

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 19th, 2021

President Joseph R. Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden,

I write to express my concern for the safety of our allies in Afghanistan, and the urgent need for the timely processing of Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applications. I applaud your Executive Order to review the Iraqi and Afghan SIV programs to ensure their compliance with existing laws and assess delays in the program as an important first step in addressing this issue. However, with U.S. troops set to potentially withdraw from Afghanistan by May 1st, time is running out to offer protection to our allies still in the country.

The Afghan SIV program was enacted through the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009 to provide a life-saving path to resettlement for Afghan nationals who have assisted U.S. military and government officials in a variety of positions including interpreters, translators, drivers, security guards, doctors, and engineers. The Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009 requires that government-controlled processing of applications for SIVs be completed within nine months. However, reports estimate current SIV processing times can be three years or longer.

According to the State Department, more than 7,000 remaining Special Immigrant Visas allocated to Afghans by Congress in 2020 went unissued,¹ compared with just over 5,000 SIVs in 2019.² Additionally, as of June 2020, 18,000 visa applications remained in the pipeline, indicating that Congress will need to allocate additional visas to meet the program's need.³

In March 2020, the U.S. Embassy in Kabul halted visa interviews as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, further compounding existing delays in the system. As the May 1st deadline approaches for U.S. troops to withdraw from Afghanistan, it is critical that we ensure that all allocated visas are used and that no further disruptions continue to backlog the system.

My home of Sacramento County has welcomed more than 3,800 Iraqis and Afghans with SIVs since 2008, the highest number of any county in California and more than the total in 47 states.⁴ Many of these SIV holders and their families continue to serve as essential workers, and contribute to the rich and diverse fabric of our community.

¹ <https://travel.state.gov/content/dam/visas/SIVs/Afghan-Public-Quarterly-Report-Q4-October-2020.pdf>

² <https://travel.state.gov/content/dam/visas/SIVs/Q4-Afghan-SIV-Report-October-2019.pdf>

³ <https://www.stateoig.gov/system/files/aud-mero-20-35.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.sacbee.com/news/local/article130708589.html>

As Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, Central Asia, and Nonproliferation, I stand ready to work with you to address this urgent issue and to provide protection to those who risked their safety to support U.S. troops, diplomats, and contractors. Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ami Bera". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. Below the signature is a horizontal line.

Ami Bera, M.D.
Member of Congress

cc: The Honorable Antony Blinken, Secretary of State
Ian G. Brownlee, Acting Assistant Secretary Bureau of Consular Affairs