

# **An Open Letter to the Government of Canada regarding Canada's Response to the Refugee Crisis in Afghanistan**

August 24, 2021

The Right Honourable Justin Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada

The Honourable Marco Mendicino, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship

The Honourable Harjit Singh Sajjan, Minister of National Defence

The Honourable Marc Garneau, Global Affairs Canada

The Honourable Maryam Monsef, Minister for Women and Gender Equality and Rural Economic Development

We, the undersigned Afghan-Canadian community leaders and representatives write to implore that you substantially strengthen steps being taken by the Canadian government to respond to the current human rights crisis in Afghanistan. We are deeply concerned about the fate of human rights defenders, women leaders and activists, journalists, ethnic and religious minorities and other individuals and communities facing dramatically heightened human rights risk in the country at this time. For years, many of these individuals have served alongside the Canadian government and our allies to bring peace, democracy, stability, and respect for human rights to a country marred by over 40 years of war, conflict and foreign interference.

The recent U.S. and NATO military withdrawal, and the lightning-speed Taliban advances, thereafter, have left thousands of vulnerable individuals in a perilous situation, exposed to Taliban cruelty and atrocities.

Given Canada's historical involvement in the Afghan conflict, our government has a moral obligation to act urgently and decisively in rescuing those who are now at serious risk of harm. Canada's international human rights legal obligations also compel us to take all possible measures to ensure their protection.

While we welcome and applaud Canada's recent announcements and efforts to provide protection to vulnerable Afghans, we make the following recommendations in order for the proposed measures to work urgently and meaningfully in rescuing those most at risk of harm.

We, therefore, call on the Canadian government to:

- Appoint a high-level Special Envoy with a mandate to oversee and coordinate Afghan evacuation and resettlement efforts across the entirety of government, including the ministries of National Defence, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, and Global Affairs. A Special Envoy would serve to improve

communication, avoid inefficient duplication, and ensure coherent, expeditious decision-making. The Special Envoy could also play an important role in liaising with counterparts from other countries involved in evacuations and addressing the humanitarian crisis unfolding in and around airport in Kabul.

- Make changes to the current refugee resettlement program, so that it is not only available to individuals who have managed to arrive at a third country, but also facilitates the evacuation of aforementioned at-risk individuals who are trapped within Afghanistan. With Taliban forces in control of Afghanistan's land borders, and flights out of Afghanistan very limited at this time, travelling to third countries is virtually impossible for anyone fearful of the Taliban. Moreover, make changes to the eligibility criteria for the proposed special programs by waiving the requirement for recognition of refugee status by the UNHCR or a host country. This will greatly expedite and simplify the process and ensure that the most vulnerable Afghans receive Canada's assistance in a timely manner. We further urge that the quota for the program be increased from 21,000 to at least 95,000, and that those numbers be additional to Canada's existing levels for refugee resettlement.
- For those found eligible and ready to be evacuated from Afghanistan, ensure that significantly enhanced levels of security and assistance are provided by the Canadian military to help individuals reach the airport safely.
- Engage with neighbouring countries and emphasize the significance of opening their borders and respecting the right of Afghans to seek refugee protection.

Prime Minister, Afghan-Canadians look to you for decisive and bold leadership at this time. We know as well that Canadians across the country share our concerns and stand with us in solidarity. This is a time for speed, a time for innovation and a time to spare no effort in ensuring that human rights are upheld and protection provided to individuals who now face grave peril simply because they have devoted themselves to working for human rights, women's equality and democracy.

Sincerely,

Djawid Taheri, Barrister and Solicitor

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Afghan Association of Ontario Canada

Afghanistan Business Council

Afghan Network for Social Services Foundation

Ummah Nabawiah Mosque

Afghan Canadian Islamic Community

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Afghan Canadian Cultural and Educational International Organization

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