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November 29, 2021

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We write to you as Members of ADL's Task Force on Middle East Minorities to encourage you to broaden the criteria for Priority-2 refugee admissions status for Afghan nationals in order to include ethnic and religious minority groups that have a well-founded fear of persecution under Taliban rule on the basis of their group identity.

Many of us have personally experienced persecution in our own countries of origin as retaliation for our human rights advocacy work. As such, we know what it means firsthand when we say that we look to the United States to play a responsible leadership role in support of persecuted minority communities as well as human rights defenders.

We commend the State Department's decision on August 2, 2021 to broaden the criteria for P-2 designation to include certain categories of Afghan nationals who did not meet precise criteria for Special Immigrant Visa status but whose lives are still in danger because of their association with U.S. forces, U.S.-funded development programs, or a U.S. media organization.¹ That was the right decision, and it filled an important gap to meet an urgent humanitarian need.

And yet that need still remains painfully urgent for members of those vulnerable ethnic and religious groups that are now in much greater peril ever since the Afghan government was violently overthrown by the Taliban. As you know, the State Department formally has designated the Taliban an Entity of Particular Concern for its systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom.²

Shiite Hazaras, Christians, Sikhs, Ahmadis, Uyghurs, and Hindus are among those groups that are particularly at risk of persecution in Afghanistan under a Taliban government. They are already suffering terrible abuses in areas under Taliban control, such as the recent cases of reported extrajudicial killings targeting Hazaras in Daykundi Province.³ Furthermore, many of these vulnerable minority groups are now at increased risk of mass casualty attacks by the local branch of ISIS, such as the terrible recent bombings at Shiite mosques in Kandahar and Kunduz.⁴

We are not the first organization to raise concern about this pressing issue. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has called on the State Department to extend P-2 status to vulnerable Afghan religious minorities.⁵ So has the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention.⁶ More broadly,

ADL has joined several coalition letters on this crisis, including letters led by HIAS⁷ and by the Refugee Council USA⁸ that urged the Administration to help protect religious or ethnic minorities seeking asylum from persecution in Afghanistan.

It is unreasonable, impractical, and, in fact, unsafe to ask each member of such minority groups to individually prove their personal reasons for seeking asylum when it is manifestly clear that mere membership in their religious or ethnic group is an obvious basis for a well-founded fear of systematic and life-threatening persecution in their home country.

As such, we urge the Administration to broaden P-2 status in order to include members of Afghanistan's ethnic and religious groups that have a well-founded collective fear of persecution today, and we encourage you to set up the necessary processing centers for applications of this sort in neighboring countries, so those individuals who are relatively fortunate enough to reach those sites are then able to directly apply.

Thank you for your consideration of our concerns.

Sincerely,

Sharon Nazarian, Task Force Co-Chair

Farahnaz Ispahani, Task Force Co-Chair

Maziar Bahari, Task Force Member

Aykan Erdemir, Task Force Member

Shadi Martini, Task Force Member

Johnnie Moore, Task Force Member

Alireza Nader, Task Force Member

Tuğba Tanyeri-Erdemir, Task Force Coordinator

¹ Antony J. Blinken, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken Remarks to the Press on the Announcement of a U.S. Refugee Admissions Program Priority 2 (P-2) Designation for Afghan Nationals," *U.S. Department of State*, August 2, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-remarks-to-the-press-on-the-announcement-of-a-u-s-refugee-admissions-program-priority-2-designation-for-afghan-nationals/>

² Michael R. Pompeo, "United States Takes Action Against Violators of Religious Freedom," *US Department of State*, December 7, 2020. <https://2017-2021.state.gov/united-states-takes-action-against-violators-of-religious-freedom-2/index.html>

³ Sarah Dean, "Taliban accused of killing 13 ethnic Hazaras in Afghanistan," *CNN*, October 5, 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/10/05/asia/taliban-hazaras-killing-intl-hnk/index.html>

⁴ Taimoor Shah and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “Blast at Afghan Mosque Kills Dozens as Shiites are Targeted Again,” *New York Times*, October 15, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/15/world/asia/afghanistan-mosque-blast.html>

⁵ “USCIRF Calls on the State Department to Prioritize Refugee Resettlement of Afghan Religious Minorities,” *U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom*, August 23, 2021. <https://www.uscirf.gov/news-room/releases-statements/uscirf-calls-state-department-prioritize-refugee-resettlement-afghan>

⁶ Chelsea Patterson Sobolik, “Why the U.S. should provide Priority 2 refugee status for Afghans fleeing persecution,” *ERLC*, August 18, 2021. <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/why-the-u-s-should-provide-priority-2-refugee-status-for-afghans-fleeing-persecution/>

⁷ “More than 200 Jewish Orgs and Congregations Call on Biden Admin to Appoint Afghan Refugee Special Envoy,” *HIAS*, August 31, 2021. <https://www.hias.org/news/press-releases/more-200-jewish-orgs-and-congregations-call-biden-admin-appoint-afghan-refugee>

⁸ “300+ organizations and faith groups tell Biden: support Afghan refugees,” *Refugee Council USA*, August 20, 2021. <https://rcusa.org/resources/300-organizations-and-faith-groups-tell-biden-support-afghan-refugees/>