



## Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service

*Submitted via email*

May 12, 2021

Hon. Joseph R. Biden, Jr.  
President of the United States  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20500

### **Re: Recommendations to Provide Humanitarian Protections for Certain Afghan Civilians**

Dear President Biden:

On behalf of the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS), we write to respectfully and urgently request that you pursue the emergency evacuation of Afghan civilians who worked with U.S. government in view of the recent announcement that the United States and its NATO allies will fully withdraw troops from Afghanistan by September 2021. Specifically, we ask that you: urgently evacuate Afghan wartime allies; execute their humanitarian evacuation well before the withdraw date given the emboldened and assuredly precipitous targeting of American-affiliated Afghans; appoint a Special Envoy to spearhead the effort; disentangle any evacuation plans from the interagency review process requested in Section 3 of Executive Order 14013, issued by the President on February 4, 2021;<sup>1</sup> and ensure the delivery of appropriate support services.

LIRS is a faith-based organization with over 80 years of experience providing welcome to refugees and asylum seekers fleeing inescapable violence from conflict and persecution in their home countries. We began our work of welcome back in 1939, when LIRS was founded during the Second World War to assist the resettlement of Lutherans persecuted by the Nazi regime. Our mission quickly expanded, and we have since responded to every major immigration crisis, from the Cuban Refugee Airlift and the Fall of Saigon to ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, and the Lost Boys and Girls of Sudan. We have supported and

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<sup>1</sup> EXEC. ORDER NO. 14013, 86 FED. REG. 8839 (Feb. 9, 2021), *available at*:  
[www.federalregister.gov/documents/2021/02/09/2021-02804/rebuilding-and-enhancing-programs-to-resettle-refugees-and-planning-for-the-impact-of-climate-change](http://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2021/02/09/2021-02804/rebuilding-and-enhancing-programs-to-resettle-refugees-and-planning-for-the-impact-of-climate-change)

empowered more than 500,000 immigrants since our founding, including helping 11,244 Iraqis and Afghans resettle in the United States through the Special Immigrant Visa program.

Since 2002, the U.S. government has employed Afghan allies to serve alongside U.S. troops, diplomats, and other government employees as translators, interpreters, cultural advisors, or support staff. As a result of their faithful service to our country, these allies and their families have become the targets of anti-American persecution and violence. In recognition of the peril they face, Congress enacted the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program in 2009 and mandated that visa applications be processed within nine months.<sup>2</sup> This visa program allows eligible Afghans to safely resettle to the United States. As a leading organization that has provided welcome and support to Afghan allies and their families upon arrival to the United States since 2009, we believe all who have served and wish to seek safety here should be welcomed into the United States as a tribute to their faithful service.

Now, the U.S. must fulfill its commitments to our Afghan allies and work urgently to ensure their and their families' safety. Veterans' groups, national security experts, and legislators agree that we must honor this commitment.<sup>3</sup> Our allies put their lives on the line to support our troops because they believed in the U.S. mission. We must show Afghans and the rest of the world that the U.S. will follow through on our word. Thus, we recommend the following immediate actions:

- **Evacuate Afghan wartime allies who have already applied for the Special Immigrant Visa program and their families to American territory** – This would provide protection for an estimated 17,000 Afghan allies and their estimated 53,000 dependent family members<sup>4</sup> and would be in keeping with previous evacuations for similar wartime-related populations.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> ANDORRA BRUNO, CONGR. RESEARCH SERV., R43725, IRAQI AND AFGHAN SPECIAL IMMIGRANT VISA PROGRAMS (APRIL 2, 2020), available at <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R43725>.

<sup>3</sup> LETTER BY ADVOCATES SUBMITTED BY HUMAN RIGHTS FIRST TO JOSEPH R. BIDEN JR., PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES (May 10, 2021), available at: [www.humanrightsfirst.org/sites/default/files/Afghan%20SIV%20Organizational%20Sign%20On%20-%20FINAL.pdf](http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/sites/default/files/Afghan%20SIV%20Organizational%20Sign%20On%20-%20FINAL.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> ANNE GEARAN, *THOUSANDS OF AFGHANS AND IRAQIS ARE UNDER THREAT OF FOR HELPING AMERICANS. NOW THEY HOPE BIDEN WILL HELP THEM RESETTLE IN THE UNITED STATES.*, THE WASHINGTON POST (Dec. 30, 2020), available at: [www.washingtonpost.com/politics/biden-refugees-visas/2020/12/30/572c00fc-3e4f-11eb-9453-fc36ba051781\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/biden-refugees-visas/2020/12/30/572c00fc-3e4f-11eb-9453-fc36ba051781_story.html).

<sup>5</sup> KEN OLSEN, *U.S. VETERANS SCRAMBLE TO HELP INTERPRETERS LEFT BEHIND*, THE AMERICAN LEGION (April 29, 2021), available at: [www.legion.org/security/252361/us-veterans-scramble-help-interpreters-left-behind](http://www.legion.org/security/252361/us-veterans-scramble-help-interpreters-left-behind).

- **Appoint a respected, high-level figure with interagency experience to lead the urgent evacuation.**
- **Execute the evacuation well before U.S. and NATO Allies' planned withdrawal in September 2021.** Growing retributive violence by the Taliban and expansion of the territories that the group controls threaten the lives of Afghans who have served alongside us as well as their families. Rising reports of targeted executions of Afghan SIVs indicate that the U.S. does not have until September to save the lives of our Afghan partners.<sup>6</sup>
- **Treat all evacuees with dignity and respect for their service by providing housing and other basic support, ensuring their freedom of movement, and access to legal and social services.**
- **Disentangle urgent evacuation efforts from the necessary but separate pursuit to streamline, expedite, and prioritize SIV application processing for evacuees.** While there is a timely need to clean up the Afghan SIV program, which has been plagued with inefficiencies and backlogs, these efforts must not prevent the emergency effort to get Afghan SIVs and their families to safety immediately. These processing issues can and must be resolved alongside dual-tracked evacuation efforts.
- **Facilitate the relocation of approved applicants to the United States and ensure they are provided with information, support, and resources.** This should include, but is not limited to, referrals to refugee resettlement agencies and access to the Reception and Placement program, which serves as a bridge to wrap-around services including English language classes, employment trainings and placement, and ongoing case management support.
- **Seek necessary funding to support these recommendations via FY22 appropriations.** Partner organizations have researched the projected costs<sup>7</sup> and have estimated \$10,000 per individual or a total cost of roughly \$700 million – an infinitesimal fraction of the \$978 billion spent on the U.S. war in Afghanistan to date.<sup>8</sup> America is duty bound and morally called to safeguard the lives of

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<sup>6</sup> GEORGE PACKER, *A DEBT OF HONOR: THE U.S. MUST FULFILL ITS RESPONSIBILITIES TO THE AFGHANS WHO PUT THEIR TRUST AND LIVES IN AMERICAN HANDS.*, THE ATLANTIC (March 26, 2021), available at: [www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/03/we-cant-abandon-afghans-who-helped-us/618416/](http://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/03/we-cant-abandon-afghans-who-helped-us/618416/).

<sup>7</sup> KIM STAFF MATT ZELLER AND KIM STAFFIERI, *SPECIAL IMMIGRANT VISA: CALL FOR COOPERATIVE ACTION*, THE TRUMAN CENTER (April 2021), available at: <http://trumancenter.org/ideas/special-immigrant-visa-a-call-for-cooperative-action/>.

<sup>8</sup> NETA CRAWFORD, *UNITED STATES BUDGETARY COSTS AND OBLIGATIONS OF POST 9/11 WARS THROUGH FY2020*, BROWN UNIVERSITY (NOV. 13, 2019), available at: <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2019/US%20Budgetary%20Costs%20of%20Wars%20November%202019.pdf>.

Afghan wartime allies whose lives and whose families' lives are in imminent danger because of their association with and support of the U.S. and NATO mission there.

While this list is not exhaustive, we offer these initial recommendations as a beginning for discussion on how resettlement agencies may offer valuable insights to the administration in these critical moments before withdrawal of troops.

Since LIRS's beginnings, we have worked closely and in partnership with governmental agencies that administer our immigration system and refugee resettlement program. We continue in our commitment and partnership with you and the agencies that must come together to provide safety to those who put their lives as risk for our American mission and troops.

To coordinate a meeting or for any questions, please contact Jill Marie Bussey, LIRS's Director for Public Policy, at [JBussey@lirs.org](mailto:JBussey@lirs.org).

Sincerely,



Krish O'Mara Vignarajah  
President & CEO

cc: The Honorable Lloyd Austin, U.S. Secretary of Defense  
The Honorable Xavier Becerra, U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services  
The Honorable Antony J. Blinken, U.S. Secretary of State  
The Honorable Alejandro Mayorkas, U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security