

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 13, 2021

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken  
Secretary of State  
2201 C Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken,

We write today with extreme concern regarding the ongoing civilian situation in Afghanistan as U.S. forces withdraw. As the Taliban rapidly seizes control of cities across the country, we strongly urge the Department of State to also swiftly expand its overly narrow interpretation of eligibility for the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program to include not only those staff members who have worked under U.S. government contracts, but also those employed under and associated with grants or cooperative agreements.

Throughout the United States' engagement in Afghanistan over the last two decades, five U.S. democracy organizations, including the International Republican Institute (IRI), National Democratic Institute (NDI), the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE), Internews, and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) have actively engaged with Afghan partners to support the development of women's political leadership, civil society and inclusive governance. Although employees of for-profit contractors working to expand democratic principles are eligible for SIVs, the Department of State has determined that those who worked on U.S. Government-funded democracy support projects under grants or cooperative agreements to non-profit organizations are not. As a result, approximately 900 Afghan current and former staff members of these democracy organizations who are at identical risk are being treated less favorably and afforded less protection than their colleagues employed through for-profit contractors. Afghan employees of many other U.S.-funded NGOs are in similar circumstances, as are high profile judges, scholars, journalists and others associated with U.S. media organizations, human rights defenders, and others, many of them women, whose identities are known for having openly participated in such U.S.-funded NGO programs. This is unfair and wrong.

We applaud the recent and broadly bipartisan legislation to amend the *Afghan Allies Protection Act* to expand access to the Afghan SIV program and welcome the administration's subsequent announcement of a Priority 2 "P-2" designation in the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program to permit resettlement in the United States to at-risk Afghans who do not qualify for SIVs. However, we remain very concerned that the Department of State's overly narrow interpretation of SIV eligibility requirements imposes significant additional burdens and dramatically increases the risk for Afghans involved in U.S. efforts through a grant or cooperative agreement. Additionally, at a time when intra-Afghanistan travel is dangerous and unpredictable – yet a prerequisite for P-2 eligibility – we believe this pathway is increasingly untenable as an alternative option. These brave Afghan nationals, a high percentage of them women, who risked their lives through their

association with U.S. democracy and civil society programs should have the same pathway to safety as those currently deemed eligible for the SIV program.

Again, we strongly urge the Department of State to expand its interpretation of eligibility for the Afghan SIV program to include those who participated in grants or cooperative agreements. Regardless of how the SIV statute was applied in the past, we ask that the Biden administration recognize the compelling national interest in interpreting the law to apply to Afghans who also risked their lives by participating in or implementing U.S.-funded programs. Thank you for your prompt consideration of this request.

Sincerely,



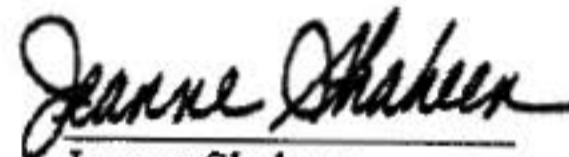
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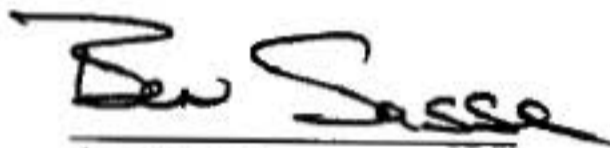
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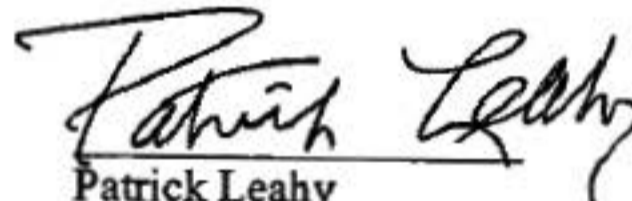
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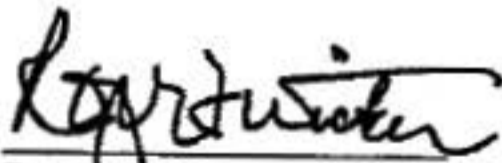
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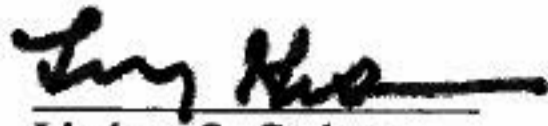
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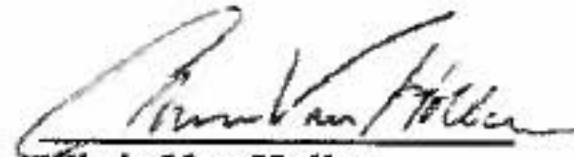
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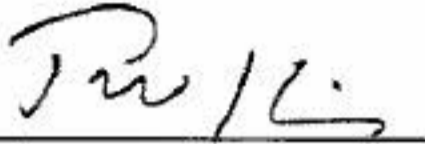
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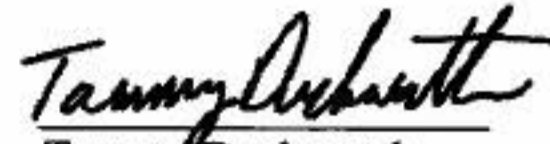
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Chris Van Hollen  
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