



INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ROUNDTABLE

August 21, 2021

The Honorable Joseph Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Re: Emergency Protection and Evacuation of Afghan Religious Minorities/Sanctioning Taliban for Religious Freedom Abuses

Dear President Biden:

We are an informal participant-led, multi-religious group that advocates for international religious freedom. Despite our extremely broad diversity of theological views and political positions, we are united in our horror at the unfolding events in Afghanistan following the abrupt US troop withdrawal and the swift Taliban takeover. It is clear that most Afghans do not want a Taliban dominated government and are experiencing deep fear and anxiety at what the future holds. Videos of women handing babies and small children to soldiers over barbed wire vividly illustrate the panic sweeping the nation.

We request specific steps to assist non-governmental organizations in the evacuation and safeguarding of vulnerable religious minorities: Shia Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Hindus, Bahais, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, and others. Immediate action is imperative to fulfill the pledge made in your recent speeches that: “human rights will be the center of our foreign policy,”¹ and the many pledges of your Administration, including Secretary of State Blinken and USAID Administrator Samantha Power at last month’s 2021 IRF Summit, confirming its commitment to international religious freedom.

We also believe that current Taliban actions warrant reimposition of US sanctions and freezing of funds and future assistance to a Taliban run Afghan government until they cease violating the rights of religious minorities. We collectively have assembled numerous reports of horrific mistreatment of religious minorities by Taliban militants now roaming freely throughout

1. August 16, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/16/us/politics/biden-taliban-afghanistan-speech.html>;
August 31, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/31/us/politics/transcript-biden-speech-afghanistan.html>

Afghanistan. Christians and others seeking refuge at Kabul Airport have been murdered, whipped, had their ID documents seized, and their cell phones destroyed. They are being identified via government records and hunted down in door-to-door searches.² They are receiving officially stamped “threat letters” warning that they have been identified for arrest or worse. Property is being stolen. Women are being seized, raped (“married” in the eyes of Taliban thugs), or killed, and men are being summarily executed or tortured.³ Shia celebrating Ashura have seen their banners torn down, a harbinger of worse to come.⁴

The Taliban seeks to impose a hegemonic and absolutistic interpretation of Islam in which religious minorities and non-compliant majority group member must be subjugated or eliminated. The Organization for Islamic Cooperation has called on the Taliban to adhere to “international governing norms enshrined in the UN Charter and resolutions” and to follow “tolerant Islamic principles and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR),” which includes the right to freedom of religion and belief.⁵ In contrast, we realistically expect a swift reversion to Taliban policies of the 1990’s when religious minorities and dissenters were jailed, forced to convert, publicly whipped or executed, forced to pay tribute and use distinctive colors on their clothes and homes.

We also believe that the victory of the Taliban creates a world-wide threat to all religious groups that do not share its radical views—as well as a substantial threat to the national security of the United States and our allies. Taliban rule in Afghanistan will likely have swift negative consequences for our efforts to bring religious freedom, peace and stability to Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Africa, and other flashpoints. Taliban promises not to harbor or support external terror organizations in its February 29, 2020 agreement with the United States are laughable in light of its own actions (and multi-national forces) and the many credible reports that Al Qaeda, ISIS, and other terror groups are already training and staging attacks from inside Taliban held areas.⁶

US based NGO’s and others are amassing funds and capabilities to evacuate religious minorities and women to safe havens even as your Administration and our allies are working to repatriate our citizens and those who worked directly for us. Various countries are committed to taking some of these evacuees and the US should do so as well. Yet we are seeing those we seek to save lose their

² <https://www.christianpost.com/news/taliban-hunting-for-christians-inspecting-phones-for-bible-apps.html>; <https://religionunplugged.com/news/2021/8/20/afghani-christians-are-facing-a-taliban-reign-of-terror>

³ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/images-bloodied-afghans-contradict-taliban-s-claims-moderation-n1277042>

⁴ <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/568192-the-imminent-danger-for-afghanistans-women-and-minorities>

⁵ Final Communique of The Extraordinary Open-Ended Meeting of The OIC Executive Committee At The Level of Permanent Representatives On The Situation In Afghanistan, August 8, 2021. https://www.oic-oci.org/topic/?t_id=29375&t_ref=18482&lan=en

⁶ <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/return-islamic-emirate-afghanistan-jihadist-state-play>; Congressional Research Service Report <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF10604.pdf>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/17/world/asia/taliban-afghanistan-al-qaeda.html>

lives trying to get to the airport in Kabul, being too afraid or unable to get there, and facing huge risks in traveling overland to sanctuary nations. Even US and other foreign citizens were unable to safely access Kabul Airport.

We ask that your Administration take immediate action to:

1. **Create evacuation corridors and refugee assembly points outside Kabul's airport (including in other regions) and continue evacuations for as long as necessary to get these people out.** We envision refuges where religious minorities can go, be protected, be processed, and be transported by air or other exit means in an orderly fashion. This can happen unilaterally or through agreement with the Taliban, which publicly promised to let all those who wish to leave the country go.
2. **Establish special visa quotas and priorities for Afghan religious minorities and work with existing refugee assistance organizations** that are standing by ready to provide assistance as they arrive in the US and other countries.
3. **Create a special emergency coordination office for NGO Afghanistan evacuations** inside the Pentagon or the State Department tasked with interacting with NGOs seeking to evacuate religious minorities. It should facilitate their communications with countries accepting religious minority Afghan refugees. It should help coordinate flights, documentation, resettlement, and secure escape routes.
4. **Work with IRF focused groups to coordinate monitoring and actions by the US, our allies, and international organizations on religious minority rights in Afghanistan,** including our IRF Roundtable, our partner Roundtables worldwide,⁷ the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB),⁸ and the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance.⁹ We want to see strong public statements demanding an end to Taliban oppression of religious minorities and warnings that we will hold them to account, using targeted sanctions under the Global Magnitsky Act, existing Afghanistan sanctions regimes and war crimes prosecutions.
5. **Freeze all economic and other assistance to the Taliban and recognition of it as controlling the Afghan government,** until it demonstrates through actions, not words, that it is complying with universal standards on religious freedom, human rights, and the rights of women and children, as codified in the UN Convention on Human Rights¹⁰ and in numerous UN conventions and agreements that the government of Afghanistan has signed. We do not suggest that direct humanitarian aid to the people of Afghanistan be curtailed, but that Taliban not be enabled.

We thank you in advance for your attention to our requests and stand ready to meet with Administration officials to facilitate this effort. [#ExitWithHonor](#)

⁷ <https://www.irfroundtable.org/copy-of-global-network-1>

⁸ <https://www.ippforb.com>

⁹ <https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-or-belief-alliance/>

¹⁰ <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

Respectfully,

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