

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

September 9, 2021

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

Dear Mr. Secretary,

We write today to ask you to ensure that American University of Afghanistan (AUAF) students and staff who were unable to evacuate before the American withdrawal on August 31st will qualify for Priority 2 (P-2) designation. We recognize the challenging task that you and your staff undertook to assist more than 100,000 people in a matter of weeks and understand that your work is by no means over. However, we are concerned that if these students are not given access to an expedited means of leaving Afghanistan soon, they will be left behind to face retaliation, up to and including, death.

AUAF first opened its doors in 2006, following years of advocacy by Dr. Sharif Fayeze, the Afghan Minister of Higher Education, and the First Lady of the United States, Laura Bush. AUAF was Afghanistan's first private, non-profit higher education institution, dedicated to providing a modern, global education based on the United States liberal arts model. In 2013, AUAF established the International Center for Afghan Women's Economic Development and played a leading role in supporting the continuing education of Afghan women. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) provided most of the funding for AUAF, and many faculty members were recruited from the United States.

Perhaps due to the influence from the United States, AUAF has been a target of Taliban attacks even before the fall of Kabul. In 2014, two AUAF employees were killed by the Taliban while out to dinner with colleagues. On August 7, 2016, two foreign professors were kidnapped and held for three years before being exchanged for Taliban prisoners. Two weeks later, on August 24th, seven students, a policeman, three security guards and a professor at AUAF were all killed when three gunmen opened fire and set off bombs. While there was never a claim of responsibility for this attack, many believe the Taliban was behind it.

On August 15th, 2021, one of the first sites that the Taliban took over once they entered Kabul was AUAF. On social media, Taliban fighters posted pictures of the school with captions suggesting that it was the location where the United States had taught infidel "wolves." Students and Afghan staff at AUAF immediately went into hiding and frantically tried to secure seats on evacuation flights. Unfortunately, as they did not qualify for Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) or P-2 designation, and as the security situation at Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) devolved over the next two weeks, their options became more and more limited. On Sunday, August 29th, hundreds of Afghans waited at a safe house for seven hours in the hopes of getting on a flight, only to be told that evacuations had stopped entirely.

Early on, Taliban leaders claimed that there would be no retaliation against Afghans who worked with Americans, and that women would still be able to get an education. But as they solidify control over Afghanistan, we are seeing a different story emerge. University students who returned to class this week have found their classrooms cut in half by curtains or boards to keep men and women separate. A document is being circulated by an association of private universities in Afghanistan mandating that women wear hijabs and have separate entrances to schools. It also suggests that female instructors should be hired to teach female students and that they should be taught separately. It isn't hard to imagine that these changes are building blocks to a gradual return of the Taliban policies from the late 1990's, when women weren't allowed to attend school. If they backtracked on this assurance so quickly, there's nothing to indicate they won't do the same when it comes to retaliation.

We have a responsibility to assist these students and staff members. For the last 15 years, we have provided not only financial assistance to AUAF, but also supported these students who believe in a free and democratic future for Afghanistan and its people. Now, due to our support and our rapid withdrawal from the country, their lives and livelihoods are in danger. We ask that you grant presumptive eligibility to the students and staff of AUAF for P-2 designation and do everything in your power to assist in their safe departure from Afghanistan. In the meantime, we also ask that you provide us with specific guidance on how you suggest these people can most safely depart Afghanistan to get to a third country where they can apply for P-2 designation.

We know that you and your team are committed to bringing every possible person to safety, and we feel strongly that the students and staff of the American University of Afghanistan deserve our utmost effort in that regard.

Sincerely,



Gerald E. Connolly
Member of Congress



Andy Barr
Member of Congress