals were directed to wait at designated hotels, approach specific airport gates, or make themselves identifiable through various means, only to be denied entry despite adherence to official ministerial instructions (Chase & Fife, 2021b). Approved

⁵ Sourced from *Planet Labs*, as reproduced in *BBC Indonesia*. (BBC News, 2021)

applicants and visa holders were routinely prevented from accessing the evacuation perimeter, not due to revocation of authorization, but because access itself remained conditional and discretionary. In a widely circulated video on social media, for instance, Canadian soldiers appear to ignore a group of Afghan nationals pleading for access to airlifts while holding up their exit documents. One man is heard saying:

They are completely ignoring our messages, our yelling and shouting... We have been watching for the last three hours. We have approved visas, but nobody is going to take care of us... We are waiting for the Canadian guys. We are showing them our documents, and we are asking them to at least support us to get out. (Chase & Fife, 2021a)

Officials acknowledged the “heart-wrenching” scenes but emphasized force-protection requirements and the threat posed by potential terrorist attacks to justify intensified securitization around the airport perimeter and the constriction of movement corridors leading to it (Chase & Fife, 2021a)—articulating the common rationale that often casts humanitarianism as an impediment to security interests (de Lint & Giannacopoulos, 2013). As such, non-sortie operated through uncertainty and procedural opacity as much as through formal exclusion.

While the security risks cited by officials were substantive and broadly acknowledged (Blackwell, 2021b, 2021c; Chase & Fife, 2021a; Fife & Chase, 2021), their consequences were unevenly distributed. Canada prioritized the safety of its citizens, permanent residents, military personnel, and diplomatic staff, effectively re-ordering access to evacuation and leaving Afghan nationals—many already in possession of Canadian travel authorization and thus prospective permanent residency—exposed to escalating dangers outside the airport perimeter.

The consequences of non-sortie were rendered starkly visible on August 26, 2021, when a suicide bombing at Abbey Gate killed 183 people, including 170 Afghan civilians and 13 U.S. military personnel, and injured hundreds more (Bennett et al., 2021; Cooper et al., 2021; Trudeau, 2021). No Canadian soldiers or citizens were harmed, and while Canadian ministers indicated that Afghan nationals destined for Canada were also unharmed, the VTN reported that some of the families it was assisting were caught in the blast and required hospitalization (LaFlamme, 2021a; Nardi, 2021).

Despite intelligence shared among NATO member states warning of an imminent attack on crowds near the airport, Canadian officials issued no clear public guidance regarding the security threat until the night before the bombing (Kotecha, 2021; Laurie, 2021). Until that point IRCC continued to direct approved applicants to travel near the Baron Hotel and access the airfield via the sewage canal bordering Abbey Gate (see Figures 3 and 4)—an area that soon after ceased to be guarded by Canadian forces and was taken over by Taliban fighters (Newman, 2021). Although IRCC circulated a mass email advising visa holders to avoid the airport on the eve of the attack, many individuals were already waiting outside the perimeter, some for up to 48 hours, under conditions that made reliable email access and the ability to act on last-minute guidance highly uncertain (LaFlamme, 2021a; Nardi, 2021; Newman, 2021). In the absence of clear or actionable state communication, members of the VTN attempted to relay warnings directly to refugees, advising them to return to safehouses where possible (Laurie, 2021).



Figure 3. Civilians waiting outside Abbey Gate holding travel documents, prior to bombing.⁶



Figure 4. Wide view image of Abbey Gate, prior to bombing.⁷

Similar dynamics were evident among allied governments. In the hours preceding the attack, UK officials also directed civilians toward Abbey Gate despite intelligence assessments identifying the area as a high-risk target. As the BBC reported, internal embassy communications instructed evacuees to “use the Abbey Gate [near] to the Baron Hotel,” even as British and U.S. authorities deemed an attack imminent (Kotecha, 2021). One former interpreter later recalled receiving such an instruction but ultimately deciding not to comply, a decision he credited with saving his life:

⁶ Abbey Gate served as a key site during the evacuations. Its narrow corridors, adjacent drainage canal, and lack of crowd control infrastructure made it a bottleneck for thousands of civilians. Image sourced from *New Zealand Defence Force* via *Getty Images*, as reproduced in *Task & Purpose*. (Schogol, 2022)

⁷ Sourced from *U.S. Central Command/AP*, as reproduced in *CNN*. See, (Walsh & Krever, 2024)

If I had followed their advice, I would be no more. I said I won't because I don't feel safe as the situation was getting worse... It would be madness to go there and that saved my life. It was our own judgement that saved our lives. (Kotecha, 2021)

Following the conclusion of evacuations at the end of August, non-sortie gave way to more established practices of mobility control, including non-entrée and border externalization. Individuals who remained were instructed to “shelter in place” until conditions improved, or to reach third countries independently in order to pursue onward resettlement (Chase & Fife, 2021c). Ottawa stated it would “be ready... to receive” approved applicants in third countries, but provided limited supports and services to reach those borders (Nardi, 2021). Statements from the Foreign Affairs Minister exemplified the ambivalence embedded in such communications, asserting that those in Afghanistan “are best placed to make the decision about what their lowest-risk safe route is” (Nardi, 2021).

In this way, non-sortie and non-entrée operated as complementary modes of governance, effectively displacing risk and responsibility onto the displaced themselves by obstructing departures in Kabul during active evacuations, then delegated mobility to arduous, self-navigated corridors policed by either the Taliban or neighbouring states that had long expressed interests in deterring Afghan refugee flows and intensified securitization measures amid discussion of withdrawal up to two years prior to the collapse of the Afghan state (Dambach, 2019; Jain, 2019). Public commitments to pursue “other pathways” (Nardi, 2021) coexisted with practical inaccessibility—passport requirements, visa hurdles, and perilous transits—producing a temporal politics in which rescue became contingent, delayed, and re-routed. As existing scholarship has documented, border externalization and non-entrée practices have long been effective in prolonging temporalities of uncertainty, isolation, and precarity, as refugees and asylum-seekers undertake treacherous journeys in their attempts to access protection (Gammeltoft-Hansen & Hathaway, 2014; Hyndman, 2000; Menjivar, 2006; Sahin-Mencutek et al., 2022). Even for those who eventually reached third countries, departure did not resolve uncertainty. Many remained stranded for months or years awaiting resettlement decisions in contexts marked by precarious legal status, restricted access to work, and persistent risk of deportations (Dickson, 2023; Stewart, 2022).

For veterans and allied advocates, repeated encounters with authorization unaccompanied by feasible pathways to movement diminished confidence in formal policy processes and highlighted the limits of advocacy confined to lobbying and procedural engagement. It was under these conditions that advocacy increasingly took on an operational dimension, as veteran-led organizations and allied civil society actors assumed direct responsibility for facilitating movement and protection where state action was delayed, constrained, or absent.

Civil Society Keyword and State Containment

As frustrations mounted with state-led responses, many veterans' groups moved beyond advocacy and employed more direct forms of action. I conceptualize these interventions as *civil society keyword*: a field of coordinated interventions in which non-state organizations and networks mobilized their own resources and capacities to address urgent protection, evacuation, and resettlement needs on the ground. Unlike more conventional humanitarian interventions, such as advocacy or intermediary services that translate formal policy into practice (Fee, 2025; Yousuf, 2024), civil society keyword involves intervening directly in the organization of mobility itself—facilitating movement, providing safe evacuations, and managing risk in real time. It aims to address urgent protection needs when state mechanisms prove inaccessible or insufficient.

During Afghanistan's 2021 crisis, civil society keywork assumed multiple operational forms (see Figures 5 and 6). Groups like VTN and Aman Lara led rescue operations that provided emergency safehouses in Afghanistan, coordinated overland convoys to neighbouring states, and disseminated real-time intelligence regarding security conditions, threat assessments, and evacuation opportunities (Aman Lara, n.d.-b; VTN, 2022a). These activities unfolded in a hybrid relationship with the state. In some instances, they ran in parallel with government-led operations, supplying information, case coordination, and operational support that supplemented official efforts. In other instances, particularly when the state was either unable or unwilling to provide protections, these CSOs deployed independent rescue efforts outside formal state-led channels.

Leveraging their unique political and institutional ties, these groups triaged cases, prioritizing and vetting individuals and families on the basis of risk, documentation status, and the feasibility of movement, while coordinating actions across multiple jurisdictions and actors. As one VTN member explained:

... Using our network of veterans, and our cross nation connections, our friends in the US and the British Forces, people who were on the ground were able to feed real time intelligence back to the government and support this operation and try and get people out safely. (Solomon, 2021a)

In effect, they began exercising discretions and performing functions typically associated with state authority, including mobility coordination, logistical planning, and the facilitating pathways to safety under crisis conditions.



Figure 5. Families at a safehouse for Afghan nationals awaiting evacuation to Canada⁸

⁸ Image source: *Global News*. (Bell & Semple, 2021)



Figure 6. A family on a VTN donor-funded road convoy to Pakistan⁹

Despite the scope and centrality of this work, however, it unfolded within a markedly uneven playing field where CSOs absorbed substantial financial, logistical, and human costs and the state nevertheless retained exclusive authority over visas, border access, and final admissions. This asymmetry was particularly evident in the political economy of humanitarian aid, evacuation, and protection work where sustaining in-country operations required substantial and ongoing financial expenditures that were borne disproportionately by CSOs. The VTN and its partners, for example, reported that maintaining the network of Kabul safehouses alone cost approximately \$20,000 per day, covering rent, food, generators, security measures, and basic medical supplies for roughly 2,000 individuals in hiding (VTN, 2022a). These safehouses were essential for enabling at-risk Afghan nationals to remain concealed, housed, and medically supported while awaiting access to government-funded evacuation flights during August 2021, or to overland convoys into neighbouring states in the months and years that followed (Blackwell, 2021d; Dickson, 2022a; LaFlamme, 2021b; Solomon, 2021b). Yet despite the importance of these safehouses to enabling eventual evacuations, the federal government repeatedly declined to fund them directly, citing security and legal constraints (Dickson, 2022a), even as officials acknowledged that evacuees could not safely access exit routes without interim shelter and protection (Chase & Fife, 2021c). In parallel, CSOs also absorbed the costs and risks associated with overland evacuations once air routes closed. Veteran-linked organizations and their humanitarian partners reported that transporting evacuees to third countries such as Pakistan cost between \$3,000 and \$5,000 per person, again financed through charitable fundraising rather than public funds (JHR, 2021a, 2021b; Scrivener, 2021).

These expenditures were incurred notwithstanding the fact that ultimate authority over visas, entry, and onward movement remained firmly under state control, often subject to opaque delays and shifting requirements. Hence, the capacity of CSOs to convert protection efforts into durable protection outcomes remained dependent on state recognition, cooperation, and approval. As one VTN member observed, even expansive forms of non-state intervention remained tethered to state authority:

It does require funding. We do have essential life support needs in country, and that's why we are pushing for donations... we've got to make sure that we keep operational security, it has to be there, but we do need that open door with government to make sure we feed our lists in and get them out. (Solomon, 2021a)

⁹ Image source: *Global News*. (Bell & Semple, 2021)

While CSOs facilitated movement and mitigated risk, they could not confer legal status or guarantee entry. This asymmetry illustrates that even as CSOs temporarily expanded access to protection, they remained structurally subordinate to sovereign control over mobility and admission.

This pattern aligns with broader scholarship on the uneven incorporation of non-state actors in crisis governance. As Sahin-Mencutek et al. (2022) argue, relations between states and CSOs tend to remain comparatively cooperative in domains such as reception and integration, but become markedly more contested when non-state actors intervene in fields tied to border control, protection, and mobility—particularly when they move beyond subsidiary roles or begin to monitor, substitute for, or expose state practices (p. 9). In such moments, states may temporarily tolerate or tacitly rely on non-state action during times of acute crisis, only to then reassert authority by narrowing the legal and regulatory space in which those actors can operate (p. 9).

The Afghan evacuation illustrates a particularly messy instantiation of this dynamic. Veteran-led organizations were neither fully incorporated into a formal humanitarian architecture nor outright prohibited from acting. Instead, they operated within a fragmented and hybrid governance space in which their operational indispensability coexisted with persistent legal and political vulnerability. It was within this context—where civil society keyword encroached upon domains conventionally reserved for sovereign authority—that the state moved to reassert control, most decisively through the strict interpretation of Canada’s antiterrorism law.

Because the Taliban was designated as a terrorist organization under Canadian law, government officials maintained that even indirect and incidental expenditures associated with sheltering or evacuating Afghan civilians—including taxes on fuel, food, rent, or transportation—could constitute prohibited support for terrorism (AFGH, 2022b). This interpretation was invoked to justify the refusal of public funding for safehouses, land convoys, and related evacuation expenditures and, at the same time, rendered the use of privately raised funds a potential source of criminal liability, effectively foreclosing both state-supported and autonomous non-state intervention during a period of acute humanitarian need.

This interpretation was contested by legal practitioners and humanitarian organizations, who challenged both its doctrinal coherence and its practical consequences. For instance, the *Canadian Bar Association* (CBA) argued that unavoidable, life-preserving expenditures could not reasonably satisfy the *mens rea* requirement associated with terrorist financing offences (CBA, 2023). They further cautioned that such a strict legal position risked rendering refugees and asylum-seekers themselves as legally implicated for basic living expenses in their everyday lives (CBA, 2023; Dickson & Fife, 2022). The *Canadian Immigration Lawyers Association* (CILA) challenged the state’s categorical labelling of the Taliban as a non-governmental actor for the purposes of the *Criminal Code*, noting that under customary international law, effective control—not diplomatic recognition—determines whether an entity constitutes a governing authority (Dickson & Fife, 2022). On this basis, CILA maintained that taxes, fees, and administrative charges indirectly paid to the *de facto* authorities in Afghanistan should not automatically trigger aspects of anti-terrorism provisions designed for non-state entities, particularly when such payments were unavoidable for humanitarian aid and protection.

However, in the absence of timely legal clarification or exemption, CSOs were forced to adapt their evacuation and protection practices in ways that often heightened risk for those they sought to assist. Some groups avoided formal accommodation arrangements to avoid taxes on hotel rooms, while others purchased and carried canisters of fuel from neighbouring states in their vehicles before entering Afghanistan (Dickson, 2022b). These adaptations increased vulnerability to surveillance, checkpoints, and interdiction. Legal ambiguity thus translated into heightened risk on the ground, narrowing the range of actions that CSOs could safely undertake.

Over time, the cumulative financial, logistical, and emotional costs of civil society keywork became increasingly unsustainable (Fife, 2022a, 2022b; Semple, 2022). Veteran-led CSOs reported expenditures amounting to tens of thousands of dollars per day to maintain safehouses and support evacuation efforts, largely financed through private donations. By late 2021, these operational burdens reshaped relationships among veteran-led CSOs, contributing to fragmentation within what had initially functioned as a relatively coordinated rescue ecology. For instance, while VTN increasingly concentrated its constrained resources on assisting refugees with direct ties to Canada's military, Aman Lara recalibrated its operations through partnerships with organizations seeking to support a broader population of approved and at-risk Afghan nationals (Aman Lara, 2022; Dickson, 2022a). By April 2022, VTN announced the end of its rescue operations (VTN, 2022e)—nearly one year prior to the amendments to the *Criminal Code* (Bill C-41, 2023). During this time, several Afghan allies had either been captured by Taliban forces, remained in hiding within Afghanistan, or were stranded in precarious conditions in third countries awaiting resettlement decisions (Blackwell, 2022; The Canadian Press, 2023).

When legislative changes were eventually enacted in March 2023, they formalized a permissions-based model of humanitarian action, requiring organizations to seek prior authorization for activities that might otherwise risk criminal liability (Bill C-41, 2023). Government communications describe the amendments as follows:

In deciding whether to grant an authorization, the Minister of Public Safety would consider referrals by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship...

Authorizations would be subject to information-sharing between departments and agencies for the purpose of security review... and applicants would be assessed on the need for the proposed activity, the capacity of the organization to manage and report on funds, and whether the benefits of permitting the activity outweigh the risk of terrorist financing...

Applicants granted authorizations would be subject to stipulated reporting and compliance conditions, and the Minister of Public Safety would retain the authority to amend, suspend, or revoke authorizations as deemed necessary to mitigate security risks. (Public Safety Canada, 2023)

On the surface, the amendment appeared to offer legal clarity and a pathway for renewed humanitarian work in Afghanistan. In practice, however, it institutionalized a permissions-based model that subsumed autonomous humanitarian action within a framework that expanded ministerial discretion through securitization logics. Rather than enabling independent civil society intervention, the amendments consolidated state authority over who may act, under what conditions, and in service of which populations. Indeed, even within complex, multi-level governance systems, states retain decisive leverage over protection outcomes and admissions (Sahin-Mencutek et al., 2022, p. 12)—a dynamic that this case illustrates with particular clarity. Civil society keywork, while operationally indispensable during a moment of acute crisis, was thus subject to legal containment at the national level and then reincorporated under new provisions that continued to emphasize state ministerial discretions.

Conclusion

This paper has examined veterans-led civil society organizations as consequential actors in Canada's response to Afghan displacement, not by treating them as moral outliers or humanitarian substitutes, but by situating their interventions within the political logics that structure contemporary refugee governance. The Afghan case shows that veterans' influence did not arise in spite of state power, but through a particular proximity to it—one shaped by militarized authority, institutional familiarity, and the moral economies produced by war. This proximity mattered both symbolically and practically, affording veterans credibility within Canadian political culture, access to informal institutional channels, and an operational fluency that enabled forms of coordination largely unavailable to conventional humanitarian organizations.

Three arguments emerge from this analysis. First, veterans' advocacy drew its force from a militarized grammar of obligation that framed Afghan interpreters and other locally engaged staff as deserving of protection on the basis of service, loyalty, and sacrifice. This framing generated urgency and political traction, but it also narrowed the field of humanitarian concern. Protection was extended selectively, not expansively, and remained tethered to alignment with Canadian military objectives rather than vulnerability alone.

Second, the events of 2021 demonstrate that humanitarian authorization does not necessarily entail humanitarian mobility. Through the concept of *non-sortie*, I have shown how evacuation was repeatedly affirmed in principle while exit was governed through delay, discretion, and extraterritorial control. In this mode of crisis governance, sovereignty was exercised by the destination country through the management of movement from directly within the country of origin itself. The result was a condition in which protection existed formally but remained inaccessible for many of those it purported to include.

Third, when veterans-led organizations moved beyond advocacy and assumed direct operational roles—organizing safehouses, coordinating evacuations, and facilitating movement—the state did not consolidate these practices into durable policy. Instead, it reasserted authority through legal and procedural containment, most notably via strict interpretations of antiterrorism law. *Civil society keyword* temporarily expanded access to protection, but it did so under conditions of legal uncertainty, financial precarity, and ultimate subordination to state discretion.

These findings challenge the assumption that humanitarian crises naturally produce humanitarian openness in Canada. The Afghan case suggests that crisis more often enables selective flexibility: moments in which advocates can negotiate limited openings that reorganize, rather than unsettle, state restrictions on refugee and immigration controls. Veterans' advocacy proved effective precisely because it resonated with dominant securitized and militarized logics—yet those same logics circumscribed what could be achieved and for whom.

This paper thus contributes to broader debates on refugee governance by showing how civil society action can generate meaningful, even life-saving interventions without necessarily displacing the deeper exclusionary structures that govern mobility, membership, and belonging. Veterans-led CSOs operated neither outside the state nor fully within it. They occupied a contingent space in which a unique moral authority and crisis urgency briefly widened the scope of action, only to be folded back into legal and administrative regimes designed to preserve sovereign discretion. Civil society keyword thus operated less as a rupture of sovereign authority than as a temporary disruption of it.

The significance of this case lies not only in what it reveals about Canadian refugee governance, but in what it suggests about the country's responses to future displacement crises and the scope it affords to CSOs within them. As long as protection remains mediated through exceptional deservingness, discretionary authorization, and legal containment, even the most effective civil society interventions are likely to remain provisional—capable of enabling selective expansions, but not of sustained transformation consistent with the ethos of international human rights, let alone more expansive visions of inclusion that move beyond conventional liberal frameworks.

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