

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

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August 19, 2021

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

The Honorable Lloyd J. Austin III
Secretary of Defense
Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301

Dear Secretary Blinken and Secretary Austin:

The Taliban's swift return to power in Afghanistan has left thousands of American citizens in grave and imminent danger. Afghan nationals who previously worked for the U.S. government, political and civic leaders, and their family members are also under threat, and many women and girls face an especially acute risk of political violence and retribution at the hands of the Taliban.

We write today to urge you to ensure that the United States evacuates all of our citizens and as many of our Afghan allies as possible from Afghanistan. The safety of U.S. citizens and government personnel is paramount, and we also have a moral imperative to rescue our Afghan partners who served alongside and supported U.S. forces over the last two decades.

We are grateful to the thousands of American servicemembers who have deployed to Hamid Karzai International Airport to secure the airfield and facilitate the evacuation of U.S. citizens and vulnerable populations from Afghanistan. We also appreciate President Biden's recent announcement that U.S. military personnel will remain at the airport beyond August 31, if necessary, to evacuate all U.S. citizens who wish to leave.¹

However, we remain concerned that facts on the ground make achieving the complete evacuation of U.S. citizens, as well as our Afghan allies and partners, extraordinarily difficult. In a security alert issued yesterday, the State Department warned that "[t]he United States government cannot ensure safe passage to the Hamid Karzai International Airport" due to patrols and checkpoints the Taliban have established throughout Kabul.² "Even going to the airport in

¹ *Biden Says U.S. Forces Will Stay in Kabul to Get All Americans Out*, New York Times (Aug. 18, 2021) (online at www.nytimes.com/2021/08/18/world/biden-abc-news-afghanistan.html).

² U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan, *Security Alert: U.S. Embassy Kabul* (Aug. 18, 2021) (online at <https://af.usembassy.gov/security-alert-u-s-embassy-kabul-august-18-2021/>); *The Dangerous Road to the Kabul Airport*, New York Times (Aug. 18, 2021) (online at www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/08/18/world/asia/kabul-airport-afghanistan-maps.html).

Kabul ... has become a life-or-death decision,” according to one report.³ When asked yesterday whether the Department of Defense (DOD) has the ability to facilitate safe passage to the airport, Secretary Austin replied, “We don’t have the capability to go out and collect large numbers of people.”⁴

It is vitally important that no American citizen be left behind in Afghanistan. To that end, we urge you to expedite your departments’ efforts to account for all American citizens who may remain in Afghanistan. In addition, the Biden Administration should make clear to the Taliban—in no uncertain terms—that they will face severe repercussions if they take any action that jeopardizes the security of U.S. military and civilian personnel at Hamid Karzai International Airport, limits or restricts safe passage to the airfield, or otherwise interferes with the evacuation of U.S. citizens and Afghan nationals.

We cannot abandon our Afghan allies and partners to the brutal violence of the Taliban. According to one account, more than 300 Afghan interpreters and their family members have been killed since the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom because of their association with the United States.⁵

We are thankful that DOD is preparing to house up to 22,000 Special Immigrant Visa applicants, their families, and other at-risk individuals on military bases in the United States.⁶ Yet President Biden recently estimated that there are approximately 50,000 to 65,000 Afghan nationals awaiting evacuation.⁷ Given the urgency of the threat, we must quickly overcome any logistical and bureaucratic hurdles that may be impeding our ability to rapidly assist our Afghan partners. Evacuating our allies is not only the right thing to do; it is a national security and foreign policy imperative. If we do not uphold our solemn promise to those who served, fought, and died alongside U.S. forces, our ability to enlist local support around the world in the future will be significantly diminished.

³ *Desperate Afghan Women Wait for U.S. Protection, as Promised*, New York Times (Aug. 18, 2021) (online at www.nytimes.com/2021/08/18/us/politics/afghanistan-women-protection.html).

⁴ Department of Defense, *Secretary of Defense Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Milley Press Briefing* (Aug. 18, 2021) (online at www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2738086/secretary-of-defense-austin-and-chairman-of-the-joint-chiefs-of-staff-gen-mille/source/GovDelivery/).

⁵ *An Afghan Interpreter Who Helped the U.S. Military Is Now a Target for the Taliban*, National Public Radio (Aug. 16, 2021) (online at www.npr.org/2021/08/16/1028016074/an-afghan-interpreter-for-the-u-s-army-is-trying-to-get-out-of-afghanistan).

⁶ Department of Defense, *Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby Holds an Off-Camera Press Briefing* (Aug. 18, 2021) (online at www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2737434/pentagon-press-secretary-john-f-kirby-holds-an-off-camera-press-briefing/).

⁷ *US Troops Will Stay Until All Americans Are out of Afghanistan, Even if Past Aug. 31 Deadline: Biden to ABC News*, ABC News (Aug. 18, 2021) (online at <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/us-troops-stay-americans-afghanistan-biden-abc-news/story?id=79507932>).

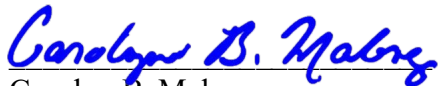
We must not forget those Afghans who, by virtue of their occupation, gender, or ethnicity, are especially vulnerable to retaliatory attacks by the Taliban. Prominent women in Afghan civic and political society are especially at risk because their very existence challenges the Taliban's repressive and authoritarian ideology. The Taliban have reportedly already arrested Salima Mazari, one of three women district governors in Afghanistan, and a female Afghan mayor recently warned, "I'm waiting for the Taliban to come for people like me and kill me."⁸

On Monday, President Biden told the American people that, following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, "[w]e'll continue to speak out for the basic rights of the Afghan people, of women and girls, just as we speak out all over the world." That is an important step, but after twenty years of standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the women and girls of Afghanistan, we have an obligation to do everything in our power to ensure that women and girls who rose to prominence or sought to advance in Afghan society during the past two decades are not killed by the Taliban for doing so.⁹

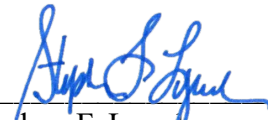
Recent events in Afghanistan will have significant consequences for our national security and the people of Afghanistan, and our Committee will conduct additional oversight of U.S. policy in Afghanistan in the days and weeks to come. However, as Members of Congress, our highest priority is ensuring the immediate safety and security of U.S. citizens and our Afghan allies and partners, and we look forward to working with the Administration to achieve that objective.

Thank you for your unwavering commitment to our national security and the safety of our servicemembers, our diplomatic personnel, and the American people.

Sincerely,



Carolyn B. Maloney
Chairwoman
Committee on Oversight and Reform



Stephen F. Lynch
Chairman
Subcommittee on National Security

⁸ *These Female Afghan Politicians Are Risking Everything for Their Homeland*, National Public Radio (Aug. 18, 2021) (online at www.npr.org/2021/08/18/1029014825/afghan-women-politicians-taliban-resistance); *Afghanistan's Youngest Female Mayor: "I'm Waiting for the Taliban to Come for People Like Me and Kill Me"*, iNews (Aug. 15, 2021) (online at <https://inews.co.uk/news/world/afghanistans-first-female-mayor-waiting-taliban-come-kill-her-1152127>).

⁹ White House, *Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan* (Aug. 16, 2021) (online at www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/16/remarks-by-president-biden-on-afghanistan/).

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The Honorable Lloyd J. Austin III
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cc: The Honorable James Comer, Ranking Member
Committee on Oversight and Reform

The Honorable Glenn Grothman, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on National Security