

Statement of Rena Bitter
Nominee to be Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
July 13, 2021

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, and Members of the Committee,

I am honored to appear before you today and grateful to President Biden and Secretary Blinken for the trust they have placed in me. It is with no small measure of humility that I approach the responsibility before me if confirmed. I believe there is no part of the Department of State more directly responsible for the security and well-being of Americans at home and abroad than the Bureau of Consular Affairs. In fact, diplomats have been serving their fellow citizens abroad in consular missions since before the constitution was written. These are the oldest and most vital functions of the Department of State.

Consular work is not glamorous and can often be heartbreaking. But colleagues in the Bureau do not do this work for recognition. They are the truest of public servants, working under sometimes very difficult conditions on behalf of the American people. For a recent example, the men and women of the Bureau of Consular Affairs led the repatriation of 100,000 Americans at the beginning of the pandemic, often risking their own health and safety. The Senate recognized this effort with Senate Resolution 567, commending the Department for its efforts on behalf of our fellow citizens. I, too, would like to add my thanks to the Bureau for all it does on behalf of the American people, much of which takes place well below their notice. If confirmed, it would be the honor of a lifetime to lead this extraordinary team.

I have had many jobs and many proud moments during the span of my 27-year career. But the proudest have revolved around Consular services. In Amman my team issued the first Special Immigrant Visas for Iraqi translators at the very start of that program in 2006. I understand on a very personal level the U.S. government's commitment to the men and women who serve beside us. More recently, as Ambassador, I received a letter from two grieving New England families whose newlywed children were tragically killed while on their honeymoon in Laos. The families thanked me for the compassionate support they received from our Embassy during their time of immeasurable grief, and they enclosed their children's joint obituary from their hometown paper, in which they thanked our consular officer by name. As I said, the work can be heartbreaking.

But its vital and never more so than now. President Biden promised to craft a foreign policy for the middle class -- a strong, healthy Bureau of Consular Affairs will be critical to this effort. But the global pandemic has taken a toll on the Bureau. I know the Department is grateful to Congress for its support for Consular Services over the last several months. I am aware that the Bureau has had to make some difficult decisions due to pandemic-related constraints on space and resources. More difficult decisions lie ahead. But prior to the pandemic international visitors contributed more than \$260b to the US economy and directly supported millions of jobs. We must get back there again. If confirmed, my top priority will be to ensure that we do – that the Bureau is able to meet the need for Consular services, even in this constrained resource environment and with the continued uncertainty of the global pandemic.

A related priority – If confirmed I will work with Department stakeholders and our partners in Congress to develop a more resilient funding model so the Bureau will always have a stable platform from which to carry out its mission.

Finally, I believe that Bureau has no more important partner than Congress. The Department of State is charged with representing the interests of U.S. citizens around the world, reminding foreign governments that the United States has no higher priority than the welfare of its citizens, and ensuring that our foreign policy reflects that goal. I believe executing that responsibility is at the heart of the mission that the president and secretary have entrusted me with, and one to which I am prepared to dedicate all my energy. If confirmed, I will advocate for your constituents.

On a personal note, I would like to thank my family and my family of friends who have put up with long absences over the course of my career, then generously welcomed me home as if I'd never been gone. Many of them are here today or watching. When I last had the honor to appear before this committee, my nephew Josh was among them, sitting behind me. He died in December and today, as every day, we mourn his absence. I think he would be pleased to know that our love for him would be reflected in the congressional record and I thank the committee for indulging me to do so.

I welcome your questions.