

Congress of the United States  
Washington, DC 20515

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March 8, 2019

The Honorable Michael R. Pompeo  
Secretary  
Department of State  
2201 C Street NW  
Washington, D.C. 20520

The Honorable Kirstjen M. Nielsen  
Secretary  
Department of Homeland Security  
Washington, D.C. 20528

Patrick M. Shanahan  
Acting Secretary  
Department of Defense  
1400 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, D.C. 20301

The Honorable Christopher Wray  
Director  
Federal Bureau of Investigation  
935 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20535

Dear Secretary Pompeo, Secretary Nielsen, Acting Secretary Shanahan, and Director Wray:

We are writing to express our concern and need for further information about the slow processing of visas for our Iraqi and Afghan wartime partners. As you know, Congress established four programs to provide a safe and legal pathway for Iraqi and Afghan citizens who face danger as a result of their employment helping American overseas personnel. Congress has acted regularly to ensure that vetted partners continue to be able to access protection in the United States—most recently in the Fiscal Year 2019 Consolidated Appropriations Act, signed by the President on February 15, 2019.

We are disturbed by reports of slow processing in the two primary programs that remain available to our Iraqi and Afghan partners. The Iraqi program has a backlog of more than 100,000 people due to slowdowns in the Direct Access Program, where only 48 individuals were admitted in a 10-month period in Fiscal Year 2018.<sup>1</sup> The Afghan Special Immigrant Visa program has seen a significant decrease in arrivals although Congress approved visas to allow processing to continue. State Department data show that 1,649 visas were issued in Fiscal Year 2018, a 60% decrease from the 4,120 visas issued in Fiscal Year 2017.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Yeganeh Torbati, "Pentagon raises alarm about sharp drop in Iraqi refugees coming to U.S.," Reuters, Aug. 20, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-immigration-refugees-iraqi-exclusi/exclusive-pentagon-raises-alarm-about-sharp-drop-in-iraqi-refugees-coming-to-u-s-idUSKCN1L51N9>.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of State, Iraqis and Afghans Employed by or on Behalf of the U.S. Government and Iraqi and Afghan SI Cases Converted under Section 1244 (SQ), Sept. 30, 2018; Massarah Mikati, "U.S. sees sharp drop in 'special immigrant visas'," Houston Chronicle, Dec. 28, 2018, <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/U-S-sees-sharp-drop-in-special-immigrant-13496506.php>.



In light of these disturbing figures, we request that your agencies respond to the following questions, and provide responses in writing by May 31, 2019.

Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV)

1. What efforts have your agencies made to comply with the nine-month processing timeline mandated by Congress?
2. What efforts are being made to ensure efficiency within your agencies and in cooperation with other agencies?
3. What are the reasons for the significant decline in Afghan SIV processing between fiscal years 2017 and 2018?
4. For each fiscal year from 2014 to the present:
  - a. How many personnel from the Department of State are assigned to issue decisions on applications for Chief of Mission (COM) approval?
  - b. How many personnel from the Department of State are assigned to issue decisions on appeals for applications for COM approval?
  - c. How many personnel from the FBI are assigned to security vetting of SIV applications?
  - d. What are the average processing times for COM applications, COM appeals, I-360 petitions, embassy interviews, and administrative processing?

Direct Access Program (DAP) for U.S.-Affiliated Iraqis

1. What are the number of Iraqis in Iraq:
  - a. Who have submitted applications but are pending access to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program?
  - b. Who are pending USCIS interviews?
  - c. Who are waiting for security clearances?
2. What are the number of Iraqis outside of Iraq:
  - a. Who have submitted applications but are pending access to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program?
  - b. Who are pending USCIS interviews?
  - c. Who are waiting for security clearances?
3. For each fiscal year from 2014 to the present, what are average processing times:
  - a. From the time of initial application to access to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program?
  - b. From the time of access to USCIS interviews?
  - c. From the time of USCIS interview to completion of security checks?
4. Are your agencies taking steps to increase admissions and improve efficiency of processing for Direct Access Program applicants? If so, what are your agency's plans?



Sincerely,



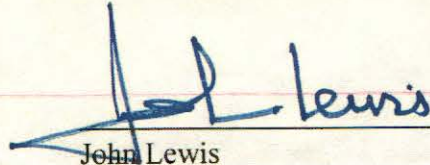
Earl Blumenauer  
Member of Congress



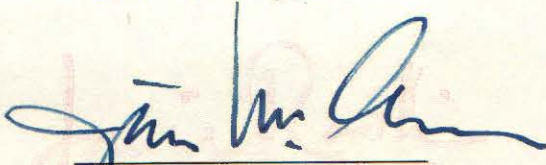
Adam Kinzinger  
Member of Congress



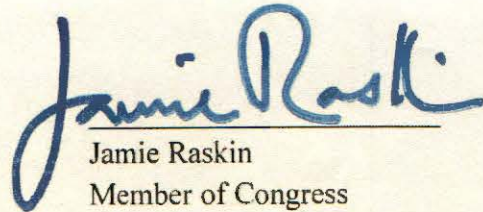
Michael Waltz  
Member of Congress



John Lewis  
Member of Congress



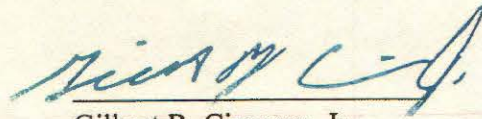
James P. McGovern  
Member of Congress



Jamie Raskin  
Member of Congress



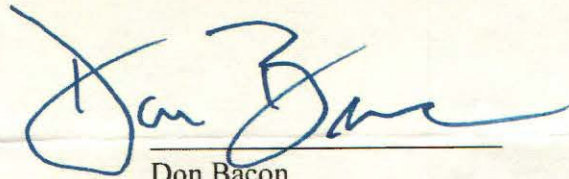
Ron Wright  
Member of Congress




Gilbert R. Cisneros, Jr.  
Member of Congress



Guy Reschenthaler  
Member of Congress



Don Bacon  
Member of Congress



Jason Crow  
Member of Congress

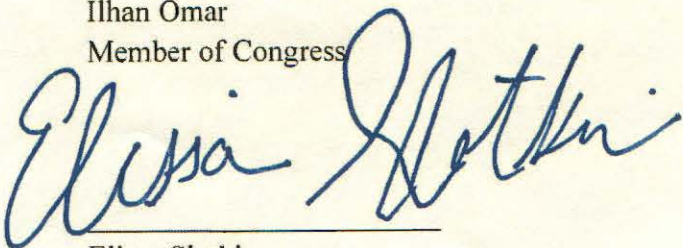


Mark Pocan  
Member of Congress





Ilhan Omar  
Member of Congress



Elissa Slotkin  
Member of Congress



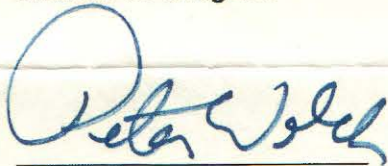
Steve Cohen  
Member of Congress



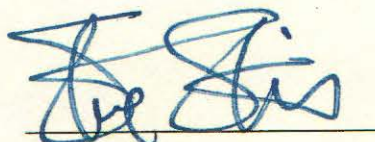
Peter A. DeFazio  
Member of Congress



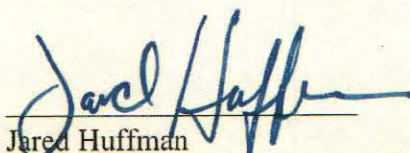
Eleanor Holmes Norton  
Member of Congress



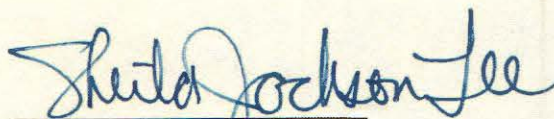
Peter Welch  
Member of Congress



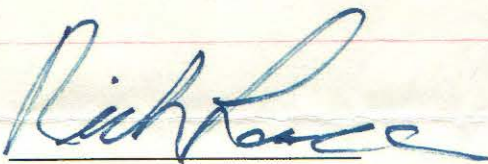
Steve Stivers  
Member of Congress



Jared Huffman  
Member of Congress



Sheila Jackson Lee  
Member of Congress



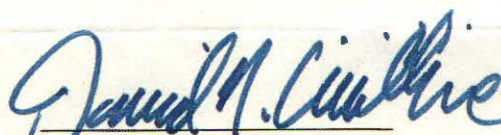
Rick Larsen  
Member of Congress



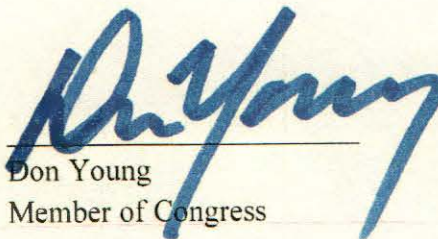
André Carson  
Member of Congress



Chellie Pingree  
Member of Congress



David N. Cicilline  
Member of Congress



Don Young  
Member of Congress

Jaime Herrera Beutler

Jaime Herrera Beutler  
Member of Congress

Nita M. Lowey

Nita M. Lowey  
Member of Congress

Jan Schakowsky

Jan Schakowsky  
Member of Congress

Brad R. Wenstrup

Brad Wenstrup  
Member of Congress

Duncan Hunter

Duncan Hunter  
Member of Congress

Denny Heck

Denny Heck  
Member of Congress



**U.S. Citizenship  
and Immigration  
Services**

April 25, 2019

The Honorable Earl Blumenauer  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Blumenauer:

Thank you for your March 8, 2019 letter. Former Secretary Nielsen asked that I respond on her behalf.

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) appreciates your continued interest and support of the U.S Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). We are proud of the USRAP's longstanding history of resettling some of the world's most vulnerable refugees. Likewise, we understand the important role that refugee resettlement plays in supporting our national security and foreign policy interests. Now and in the future, we will continue to employ rigorous security measures to protect against national security threats.

A detailed response to questions regarding the Direct Access Program (DAP) is enclosed. DHS defers to the Department of State to provide responses to the remaining DAP questions, as well as the questions regarding Afghan Special Immigrant Visas.

Thank you again for your letter and interest in this important issue. The co-signers of your letter will receive separate, identical responses. Should you require any additional assistance, please have your staff contact the USCIS Office of Legislative and Intergovernmental Affairs at (202) 272-1940

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "L. Francis Cissna".

L. Francis Cissna  
Director

Enclosure



**U.S. Department of Homeland Security Response to  
Representative Blumenauer's March 8, 2019 Letter**

**Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV)**

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) defers to the Department of State (DOS) on questions related to Afghan Special Immigrant Visas.

- 1. What efforts have your agencies made to comply with the nine-month processing timeline mandated by Congress?**
- 2. What efforts are being made to ensure efficiency within your agencies and in cooperation with other agencies?**
- 3. What are the reasons for the significant decline in Afghan SIV processing between fiscal years 2017 and 2018?**
- 4. For each fiscal year from 2014 to the present:**
  - a. How many personnel from the Department of State are assigned to issue decisions on applications for Chief of Mission (COM) approval?**
  - b. How many personnel from the Department of State are assigned to issue decisions on appeals for applications for COM approval?**
  - c. How many personnel from the FBI are assigned to security vetting of SIV applications?**
  - d. What are the average processing times for COM applications, COM appeals, J-360 petitions, embassy interviews, and administrative processing?**

**Direct Access Program (DAP) for U.S. Affiliated Iraqis**

DHS defers to DOS regarding the data requested below.

- 1. What are the number of Iraqis in Iraq:**
  - a. Who have submitted applications but are pending access to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program?**
  - b. Who are pending USCIS interviews?**
  - c. Who are waiting for security clearances?**
- 2. What are the number of Iraqis outside of Iraq:**
  - a. Who have submitted applications but are pending access to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program?**
  - b. Who are pending USCIS interviews?**
  - c. Who are waiting for security clearances?**
- 3. For each fiscal year from 2014 to the present , what are average processing times :**
  - a. From the time of initial application to access to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program?**
  - b. From the time of access to USCIS interviews?**
  - c. From the time of USCIS interview to completion of security checks?**

**4. Are your agencies taking steps to increase admissions and improve efficiency of processing for Direct Access Program applicants? If so, what are your agency's plans?**

DHS recognizes the important role that refugee protection can play for individuals who may face danger because of the work they have performed on behalf of the U.S. Government. The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) strives to process refugees in the most expeditious manner consistent with the highest security standards in order to protect vulnerable refugees.

As you are aware, DHS, together with DOS, law enforcement, and the intelligence community, have worked very hard in recent years to analyze the USRAP and have introduced new measures to make the program more secure and enhance national security. The implementation of new security vetting procedures, while necessary, has lengthened processing times for some cases and as a result, admissions did slow down the previous two fiscal years. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has also prioritized the need to address the asylum backlog in recent fiscal years in terms of resource allocation.

At this time, USCIS' Refugee Affairs Division continues to assist the Asylum Division on a voluntary basis. The majority of Refugee Officers are assigned to join circuit rides overseas to interview refugee applicants. Additionally, we are adjusting to recent changes to the program and do anticipate that refugee processing will speed up.

We defer to DOS on the pace of refugee admissions for this fiscal year.