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5 COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,

6 U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,

7 WASHINGTON, D.C.

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12 INTERVIEW OF: SETAREH SIEG

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Tuesday, October 15, 2024

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Washington, D.C.

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The interview in the above matter was held in room 2200, Rayburn House Office

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Building, commencing at 10:02 a.m.

1 Appearances:

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5 For the COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS:

6

7 [REDACTED]

8 [REDACTED]

9 [REDACTED]

10 [REDACTED]

11

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13 For the U.S. AGENCY FOR GLOBAL MEDIA:

14

15 [REDACTED]

16

17

18 For SETAREH SIEG:

19

20 MARK S. ZAID, ESQ.

21 MANAGING PARTNER

22 MARK S. ZAID, P.C.

23 1250 CONNECTICUT AVE, N.W., SUITE 200

24 WASHINGTON, D.C. 20036

1 [REDACTED] So we are now on the record.

2 Good morning, everyone.

3 Today is Tuesday, October 15th, 2024. The time is 10:02 a.m. We are
4 convened in the Rayburn House Office Building. This is a transcribed interview of Ms.
5 Setareh Sieg, special assistant to the Voice of America programming director for the U.S.
6 Agency for Global Media.

7 We will refer to Voice of America and the U.S. Agency for Global Media as VOA
8 and USAGM, respectively, for the purposes of this interview.

9 Chairman McCaul has requested this interview as part of the House Foreign Affairs
10 Committee's oversight investigation into personnel matters.

11 Would the witness please state her name for the record?

12 Ms. Sieg. Setareh Sieg.

13 [REDACTED]. On behalf of the committee, I'd like to thank you, ma'am, for
14 appearing today. The committee appreciates your willingness to appear voluntarily.

15 My name is [REDACTED]. I'm a [REDACTED] with Chairman McCaul's majority
16 staff. I will ask my majority and minority colleagues to please identify themselves as
17 well, beginning with the majority.

18 [REDACTED] [REDACTED], majority.

19 [REDACTED] [REDACTED], minority staff.

20 [REDACTED] [REDACTED], House Foreign Affairs
21 Committee, minority staff.

22 [REDACTED] Before we begin, I'll outline the procedure and guidelines we will
23 follow during today's interview.

24 Questioning will proceed in rounds. The majority will ask questions for up to
25 1 hour, followed by the minority for up to an hour if they choose. For the second round,

1 questioning will proceed in up to 1-hour increments alternating by majority and minority
2 as in the first. For the third and any subsequent rounds questioning will proceed in
3 45-minute periods until there are no more questions.

4 We'll take a short break at the end of each hour. If you would like to take a
5 break apart from that, please let us know. We will take a 30-minute break at noon for
6 lunch or thereabouts. We will then resume questioning in the manner just described.

7 There are two official reporters here today taking down everything we say to
8 make a written record, so we ask that you give verbal responses to all questions.

9 Do you understand?

10 Ms. Sieg. Yes.

11 [REDACTED] To ensure that the reporter can take a clear record, we will limit
12 the number of people directing questions to you during any given hour to such member
13 of minority or majority staff whose turn it is. Please try to speak in a clear and audible
14 manner so everyone in the room can hear you.

15 I will reiterate that, for the purposes of this interview, that no one speaks over or
16 interrupts one another during questioning. Please wait until each question is completed
17 before you begin your response and we will try to wait until your response is complete
18 before we move on to our next question.

19 I understand agency counsel is present today. Would agency counsel please
20 state their name for the record?

21 [REDACTED] [REDACTED] USAGM.

22 [REDACTED] We note that agency counsel is appearing today on behalf of the
23 agency and represents the agency, not the witness in her personal capacity.

24 I understand that the witness' personal counsel is here today as well. Would the
25 witness' personal counsel please state his name for the record?

1 Mr. Zaid. Yes. Mark Zaid, Z-a-i-d.

2 [REDACTED] Thank you.

3 During the interview we request that you answer all questions in a complete and
4 truthful manner. If you do not understand a question, please let us know.

5 We ask that you provide answers to each question to the best of your recollection.
6 If there are things you do not know or cannot remember, please say so and inform us
7 who, to the best of your knowledge, might be able to provide a more complete answer to
8 the question.

9 Although this interview is being conducted under oath -- is not being conducted
10 under oath -- by law you are required to answer questions from Congress truthfully.

11 Do you understand?

12 Ms. Sieg. Yes.

13 [REDACTED] This requirement extends to questions posed by congressional
14 staff in an interview.

15 Do you understand?

16 Ms. Sieg. Yes.

17 [REDACTED] Witnesses that knowingly provide false testimony could be subject
18 to criminal prosecution for perjury or for making false statements under 18 U.S.C., section
19 1001.

20 Do you understand?

21 Ms. Sieg. Yes.

22 [REDACTED] Is there any reason you are unable to provide truthful answers to
23 today's questions?

24 Ms. Sieg. No.

25 [REDACTED]. Thank you.

1 Finally, I'd like to note that the content of what we discuss today is confidential.
2 We ask that you speak about what we discuss here today in this interview -- that you not
3 speak about what we discuss here today in this interview to any outside individual in
4 order to preserve the integrity of this investigation.

5 For these same reasons, the marked exhibits used today will be provided to the
6 court reporter so that they may go in the official transcript and any copies of those
7 exhibits will be returned to us when we wrap up.

8 Thank you.

9 The clock now reads 10:07. And before we begin, I will ask if my minority
10 colleagues have any comments they'd like to make.

11 ██████████ Just to add that, notwithstanding any agreement that may have been
12 made between the witness, your counsel, agency counsel, and/or the majority, there are
13 no rules governing confidentiality of transcribed interviews for either the House or the
14 committee, this committee, in the 118th Congress.

15 Thanks.

16 ██████████ Thank you.

17 If the court reporters and witness are ready to begin, we will now go on the clock.

18 ██████████ Okay. Ms. Sieg, thank you for joining us today. I know that it is
19 not pleasant for you, nor for us, to be here. It brings us no pleasure to have to conduct
20 this interview.

21 I'll get into why the chairman was interested in conducting this interview in a
22 moment, but I wanted to begin by asking you, why, in your view, are you here today?

23 Ms. Sieg. There have been questions about my style of management and some
24 of my credentials. This is the understanding that I have.

25 ██████████ Thank you. That comports with our understanding as well.

1 And just to reiterate what the chairman and his staff have tried to make clear
2 throughout the course of this investigation, some of these matters -- or all of these
3 matters that we'll discuss today were raised by whistleblowers inside the agency.

4 And so when whistleblowers bring matters like this to our attention that touch on
5 agency personnel it is incumbent upon Congress, in the chairman's view, to investigate
6 fully those matters. So please do not take any of our questions as personal attacks on
7 you. They were raised to us by whistleblowers.

8 And, again, we have a duty to conduct our investigation thoroughly, without fear
9 or favor, and that's what has brought us here today.

10 So, again, thank you for appearing voluntarily. And let's get into the substance.

11 EXAMINATION

12 BY ██████████ :

13 Q As mentioned earlier, this interview is taking place on October 15th, 2024.
14 When were you first made aware that the committee had requested your
15 participation for this transcribed interview?

16 A I don't have the exact date for this particular transcript interview.

17 Q USAGM informed the committee that you were made personally aware on
18 April 9th, 2024. Is that correct?

19 A Yes.

20 Q Who informed you of the committee's request to interview you?

21 A I received an email from a VOA manager.

22 Q I'm sorry?

23 A I received an email from a VOA manager.

24 Q And who was that manager?

25 A John Featherly.

1 Q And what was the substance of that information communicated to you by
2 Mr. Featherly?

3 A He mentioned that there will be an interview.

4 Q What was your response when you were informed in April of 2024 of the
5 committee's request to interview you?

6 A I don't remember exactly what I said, but I asked -- I remember I think I
7 asked what it is for.

8 Q And his response was?

9 A He referred me to the counsel at USAGM.

10 Q And what did the counsel tell you?

11 A That the committee has requested a transcript interview.

12 Q And what followed from that information that was provided to you?

13 A I don't think there was any more correspondence. I don't remember if
14 there were.

15 Q Did you follow up with counsel or Mr. Featherly to schedule a date for the
16 interview in April of 2024?

17 A I left it up to the counsel. I did not.

18 Q So you -- did you indicate a willingness to appear?

19 A Yes.

20 Q In April of 2024?

21 A In April, yes.

22 Q And counsel for USAGM, is it your understanding, did not act on that
23 notification of yours?

24 A I don't remember.

25 Q So here we are, ma'am, it is now October. This request was made in April.

1 So we're just trying to better understand the delay that was over 6 months in scheduling.

2 And so just to the best of your recollection, I just want to make clear for the
3 record, you're saying that you indicated a willingness in April to appear before this
4 committee, you made that clear to counsel, and that you're not sure what happened after
5 that?

6 A I'm not sure what happened after that.

7 Q Okay. We were never made aware by the counsel that you had indicated a
8 willingness to appear until this fall. So not sure where the ball got dropped, but the
9 chairman was a little frustrated that he made a request that was never followed up upon.

10 Did anyone at the agency give you instructions or offer advice to you regarding
11 today's interview?

12 A Yes.

13 Q And who were those individuals?

14 A [REDACTED]

15 Q I'm sorry?

16 A The gentleman who's right here, [REDACTED]

17 Q And what did your friend, Ms. Amanda Bennett, advise you to say?

18 A About what?

19 Q About today's interview?

20 A I have not had a conversation with her.

21 Q Okay. And what did Ms. Kelu Chao advise you to say?

22 A I have not talked to Kelu Chao.

23 Q About this interview?

24 A About this interview.

25 Q Your misuse of government funds and illegitimacy of your academic

1 credentials have been the subject of administrative and congressional investigation since
2 2020.

3 Is there a reason that you have consistently delayed or hindered investigations
4 into these issues, including but not limited to denying a USAGM request to receive
5 university records on your past and delaying responses to information requests from both
6 this committee and USAGM?

7 A No.

8 Q There's no reason?

9 A No.

10 Q So you're admitting that you have delayed, but -- and that no reason exists
11 for such delay?

12 A No, I didn't say that.

13 Q Do you acknowledge that there have been delays and hindrances into these
14 issues both in your responses to the agency itself and in regards to requests made by the
15 chairman?

16 A I'm not aware of these delays.

17 Q Have you ever retained private counsel, other than the one present here
18 today, to handle issues related to Congress' investigation into USAGM HR matters that
19 implicate you?

20 A Yes.

21 Q And who is that?

22 A David Zaid.

23 Q I'm sorry?

24 A David Zaid.

25 Q Has Andrew Dockham from the Freshfields law firm ever represented you?

1 A Yes.

2 Q And now Mr. Zaid represents you or are you to this day still represented by
3 the other two attorneys you just mentioned?

4 A Mr. Zaid is representing me and I got advice from Andrew.

5 Q Prior to today's interview?

6 A Not from Andrew directly, but from his firm.

7 Q Please state your past and current roles with VOA and USAGM?

8 A Past? You mean since when?

9 Q Since you began at the agency?

10 A I started as a contractor and I worked in different units. I worked for the
11 Persian Service as a broadcaster, as a producer, as an executive editor, managing editor,
12 deputy director, and director. And I was also an anchor.

13 Q In your past roles, did you supervise other employees?

14 A I did, yes.

15 Q And do you do so in your current role?

16 A Yes.

17 Q Roughly how many employees currently?

18 A Six.

19 Q In your past roles, did you manage government funds and approve projects
20 funded by taxpayer money?

21 A Yes.

22 Q Do you do so currently?

23 A No.

24 Q In your past roles generally how large of a budget did you oversee?

25 A If I remember correctly, it was about \$13 million.

1 Q Do you oversee a budget in your current role?

2 A No.

3 Q In your past roles did you interact with the public on behalf of USAGM?

4 A I'm not clear on your answer. I'm sorry. What do you mean public? In
5 what way?

6 Q In terms of agency events, recruiting, panel discussions, various events in
7 which the agency is represented as a stakeholder?

8 A Panel discussions, yes.

9 Q News broadcasts as well? You said you were an anchor?

10 A I was an anchor for 10 years.

11 Q Do you do any of that sort of work in your current capacity?

12 A No.

13 Q So no public-facing events not only on air but also panel discussions and the
14 like?

15 A I don't remember doing any panel discussions. But on air, no.

16 Q Okay. Throughout your career have you been featured on the agency's
17 website?

18 A Yes.

19 Q Were you referred to as Dr. Sieg or as having a Ph.D. in your official
20 biography on the VOA website?

21 A Yes.

22 Q Please describe the duties of your current position.

23 A I review the language services for content, journalistic standards, and
24 production.

25 BY [REDACTED]:

1 Q Do you mind specifying which language services?

2 A Forty-eight language services.

3 Q And in your prior role you only oversaw one, correct?

4 A In another capacity.

5 Q Yes. So in your current role you now oversee 48 more -- or I guess 47
6 more -- different language services?

7 A It's not in the same capacity.

8 Q But you are overseeing these?

9 A I look at their content and production, content values and production values.
10 I don't oversee them.

11 Q And what, when you're looking at them, what's the outcome of your
12 activity? Are you producing reports to any one individual?

13 A Yes, I put out reports.

14 Q And who reads these reports?

15 A The director of programming.

16 Q So you're now directly communicating with the director of programming for
17 all of VOA. And your reports are influencing his oversight of all of these agencies.

18 A I advise.

19

BY [REDACTED]

20 Q Would it be fair to say that you are interacting with--/overseeing the
21 many language services that in your prior capacity at VOA Persia you were not?

22 A I'm not overseeing them. No, that's not correct.

23 Q Okay. I qualified that statement by saying interacting with or overseeing.

24 Are you interacting with those language services in ways that you were not doing
25 so when you were at VOA Persia?

1 A Not directly. My staff is.

2 Q Your staff is interacting with those entities.

3 A Yes.

4 Q Your staff of six that you identified earlier.

5 A Yes.

6 Q Okay. I wanted to parse the three areas you said that you
7 review -- content, journalistic standards, and production.

8 Could you talk a little bit more in detail about what you're looking for in those
9 three areas and what your work consists of?

10 A We have a VOA standards that has been published. And we look at the
11 content of these language services and we compare them against these standard values.

12 Q So you have sort of a guide and you're comparing broadcasts --

13 A Yes.

14 Q -- against those standards?

15 And as far as content and production, is that separate work or you're saying that's
16 all wrapped up into the review of the standards?

17 A It's all the same.

18 Q And what happens if you find a broadcast that you feel does not meet the
19 standards or there's some issue there?

20 A We put it in the report.

21 Q It goes up to the VOA director of programming?

22 A Yes.

23 Q Who is currently?

24 A It's John Lippman. He's acting VOA director of programming.

25 Q And Mr. Lippman then presumably has a range of options as far as how he

1 can act on that information?

2 A I don't know what he does.

3 Q So you're not sure what happens to the reports once they go to
4 Mr. Lippman?

5 A No.

6 Q You don't discuss your reports with Mr. Lippman?

7 A No.

8 Q So you just send them to him and that's it?

9 A That's correct.

10 Q Does that give you pause, that he's not reviewing your reports-slash-he's not
11 following up with you verbally or in email to discuss the contents of what you're sending
12 him?

13 A I do my job, I send it to him. You should ask him. I don't know what he
14 does with them.

15 I also have, if I just may add, we also have a yearly report at the end of the year.
16 We put everything together and we send it to him and he's supposed to send it to the
17 director of VOA.

18 Q So overseeing 48 language services, could you identify a few that in your
19 view are performing in exemplary fashion and/or are not meeting the journalistic
20 standards?

21 A I'm not overseeing the languages again. I want to make it clear.

22 Q You're conducting a review, so I'm sorry if my language isn't precise. But
23 you are reviewing 48-some-odd language services. So I'm just asking, in your
24 professional opinion, which of those language services, after you have conducted this
25 review, you would identify as either subpar or exemplary?

1 A Korean is doing a very, very good job. And I remember that Cantonese was
2 not doing well.

3 Q And why in your -- what standards was the Cantonese Service not meeting?

4 A There were issues in their -- the standards. As I said, I compare the
5 standards -- we compare the standards, what they do content-wise, and it wasn't meeting
6 the standards of VOA.

7 Q Can you identify a particular standard that it was not meeting?

8 A I don't remember.

9 Q And when -- how long ago was your most recent review of the Cantonese
10 Service?

11 A I have to look at my papers. I don't remember that either. It was this
12 year, but I don't remember when.

13 Q And you don't remember anything in the content of the review itself, no
14 more details that you can provide?

15 A I don't. I don't remember.

16 Q Roughly how -- with what frequency are you performing these reviews? In
17 other words, like, one a week, one a month, several at the same time? How does it
18 work process-wise?

19 A We have to do it every year. We have to do all the language services every
20 year. It was mandated by Congress for us to do it. And it's divided among the staff
21 that we have. We have a calendar and they go by the calendar.

22 Q Thank you.

23 Does your current role require eligibility for access to classified information?

24 A No.

25 Q Do you currently have a security clearance?

- 1 A I do, yes.
- 2 Q At what level?
- 3 A I'm not sure.
- 4 Q Where in the organizational hierarchy is your current role relative to your
5 previous role?
- 6 A I couldn't tell you.
- 7 Q You're not familiar with the agency's org chart?
- 8 A I don't know where I stand.
- 9 Q In your current role, do you help oversee not only your previous department
10 of the Persian News Network but other VOA departments as well?
- 11 A No, I have recused myself from the Persian Service. I don't do their
12 reviews.
- 13 Q So based on your previous testimony, you're unable to characterize whether
14 your current position is higher in the org chart than your previous position?
- 15 A I don't know.
- 16 Q Could you -- would you characterize it as a promotion?
- 17 A I don't think so.
- 18 Q Would you characterize it as a demotion?
- 19 A I have the same grade. I don't know.
- 20 Q Did your salary change from your prior position to your current position?
- 21 A No.
- 22 Q So your current salary is the same as your previous salary?
- 23 A Yes.
- 24 Q You mentioned earlier, ma'am, that in your current capacity you engage, at
25 least it sounds like, by email with Mr. Lippman. Do you engage with other members of

1 agency leadership?

2 A Yes.

3 Q And who else do you interact with?

4 A John Featherly.

5 Q In what capacity?

6 A He is the acting deputy director of programming.

7 Q And how do you interact? Can you sort of explain the contours of that
8 interaction?

9 A If I see a service that is not doing well, instead of waiting for the yearly
10 year-end report, I would flag it and I will send it to him and Lippman.

11 [REDACTED] When you say flag it, do you mean by email?

12 Ms. Sieg. Yes, I email it.

13 [REDACTED] And does that lead to any follow-on discussion? What would be, I
14 guess, a general sense of what an email of that kind would entail?

15 Ms. Sieg. I only advise. I don't know what they do with it.

16 BY [REDACTED]

17 Q So do you work from home or in the office or both?

18 A I work both, hybrid.

19 Q Okay. And how often are you in the office?

20 A Once a week.

21 Q Once a week. All day?

22 A Yes.

23 Q And do you have in-person meetings with Mr. Featherly or Mr. Lippman?

24 A No.

25 Q Do you have face-to-face meetings with anybody?

1 A With the team that I work with.

2 Q Your staff of six?

3 A Yes.

4 Q And other than Mr. Featherly and Mr. Lippman is there anyone else from
5 agency leadership who you interact with?

6 A No.

7 Q So you don't interact with Ms. Bennett in any capacity, personal or
8 professional?

9 A No.

10 Q Ms. Chao?

11 A No.

12 Q During your time as a VOA employee have you ever been the subject of
13 formal complaints from those you have worked with?

14 A Related to this investigation?

15 Q Ever.

16 A I don't remember.

17 Q You don't remember hearing about complaints from any of your supervisors
18 or senior execs at the agency?

19 A I don't remember.

20 Q Is it possible that formal complaints were issued and you just can't
21 remember them?

22 A Everything is possible.

23 Q Is it likely?

24 A I can't answer. I'm not sure. I have to go back to the files. I have to go
25 back to HR and check all that. I'm not sure.

1

BY [REDACTED]

2

Q I'm sorry, just to make sure you're understanding the question. Are you

3

aware of any complaints filed against you during your time as a VOA employee?

4

A To LER?

5

Q Yes.

6

A I can't remember.

7

Q I just want to make sure we're understanding. We are here at the end of

8

almost 4 years of investigations based off whistleblower complaints against you through

9

multiple different channels. You may not remember the substance, the exact substance.

10

Are you saying you don't remember if there have ever been any complaints filed against

11

you?

12

A Well, my question was to this investigation.

13

Q Yes. And my colleague clarified any complaints, including --

14

A Related to the investigation, yes, I'm aware.

15

Q Okay. I just want to make sure we're understanding the question. Thank

16

you very much.

17

[REDACTED] Have you ever been formally disciplined or reprimanded because

18

of the complaints that you just acknowledged exist?

19

Ms. Sieg. Yes.

20

[REDACTED] Let's turn to the January '21 notice of proposed removal. My

21

colleague will hand out exhibits to all parties.

22

[Zieg Majority Exhibit No. 1

23

was marked for identification.]

24

BY [REDACTED]

25

Q Can you please read the date on the top of the notice?

1 A January 5th, 2021.

2 Q Can you confirm that this is a copy of the notice detailing why you were
3 placed on administrative leave by then-VOA Deputy Director Elizabeth Robbins?

4 A Yes.

5 Q Please take your time reviewing it.

6 A Yes.

7 Q Thank you.

8 If you turn to page 2 and page 10 of the notice, can you please read the two stated
9 charges that justified the decision to place you on administrative leave in January 2021?

10 A You mean Charge 1?

11 Q That's the first one, correct.

12 A "Waste of Agency/Government Funds, Sole Source Contracts for Max
13 Amini/Abstraction Media."

14 You said page what?

15 Q Page 10.

16 A "Lack of Candor in Official Interviews." Charge 2.

17 Q Thank you.

18 Under the explanation of Charge 1, which you read on page 2, there are various
19 misuses of government funds alleged, which are listed.

20 One of them states that you approved \$950,000 of agency funds through no-bid
21 contracts to an outside contractor to produce content, including content that had
22 previously been produced at less cost in-house at VOA. Is that correct? Please take
23 your time reviewing what is --

24 A Can you please repeat the question?

25 Q We're just trying to confirm that your understanding of what is on the

1 printed notice, beginning at page 2 and then continuing on to page 3 and beyond, want to
2 confirm that your understanding is that what is being alleged is that you approved
3 \$950,000 of agency funds through a no-bid contract to an outside contractor to produce
4 content that had previously been produced at less cost in-house at VOA.

5 A There are two parts to my answer. Yes, I approved the \$950,000, but there
6 is no comparison to what was produced in-house.

7 Q Thank you.

8 In 2014, before the contractor in question was awarded his contract, the Iranian
9 New Year -- for the court reporter, I will spell this term for you. Norouz, it's N-o-r-o-u-z.

10 The Norouz -- excuse me if I'm mispronouncing it, I probably am -- Show averaged
11 835,000 views per video. In 2019, under the outside contractor producing Norouz,
12 viewership averaged 2,560 views. This is on page 3 and 4 of the document you're
13 reviewing.

14 YouTube was blocked in Iran for both 2014 and 2019, the two dates at issue here,
15 so that's not a factor at play here.

16 Why, in your view, did viewership of the content produced by the more expensive
17 contractor decrease relative to VOA's previously in-house produced content?

18 A These are not accurate numbers.

19 Q And why do you think they're inaccurate?

20 A Afterwards we followed up and we saw that there were -- the viewership
21 had increased.

22 Q And by "we," you mean?

23 A I asked the Office of Digital.

24 Q And who in the Office of Digital did you communicate with?

25 A Matthew -- I don't remember his last name.

1 Q And at what time did you pull this data and who did you provide it to?

2 A I don't remember the time.

3 Q Was it prior to this notice going out or after?

4 A It was prior.

5 Q And you don't remember who you gave it to?

6 A I didn't know the other ones when I saw this. But we looked at the data. I
7 wasn't comparing it to anything.

8 Am I making things -- I'm sorry if maybe you're confused by my answer.

9 Q No, it's --

10 A At the time we looked at the -- go ahead.

11 Q Well, I'm just trying to clarify. You clearly disagree with the numbers here.
12 And so I'm just trying to understand your process, after seeing the numbers, what you did
13 to clarify what you allege to be a misunderstanding or a misquoting of this data.

14 A I don't remember what I did. I don't remember who did I talk to.

15 Q But it's your testimony that you raised the alarm and said LER or whoever is
16 getting this wrong?

17 A Whoever gave these numbers, they were wrong. Because at the time, in
18 2014 and afterwards, when we followed up and we asked the Office of Digital, the
19 numbers were much higher.

20 Q Do you -- I know this was some time ago -- but do you by any chance know
21 what the numbers that you allege to be more correct were?

22 A No.

23 [REDACTED] Just to clarify, when you're saying much higher, are you saying much
24 higher than the stated views for the Mr. Amini-produced content or much higher than the
25 previous VOA in-house produced content?

1 Ms. Sieg. It was much more than the 2,000 that is here. It's impossible for it to
2 be 2,000.

3 [REDACTED] So just much higher than the outside contractor-produced content
4 numbers were stated at?

5 Ms. Sieg. I can't tell. I can't tell whether it was that or in comparison to the
6 one that was made in-house. I don't remember.

7 [REDACTED] Thank you.

8 BY [REDACTED]

9 Q I believe the document you're reviewing also alleges that previous iterations
10 of the Norouz program for Iranian New Year have been conducted by VOA contractors in
11 the past at a price of approximately \$12,000.

12 Why was your sole-source contractor awarded \$170,000 to produce the 2019
13 iteration of Norouz?

14 A I'm not aware of the \$12,000. I don't know where that came from.

15 Q Did you do anything to correct what you allege to be a misstatement of the
16 price when you saw this notice or beforehand when you were interviewed about it?

17 A I'm sorry, I don't understand your question.

18 Q You're alleging that the \$12,000 price that I'm just reading from the
19 document itself is perhaps incorrect.

20 A No, I didn't say that, I'm sorry. I said I'm not aware of the \$12,000 cost. I
21 didn't see that. I don't know what that was.

22 Q So you didn't see it in the document, this document that you were served
23 with?

24 A In the document, yes, but at the time when we had the contract with this
25 particular organization.

1 Q And did you -- so you said a few minutes ago that when it came to
2 viewership numbers you took some proactive step, although you don't remember who
3 you conveyed your disagreement about the numbers to. You took some step to clarify
4 the record.

5 When it comes to the price, did you take any similar step?

6 A No.

7 Q And why is that?

8 A I don't remember. I don't -- I don't -- didn't think it was necessary, that the
9 price was an issue.

10 Q I mean, someone's proposing to remove you from the Federal service and
11 you're alleging that they got the numbers wrong. One would think that you'd to do
12 everything in your power to clarify that their numbers are inaccurate.

13 A That's what I did, that the numbers were inaccurate, yes.

14 Q But not when it comes to the price, you said?

15 A I don't remember if I did anything for the price.

16 Q We can move on.

17 As you read on page 10 of the document, the second set of charges relate to a
18 purported lack of candor.

19 Do you believe that you have been honest, forthcoming, and fully cooperative
20 during the USAGM investigations into the formal complaints against you?

21 A Yes.

22 Q Do you believe that the charge of lack of candor has any basis in fact?

23 A I consider that there are lots of controversies.

24 Q Controversies?

25 A About the diploma, if this is what it's referring to.

1 Q Okay. Thanks. We'll move on.

2 We're going to show you an excerpt from an administrative interview conducted
3 by USAGM personnel in December 2020.

4 This will be exhibit 2, majority exhibit 2 that is.

5 A Are you done with this?

6 Q For now, yes, ma'am.

7 [Sieg Majority Exhibit No. 2
8 was marked for identification.]

9 [REDACTED] This interview was conducted as part of the fact-finding
10 investigation that served as the basis of the January 5th, 2021, Elizabeth Robbins notice
11 that we were just discussing.

12 Mr. Zaid. Just for clarification, is this of her administrative interview?

13 [REDACTED] Correct.

14 Please take a moment if you'd like to just look through it. You don't -- I mean, no
15 reason to read every word, but I just want you to orient yourself.

16 Ms. Sieg. Any particular part or the whole thing you want me to read it?

17 BY [REDACTED]:

18 Q So as you can see, you are actually Person A in this transcript.

19 A Uh-huh.

20 Q At the bottom of the first page, which is page 14 of the overall transcript, it
21 just starts off with one of the allegations. The allegation -- turning to the next
22 page -- was that you went to the conference because your sister was either speaking
23 there or being honored there and not for official government business.

24 If you turn to page 16 of the transcript, at the very bottom -- once again, as a
25 reminder, you are Person A -- "But she," referring to your sister, "has no connection to

1 that organization whatsoever. She doesn't have any connections to the Iranian
2 community."

3 In response, USAGM personnel, Person J: "I'm going to share my screen with
4 you so we'll look at this document."

5 Further down on the page, person J: "This appears to be a brochure from the
6 conference, a newsletter, that was announcing that she" -- referring to your
7 sister -- "would be recognized for the King -- of Knight of Order of Arts and Letters at this
8 conference."

9 Person A: "I don't think that it says that she will be presenting. Let me read it."

10 Person J: "I didn't say that she presented. I said recognized."

11 To clarify and provide context, you stated that your sister has no connections to
12 that organization. USAGM personnel provided you a copy of a brochure laying out your
13 sister's connection to that organization.

14 Do you think that this might serve as a basis for lack of candor?

15 A No.

16 Q Why not?

17 A Because when my sister got the Knighthood from the French Government, a
18 lot of Iranian organizations covered her, whether it was Radio Farda or the Iranian
19 newspapers. And this is also a women's foundation and they covered her. So
20 everybody -- it was news within the Iranian community.

21 Q So on page 20, do you think this is accurate? You state: "This is
22 inaccurate. I'm not saying it's inaccurate what the content says. She became a knight,
23 but she's not a member of the IAWF."

24 Is that the sentiment you're conveying here?

25 A Yes, she's not a member.

1 Q And just to clarify, you were asked: Was she awarded anything? Your
2 response was: "She has no connection." Then you were shown a brochure in which
3 she was awarded. And your statement was that this was inaccurate, she's not a
4 member. But that wasn't the question, correct?

5 A She was not awarded anything.

6 Q So you stand by the statement that she was not awarded anything?

7 A She was not awarded anything. The award was at the French Embassy, not
8 there.

9 And I would like to reiterate that if they recognized her, a lot of entities in the
10 Iranian community, Iranian-American community, that was very -- big news and everyone
11 recognized that. She's not a member and she has never paid membership to that
12 organization.

13 Q So if you don't mind turning to page 24 of the transcript. USAGM Person J
14 once again says -- is pulling up an email that you sent to a friend of yours, Person 64, who
15 you self-identified as -- you agreed with the assessment that she's a friend of yours.

16 And as it says here, Person 81 is your sister, that is your sister's email address.

17 A I'm sorry, I'm not -- let me --

18 Q Oh, no worries.

19 A I need some time to -- you said page 24?

20 Q Yes, page 24 of the transcript.

21 A Okay.

22 Q Do you mind reading from line 10 through 14 out loud for the record?

23 A "Okay. Okay. So the email says I have to fly to California for a conference
24 on February 25th. Will be going too to get an award. Apologies for the change.
25 Looking forward to seeing you both."

1 Q So once you were presented with evidence in which you stated that there
2 was no connection to your trip to California, no connection to your sister being awarded,
3 is it correct that USAGM personnel provided a copy of your own emails stating that you
4 have to fly to California because Person 81, who we have established as your sister, that
5 you stated she will be getting an award?

6 A That is not accurate. And I would like to continue and you can read page
7 25. And this is why I sent that email. I can read --

8 Q Which portion you'd like to read? Which clarification?

9 A My response: "Well, if I can make a confession here, this is not accurate.
10 She wasn't getting an award there, but we were just trying to get out of this invitation.
11 She wasn't getting an award."

12 So there is a context here.

13 Q Yes. The context is your own statement, correct? You were provided
14 documentary evidence contradictory to your own statements, but your own statement is
15 sufficient evidence in your eyes?

16 A I'm not following you.

17 Q You have provided statements to USAGM. USAGM provided documentary
18 evidence contradicting your own statements.

19 A Why is it contradictory to my statements? I'm sorry, I'm saying she wasn't
20 getting an award.

21 Q Yes. But there are emails from you stating that she was getting an award.

22 A Yes, and I continued on that email explaining that to LER, that she was not
23 and I was trying to get out an invitation.

24 Q And there's no other secondary verification? Is there any documentary
25 evidence of your claim that you were just trying to get out of an invitation?

1 A The documentary claim is the ceremony itself when she was not awarded
2 anything and she had nothing to do with that.

3 ██████████ Oh, I'm sorry. Why would you send an email to get out of an
4 invitation that your sister is getting an award?

5 Mr. Sieg. She was getting an award, but not there. She was getting an award in
6 Washington, D.C. We were invited to dinner and I probably said, no, we don't have
7 time, we're not coming because she is getting an award. And I did recognize that that
8 was not accurate.

9 ██████████ So just to clarify, you believe that the other documents that USAGM,
10 the documentary evidence that USAGM provided to you contradictory to your own
11 statements, was inaccurate?

12 Ms. Sieg. Again, I would like to clarify and I would like to reiterate that that
13 document, where it says -- I mean, I haven't seen the document, I can't talk on that
14 document. But a lot of companies, organizations, Iranian-Americans covered my sister
15 getting the knighthood from the French Government. I can't control all of them.

16 BY ██████████

17 Q Okay. We can go back to the exhibit 1, the Robbins notice. If you go back
18 to page 10, the second set of claims involving lack of candor, you'll see on page 10,
19 Specification 2, it reads, quote, "False Claim of Earning a PhD from the Sorbonne."

20 Feel free to take a moment to read through the section, starting on page -- on the
21 bottom of page 10.

22 [Pause.]

23 Ready?

24 Do you agree with the January 2021 notice finding that you falsely claimed to have
25 earned a Ph.D. from the Sorbonne?

1 A No.

2 Q When you applied to be the general manager of the Persian News Network
3 in 2013 did you submit a resume claiming to have earned a Ph.D. in international relations
4 summa cum laude from the Sorbonne in 1995?

5 A I don't remember.

6 Q We will circulate exhibit 3, which is your resume.

7 [Sieg Majority Exhibit No. 3
8 was marked for identification.]

9 BY [REDACTED]

10 Q Could you read the first part of the subsection entitled "Education"?

11 A "Ph.D. International Relations, Summa Cum Laude, Sorbonne, Paris, 1995."

12 Q So can you now confirm that you did indeed submit a resume claiming to
13 have earned a Ph.D. in international relations, summa cum laude, from the Sorbonne in
14 1995?

15 A I'm sorry, can you repeat the question?

16 Q Based on your review of the document before you, can you now confirm
17 that you applied -- when you applied to be general manager of the Persian News Network
18 you submitted a resume claiming to have earned a Ph.D. in international relations,
19 summa cum laude, from the Sorbonne in 1995?

20 A Yes.

21 Q In 2017, to your recollection, did you submit an --

22 [REDACTED] On October 3rd, 2017, did you submit to the Office of Security at
23 USAGM a questionnaire for a national security position stating that you have a Ph.D.,
24 political science comparative, from the University of Paris 7, Denis Diderot?

25 Ms. Sieg. I have to look at the document.

1 ██████████ This will be exhibit 4. Do we have it?

2 We'll come back to that.

3 ██████████ Yeah, we can produce a copy.

4 BY ██████████:

5 Q Have you ever produced for the agency a diploma that reflects that you
6 received a French doctorate from either the Sorbonne or the University of Paris 7?

7 A Yes.

8 Q When did you produce such a diploma?

9 A As part of my security clearance.

10 Q In roughly what year?

11 A One to the last, probably 2017.

12 Q And did that document say "diploma" on it?

13 A It had the French word on it.

14 Q Were you able to produce a copy of your purported diploma in the context
15 of this investigation?

16 A Yes.

17 Q And when did you provide that and to whom did you provide that?

18 A I provided it to LER at the beginning of the investigation. I also provided
19 that to USAGM, I think.

20 Q Well, I believe that LER would take -- I don't want to speak for them -- but
21 there's been a lot of allegations that what you allege to be a diploma is not in fact a
22 diploma. So we'll return to that later.

23 ██████████ Sorry. Just to clarify. When you're saying diploma, reflecting that
24 you have a French doctorate, you're saying -- you're stating that you have submitted to
25 USAGM a diploma that has the word "doctorate" on there?

1 Ms. Sieg. The diploma that I have I submitted to them.

2 [REDACTED] And do you mind clarifying, does the diploma that you have say the
3 word "doctorate" on it?

4 Ms. Sieg. I've been under the -- it is -- it has been my understanding that it is.

5 [REDACTED] It's been your understanding that it says "doctorat" in French.

6 Ms. Sieg. It's been my understanding that every paperwork that I submitted had
7 the word "doctorate" from the IDs, from the registrations, from the student IDs, and the
8 diploma itself. It's had -- it has a title, and my understanding, again, is that that's been a
9 doctorate.

10 [REDACTED] Your understanding is that the diploma you submitted to USAGM says
11 the word "doctorate," not the registration forms or anything like that, but the diploma
12 that you've submitted to USAGM?

13 Ms. Sieg. The diploma it says the -- it's diplome -- it has a name for it, and it's an
14 equivalent to an American Ph.D. And, again, this is my understanding.

15 BY [REDACTED]:

16 Q So you're confirming now that the document you allege to be a diploma of
17 the degree that you hold does not refer to a doctorate in either English or French?

18 A No, I didn't say that.

19 Q Can you confirm my colleague's previous question that the document you
20 allege to be a diploma, does it say anywhere on the document "doctorat" in French or
21 "doctorate" in English?

22 A Yes, it does.

23 Q And what is the title of the document that you're referring to?

24 A It's proces verbal de soutenance. I have to translate it for you, I think, or
25 you have already done the translation, I believe.

1 Voice. [Inaudible.]

2 Ms. Sieg. Yes. Do you want me to spell it? P-r-o-c-e-s v-e-r-b-a-l, and space,
3 d-e, and s-o-u-t-e-n-a-n-c-e.

4 Q And where on that document can you point to the word "doctorate" or
5 "doctorat"?

6 A Yes, it says Diplome de Doctorat.

7 ██████████ Do you have a copy of that?

8 Ms. Sieg. Yes. It says after the --

9 Mr. Zaid. This is part of the packet I sent you guys last night. It's Bates
10 stamped number 11.

11 ██████████ We can come back to that.

12 ██████████ To clarify for the record, is that document you're alleging, Bates -- and
13 we can enter that into the record shortly -- is that a diploma of a doctorate? Is that
14 what you are alleging on the record?

15 Ms. Sieg. This is the -- after the defense it says that I was granted a diploma of
16 doctorate, with the university stamp?

17 ██████████ Are you claiming that that document is a diploma, a doctorate
18 diploma, it is in and of itself a doctorate diploma?

19 Ms. Sieg. It's a certificate.

20 ██████████. Or are you --

21 Ms. Sieg. Pardon me?

22 ██████████. Go ahead.

23 Ms. Sieg. It's a certificate that attests and confirms that after the dissertation
24 and after presentation of the dissertation the jury has declared that I have received a
25 diploma of doctorate, Diplome de Doctorat.

1 BY [REDACTED]:

2 Q And is there a reason why you could not produce the diploma itself, you had
3 to produce this document alleging that you have been granted a diploma?

4 A That's the document I have.

5 Q Why don't you have a diploma?

6 A I do have a diploma. I just presented the diploma.

7 Q No, you --

8 A That's what I received.

9 Q You, yourself, just said that this document alleges you to have been granted
10 a diploma but it is not itself a diploma.

11 A I never said that. I said this document is saying that I got a diploma for
12 doctorate.

13 Q Exactly.

14 A And then you're telling me: Where is your diploma? And I said this is
15 what I have. That's all I have. And I have another one that I gave you. And I think
16 you're asking whether it has the word "diploma" on it. And I'm saying that's what I
17 have. These are the two documents I have. I don't have any other documents.

18 BY [REDACTED]:

19 Q This specific phrase Diplome de Doctorat.

20 A Yes.

21 Q You have no piece of paper, the university has not been able to provide you
22 any piece of paper in which that document is the document --

23 A The document --

24 Q -- the document referenced in this document?

25 A The document that followed is the only document that I have. It followed

1 this. That's all I have.

2 [REDACTED] We'll come back to it.

3 [REDACTED] Thank you.

4 [REDACTED] Have you ever denied USAGM permission to request documents
5 on your behalf, such as permission to directly receive your academic documents from
6 universities you have attended?

7 Ms. Sieg. Yes.

8 [REDACTED] When and on what basis did you make that denial?

9 Ms. Sieg. I don't remember when. It's based on my counsel's advice, because
10 we were in touch with the university and we shared that with LER saying that we will give
11 all the responses from the university, negative or positive. And we didn't want
12 to -- sorry for lack of a better word -- we didn't want to bombard the university with more
13 questions.

1 [11:01 a.m.]

2 BY [REDACTED]

3 Q Would you today grant USAGM personnel permission to directly contact the
4 universities to request your documents?

5 A I believe that LER has contacted them.

6 Q And they have your permission to receive -- your authorization to receive
7 from the universities all documents related to your time --

8 A At the time, no, but I saw that in their report, afterwards, they had contacted
9 the university.

10 Q Did they do so with your permission or authorization?

11 A I did not give permission before.

12 Q So they would not -- the university would not have been authorized to
13 release any documents on your behalf?

14 A There was a letter from the doctoral committee that, again, they confirmed
15 that my degree is an equivalent to an American Ph.D., and I saw in the letter of reprimand
16 that the LER has contacted the two professors.

17 BY [REDACTED]:

18 Q And we'll be getting to them later.

19 Following the issuance of the January 5th, 2021, notice and its findings, were you
20 placed on administrative leave?

21 A Yes.

22 Q Shortly following the inauguration of President Biden on January 20th, 2021,
23 did the agency decide to curtail your administrative leave and bring you back to the
24 agency granting you full employment?

25 A Yes.

1 Q Did the agency issue a report justifying the decision to disavow the
2 January 5th, 2021, notice by Elizabeth Robbins?

3 A I do not remember, and I don't remember if there was a report.

4 Q So, to the best of your recollection, you were never made aware of the
5 agency's official findings with regard to the Elizabeth Robbins notice?

6 A I don't remember that.

7 Q You don't remember being made aware?

8 A I was made aware that I was coming back.

9 Q We don't have any preconceived answer. I'm just trying to clarify if you
10 were made aware of --

11 A That I was coming back, yes.

12 Q But not of any report about the Robbins notice?

13 A I don't remember seeing anything.

14 BY [REDACTED]

15 Q Were there any communications or explanations on the reasons for why you
16 were brought back?

17 A Yes.

18 Q With who were those communications, with whom?

19 A With some of the VOA managers.

20 Q Do you mind saying their names, please?

21 A With John Lippman, David Kotz, and Yolanda Lopez.

22 BY [REDACTED]

23 Q And what did each -- if you could separate them individually -- what did each
24 of them say was the reason that you were coming back?

25 A David Kotz was in touch with my attorney, and he relayed that message

1 through -- to my attorney.

2 Q Well, that was not my question, ma'am. It was, what was the substance or
3 rationale of Mr. Kotz's communication to your attorney? What was his explanation as to
4 why you were being asked to come back?

5 A That their investigation -- this is my understanding -- that LER's investigation
6 was not finished and that USAGM at the time, or VOA at the time, had not take all the
7 necessary steps and the process that usually they follow for terminating an employee.

8 They had not gone to USAGM, they had not gone to the attorneys, and they had
9 not made anyone aware. But it was only between the VOA director's office or the
10 acting -- or, I'm sorry, the deputy, I don't remember her position, and --

11 Q Thank you.

12 So that was the substance of Mr. Kotz's communication. And you also said you
13 were in touch with Mr. Lippman and Ms. Lopez?

14 A He said the same thing, Mr. Lippman.

15 Q So it was a uniform message communicated by all three folks?

16 A Yes.

17 [REDACTED] Did they tell you that they'd -- did they raise any concerns about any of
18 the factual findings of the January 5th, 2021, notice of administrative leave?

19 Ms. Sieg. Not that I remember.

20 [REDACTED]. So their -- the substance of their explanation was that a certain
21 process had not been followed, not that the allegations in the notice were true or untrue?

22 Ms. Sieg. No. No.

23 May I also ask something? I remember, I did ask Mr. Lippman at the time, and
24 because they said it's a technical issue, again, I'm not aware -- I'm not familiar with the
25 personnel files, but I did ask them to continue this investigation if there is such a thing to

1 clear my name.

2 I did specifically ask that. And I said, if it's based on a technical matter, I would
3 like this investigation to go forward so it will end in -- with results, not on a technical
4 matter only, because my understanding was that it was on a technical matter.

5 [REDACTED] Understood. Thank you for clarifying that.

6 And since we only have 20 seconds left, we will wrap up for this round and turn it
7 over to my minority colleagues.

8 Thank you.

9 [REDACTED] Do you need a few minutes?

10 Ms. Sieg. That would be great if I can take a --

11 [REDACTED] Okay. We can maybe take 5 minutes and then we'll go ahead and
12 start.

13 Ms. Sieg. Thank you.

14 [Recess.]

15 [REDACTED] We are now back on the record. And just as a quick housekeeping
16 matter, I will be entering exhibit 4, which is the document that the witness referred to
17 previously. We will refer to it colloquially as the jury defense report throughout this
18 interview just to make it easier for the transcribers. Thank you.

19 [Sieg Majority Exhibit No. 4
20 was marked for identification.]

21 [REDACTED] Are you done?

22 [REDACTED] Yes. And if the minority is ready.

23 [REDACTED] Okay. Yes. So we can go back on the clock now.

24 And, again, I know we introduced ourselves at the beginning, but I'm [REDACTED].

25 I'm the [REDACTED] on the minority side of the committee. And this is my

1 colleague, [REDACTED], our [REDACTED].

2 Thank you again on behalf of Ranking Member Meeks for being here voluntarily
3 today.

4 I'll just say at the top, we want as clear and clean a record as possible of the facts
5 that you are able to speak to. I apologize in advance if I retread any questions that you
6 may have been asked previously. Please note that that's just in an effort to get a clear
7 record and understanding of the facts.

8 If there's any question that you're asked today the premise of which you disagree
9 with, or if you think I am asserting facts that you disagree with, please, please do say so,
10 so that we can, again, have a clean record where we're not proceeding under any
11 assumptions that are shaky.

12 EXAMINATION

13 BY [REDACTED]:

14 Q With that said at the top, I just want to go back to your background and
15 hiring at the agency, just to make sure we have a little more systemic of an understanding
16 of your -- I want to go over your background in more detail and your hiring at the agency.

17 Can you tell me when were you hired at Voice of America?

18 A In 1998 as a staffer, and before that as a contractor.

19 Q Okay. So when you worked there as a contractor, what years was that?

20 A I was working in the Persian Service, I was working in the French to Africa,
21 and the English department.

22 Q And approximately when did you work as a contractor in those roles?

23 A I believe it was 1994. I don't have the exact date. '95 or '94, I'm not sure.

24 Q And then you said you were hired as a regular full-time employee in 1995?

25 A In 1998.

- 1 Q I'm sorry, in 1998. Thanks for clarifying.
- 2 And the role that you were hired into was what?
- 3 A International broadcaster.
- 4 Q Okay. And can you tell more -- tell us more about that role?
- 5 A At the time, we had radio and I was a news anchor.
- 6 Q For VOA generally or for --
- 7 A For VOA Persian.
- 8 Q VOA Persian.
- 9 And how long did you hold that role approximately?
- 10 A Until 2003. And I became also managing editor of the news.
- 11 Q In 2003?
- 12 A Between 1998 that I was hired and 2003 I was a broadcaster, and then I
- 13 became a managing editor as well.
- 14 Q Okay. And then in 2003 did you move into a different role, and if so, what
- 15 was that?
- 16 A Yes, because VOA Persian transitioned from radio to television, and I was
- 17 selected to be the anchor of a new TV program.
- 18 Q On VOA Persian?
- 19 A On VOA Persian.
- 20 Q Okay. And how long did you serve in that capacity at VOA Persian?
- 21 A Ten years.
- 22 Q Ten years. And so that would take us to 2013 roughly?
- 23 A To 2013. But in the meantime, during the time when I was the anchor, I
- 24 was also managing editor of the news program.
- 25 Q Okay. And in 2013, did you then take a new role at the agency?

1 A In 2010, I believe I became executive editor of the channel, of the Persian
2 News Network or Persian Service. And I -- in 2012 I was deputy director, and in 2013,
3 yes, I applied to become the director.

4 Q And you received that position, correct? You moved into the director --

5 A Yes.

6 Q -- role in 2013?

7 A In December of 2013, I believe.

8 Q And how long did you hold that role?

9 A Until 2019, until December -- I think November of 2019 or December
10 of 2019.

11 Q Okay.

12 A No, I'm sorry, 2020.

13 Q December of 2020?

14 A 2020.

15 Q Okay. And then you moved into the role that you're currently in?

16 A I was on administrative leave, and in March I was brought back to the agency
17 in this new capacity.

18 Q Okay. And just, again, for the record to be clear, what is the title you
19 currently hold?

20 A I am the director of program review.

21 Q For VOA writ large or for VOA Persian?

22 A For VOA at large.

23 Q Okay. So is it accurate that in 2020 your role was the director of VOA
24 Persian Service and you had held that role for about 7 years?

25 A That is correct.

1 Q Okay. Let me go back to the very beginning when you got hired into the
2 agency. And, I'm sorry, I'm already forgetting the title of your first full-time job there.

3 A International broadcaster.

4 Q International broadcaster. Thank you.

5 Can you describe how you came into that role and why you believe you were
6 selected for it?

7 A I came in as a commentator, as an expert -- you used to call it back then -- on
8 one of the radio programs. And I then inquired and I did a voice test, and they said that
9 you have to -- that they were quite interested.

10 And I was offered a position, of course depending on whether I was going to go
11 through the process or not. And I took a test. At the time, as a contractor, I had to
12 take a test. I passed the test. And they brought me as a contractor.

13 Q And I'm speaking specifically to when you were hired as a regular employee
14 of the agency, which I think you said was 1998?

15 A At the end of 1998, November of 1998, yes.

16 Q Can you speak to the circumstances of how you were hired into that role and
17 why you believe you were selected for the position?

18 A I had already worked as a contractor. I did several interviews that other
19 people have not done -- had not done. I took on more responsibility not only as an
20 anchor, but I was doing the schedule. I was helping with the content. And, again, I
21 competed, I went through the process, and I was selected.

22 Q Okay. And can you describe experience that you may have had prior to
23 1998 when you became a full-time regular employee of VOA that would've been relevant
24 to the role that you then played at VOA?

25 A I was teaching at Georgetown University, and I was teaching also at

1 American University on a part-time basis. That was pretty much my job. But I also
2 worked at Fox television, and I got my training at Fox local. That's why I had radio and
3 television experience. And when I was a student in Paris, I was an intern for the Express
4 magazine, so I had some kind of journalistic background.

5 My father also had a magazine in Washington, D.C., that was supported, funded
6 by NED, by the National Endowment for Democracy. I worked with him as well. And
7 we were very much connected to the community of journalists. So I did have that
8 background before.

9 Q Okay. And approximately how many years of experience of the nature that
10 you just described did you have when you became a full-time employee at Voice of
11 America Persian?

12 A Ten years at least.

13 Q Okay. So you considered yourself at the time to be qualified for the role?

14 A Yes.

15 Q And did you consider yourself to be an expert in matters related to
16 journalism and coverage of Iran or Persian language issues?

17 A Yes. And, also, I don't know if it's relevant or not, but because of my
18 background, my father's background, we came as political refugees in this country. And
19 he was about to be executed in Iran, and he ran away from the country. His
20 student -- he was also a college professor -- his student helped him. He was a minister
21 of education. He came out of prison directly to the airport. And we left everything in
22 Iran and we came here.

23 He was invited for a speech at Harvard University, but he had a heart attack then,
24 and we had to stay in the United States. But we went to Paris, and then he was offered
25 a status of political refugee.

1 So we had this background. He was an activist. He was an activist against this
2 government, against the current regime in Iran. And he was an educator as well.

3 So this -- I think it was in my DNA to become a journalist, an activist, and have the
4 people's voice. And I wanted to go to the Voice of America because I could directly take
5 this message to the people inside Iran.

6 Q Okay. Thank you for that clarification.

7 And then, just for the record, when did your family leave Iran under these
8 circumstances of being targeted by the Iranian regime?

9 A At the beginning of the revolution, my parents -- my sister and I were in
10 Paris. My father, they stayed for a year and a half. And then he got word that they
11 had found his name among the -- when there was a takeover of the embassy, the
12 students took over the American Embassy in Iran. His name was there that he had met
13 several times with then-Ambassador Sullivan.

14 So they told him that he had to run away. And at night he just left. He was in
15 hiding for 6 months. So during the revolution he was there. And, finally, they caught
16 up with him -- I mean, they caught him. And he was in their prison for 4 months waiting
17 to be executed. And I think they left a year and a half after the revolution, so I think it
18 was in '81, I believe, 1981.

19 Q And you came to join your family in the United States at around that time as
20 well?

21 A No. They came to Paris. My sister and I were in Paris. And then he was
22 invited for a speech at Harvard. We came for that. We had to stay because he had a
23 heart attack and continued on and so forth.

24 Q Got it. Okay.

25 A It's complicated. Sorry.

1 Q Thanks.

2 So your family experienced this persecution in the late '70s, and you've been in
3 the United States roughly since the early '80s.

4 A That is correct, yes.

5 Q And is it fair to say that the bulk of your career has been spent on journalistic
6 matters related to Iran and Persian issues?

7 A Very accurate.

8 Q And informed by your personal family experience --

9 A Yes.

10 Q -- of persecution?

11 A Yes.

12 BY [REDACTED]:

13 Q So I just wanted to quickly clarify.

14 So you had mentioned you were a contractor in 1994 and then were hired in 2003
15 as a director.

16 A I was a contractor, I believe it was 1994.

17 Q Okay.

18 A And then I was hired as staff --

19 Q Right. And then --

20 A -- at the end of 1998.

21 Q 8.

22 A So I worked my way up to become director in 2013.

23 Q Which is roughly about 19 years of experience --

24 A Yes.

25 Q -- with this organization --

1 A Right.

2 Q -- until you applied to become a director --

3 A Yes.

4 Q -- in 2013? Just wanted to get that onto the record. Thank you.

5 BY [REDACTED]:

6 Q Thanks.

7 And I know this is a lot to summarize and brief for us, but I want to focus
8 particularly on the role that I believe you held the longest at VOA Persian, which was as
9 the director.

10 Is that accurate?

11 A Yes.

12 Q Okay. Can you characterize what was the mission of VOA Persian in the
13 years that you've served there? And how did you understand it -- what did you
14 understand your objective to be in serving in that role?

15 A Well, because Iran is -- or the Islamic Republic of Iran is an autocracy and
16 there is no free press and people are under tremendous pressure and violation of human
17 rights and abuses, we were -- our mission was to inform the audience and to be a voice
18 for the people who did not have a voice inside Iran.

19 So it was really informing them, connecting them together, and also talking about
20 U.S. policy towards Iran.

21 Q Okay. And do you feel that in your roughly 10 years of service as the
22 director of VOA Persian, were you able to carry out that mission?

23 A Yes.

24 Q And how would you characterize your reputation in that role and in doing
25 that work?

1 A I want to preface by saying that when I was selected, because I competed
2 several times to become the director, there were 43 people who were related in the
3 service. There were husbands and wives, cousins, girlfriend/boyfriends, I mean. And I
4 understand they wanted to expand the service. They hired a lot of people at the same
5 time. So those were the people.

6 And there was no process, there was no structure. And I was brought in to
7 create a process, to shape up the service, and to also eliminate the people who are not
8 working. That was what I was told the mission was.

9 Q Okay. So to be clear, in 2013, when you were hired to be the director of
10 VOA Persian, you saw your role as essentially twofold: to carry out this mission of being
11 a voice for people in Iran who could not have the ability to speak freely and engage with
12 information freely; and, secondly, to, quote, clean up the operations at VOA Persian.

13 A Yes.

14 Q Okay.

15 And with respect to the second objective, how do you feel you were able -- did
16 you feel that you were able to carry out that objective?

17 A When I became director, the director of VOA had a conversation with me,
18 and they sent me to two courses of Federal executive just to make sure that I was aware
19 of -- even though I had a journalistic background, they wanted to make sure -- and I was a
20 manager before -- but they wanted to make sure that I would be able to do that, because
21 in 9 years the VOA Persian had ten different directors. No one would last. They would
22 come for a year and then leave and leave and leave.

23 I had a conversation with him, David Ensor, and he told me that I should take care
24 of content, journalism, processes put together, structure; and personnel will be taken
25 care of by a chief of staff.

1 So I wasn't really in charge of the recruiting, terminating contractors, or bringing in
2 people. He was in charge of that. So we were dividing --

3 Q The chief of staff?

4 A The chief of staff, yes.

5 Q But the chief of staff reported to you?

6 A No. He reported to the director.

7 Q I see. And so the chief of staff, do you feel that person then took steps to
8 carry out that second objective --

9 A Yes.

10 Q -- to clean up the organization --

11 A Yes.

12 Q -- and its operations? Can you describe some of those steps?

13 A There were contractors that he felt that were not performing well or they
14 were getting too much money. They put together a list. Of course, I had a say in it too.
15 I was -- but I was not the last word on it. And there were -- he started doing PIPs.

16 Q PIPs are performance improvement plans?

17 A That is correct, yes. Yes, to make sure that people were performing.

18 And, of course, we cannot push people to retire, but there were a lot of people
19 who had been there for years and they were not performing. And they were very much
20 against change, because we wanted to transition into television and so forth. So that's
21 the part that he took care of.

22 And I worked on the -- not the personnel matter, but I put together their duties,
23 what they're supposed to do, and we introduced digital and so forth. But that part of
24 the personnel, it was him and LER. I didn't have anything to do with it.

25 Q So that was carried out though during the early part of your tenure --

1 A Yes.

2 Q -- as director at VOA Persian?

3 A Yes.

4 Q And did that create any unhappiness --

5 A Very much so.

6 Q -- within VOA Persian --

7 A Yes.

8 The Reporter. Please let her finish the question.

9 Ms. Sieg. I'm so sorry.

10 BY [REDACTED]

11 Q So the question was if that created any unhappiness among the staff who
12 worked at VOA Persian. And it sounds like you were about to answer the question, so
13 I'll let you.

14 A Very much so, yes. They were very unhappy. They were against change.
15 And they did not want this transition to a new channel to be done. They wanted things
16 to be the way they were before.

17 Q And how did you and the chief of staff and other leaders at VOA Persian
18 respond to that unhappiness?

19 A We had meetings with the staff, constant meetings with them. We
20 explained to them what was going on. We shared everything that the management was
21 letting us know.

22 We brought in also the managers so they would have meetings with them, and we
23 tried to be very transparent.

24 Q And given that you served as VOA Persian director for about 10 years, would
25 you say that that unhappiness persisted to any degree among the staff, the career staff at

1 the agency?

2 A Yes.

3 Q And can you describe what informs that belief?

4 A The Persian Service also is -- Iran is a very emotional topic for people working
5 there. And this is, I think, the nature of the Voice of America for other services as well.
6 I mean, you ask someone in the Russian Service or Ukrainian, they feel the same way.

7 But it was in the midst of the nuclear issue, and it's very divisive. And there were
8 different groups with different political thoughts. There were lots of activists. And this
9 is something that VOA did not want. They wanted journalists.

10 And those activists were, of course, very unhappy with the then-policy of the
11 Obama administration. And we were only messengers. We were not making policy.
12 So they were not very cooperative in the things that the service wanted to do, and I
13 believe they started contacting Members of Congress about the changes.

14 And I also believe, if I may, because I want to say for the record, that they were
15 feeding information that was not accurate. I had a meeting in 2018 with Chairman
16 Royce -- I just saw his picture there, his chief of staff came -- and with lots of complaints
17 about the Persian Service.

18 Chairman Royce ended up -- I did a briefing for them. Amanda Bennett was
19 there as well, and the congressional liaison was there as well. And I explained to them
20 what steps are that we are taking.

21 We received a letter by Chairman Royce, from him, telling our then-CEO that the
22 Persian Service needs to continue -- there are lots of problems, but they need to continue
23 to make these changes.

24 And he was very supportive of me. He put my name down and saying that she's
25 doing a good job, and we need to continue despite people being unhappy.

1 Q Okay. And for clarity of the record, by Chairman Royce, you're referring to
2 Ed Royce --

3 A Ed Royce.

4 Q -- the former Republican chairman --

5 A Former. That is correct.

6 Q -- of this Committee on Foreign Affairs.

7 A That is correct, yes.

8 Q Okay. So stepping back, tell me if this is an accurate summary. You
9 worked as VOA Persian director for about 10 years. You came in from the outset with a
10 mandate to encourage and help facilitate a cleanup --

11 A Yes.

12 Q -- of the organization, in addition to carrying out VOA's core mission of free
13 flow of information.

14 You and your colleagues in leadership carried out those missions. And over the
15 course of that time there remained employees inside VOA Persian who were unhappy
16 with changes in personnel and hiring and operational matters, as well as employees who
17 objected to the U.S. administration's policies on Iran.

18 Is that accurate?

19 A That's correct.

20 Q And how did you know that people were unhappy? Did they direct their
21 unhappiness to you personally? How did you develop the sense of people's
22 unhappiness?

23 A Some did, but there were also groups from outside that they were going to.
24 And there was some interference by groups from outside with the information that was
25 being fed from inside VOA.

1 Q And this was the information that you said you believed to be inaccurate,
2 but it was being leaked from inside VOA, is that fair to say --

3 A That is correct.

4 Q -- by disgruntled VOA Persian employees?

5 A Yes.

6 Q So I want to move to 2020 now. My colleagues in the first round of
7 questioning had referred to investigations, and I just want to make sure we have a
8 baseline operational understanding today of what that refers to.

9 I believe you were asked and then affirmed in the last round that you understood
10 there to have been allegations made against you and your management as VOA Persian
11 director by individuals within the VOA Persian Service.

12 Can you give us an approximate date of when you became aware of those internal
13 complaints about you?

14 A Probably October of 2020.

15 Q Okay. So you'd been in your role for 7-ish years at that point.

16 A Yes.

17 Q And you became aware of these internal complaints.

18 A [Nonverbal response.]

19 Q And what did you understand the agency to then be doing with those
20 complaints at that time? Did they open an investigation into those allegations --

21 A Yes.

22 Q -- to your knowledge?

23 Okay. So that opened in 2020?

24 A That opened at the end of 2020 when there was a new administration at the
25 time.

1 Q Okay. By new administration, can you clarify for the record which
2 administration?

3 A Mr. Pack was there. It was the Trump administration.

4 Q Okay. So CEO Michael Pack.

5 A The CEO, Michael Pack.

6 Q By new administration, meaning he was a new arrival at the agency?

7 A He came in in June of 2020, yes.

8 Q Okay. So shortly after his arrival you understood these allegations had
9 been filed internally, and Mr. Pack or his administration at the agency took steps to
10 investigate?

11 A Yes.

12 Q Okay. We had, I think, exhibit 1 in the last round that was a notice of a
13 proposed removal of you from your role as VOA Persian director that you received on
14 January 5th, 2021.

15 I believe you testified previously, and you did give your countervailing views on
16 some of the content that this proposed removal included, but you testified that this
17 action, this proposed action, was halted or reversed. Is that accurate?

18 A Yes.

19 Q And approximately when was that?

20 A January of '21.

21 Q Under which administration?

22 A I believe, before the Office of Inspector General asked for a stay on this, we
23 sent everything to them. And that happened, I think it was in December --

24 Q Okay.

25 A -- in December of 2020. And then in January of 2021, I was told that I was

1 coming back.

2 Q Okay. So you received this proposed removal, at least exhibit 1 is dated
3 January 5th, 2021?

4 A Yes.

5 Q That was the first time you knew that there was an effort to remove you
6 from your role?

7 A No. I was on administrative leave before that. They put me on
8 administrative leave.

9 Q I see. Thanks for the clarification.
10 So when did you -- when were you put on administrative leave?

11 A I think at the end of October of 2020.

12 Q At the end of October. When the investigation into these internal
13 allegations --

14 A Yes.

15 Q -- and complaints began? Okay.

16 At any rate, you understood this proposed removal to have been stayed, correct?

17 A Yes.

18 Q Because of concerns raised by an outside watchdog agency?

19 A That is correct.

20 Q Okay. And then it was ultimately reversed and you returned to a role, a job
21 at the agency sometime in late January 2021? Is that accurate?

22 A It was at the end of February, the beginning of March, because it took a
23 while for the paperwork to get done.

24 Q Okay. And you mentioned in the last round that when you were brought
25 back to a working role at the agency, I believe you said that you asked the agency to

1 please continue its investigation that had been begun in October 2020 because you
2 wanted them to follow the facts and get to a conclusion. Is that accurate?

3 A Yes.

4 Q Okay. And to the best of your knowledge, did the investigation continue?

5 A Not at that time.

6 Q Can you describe your understanding of what happened with the
7 investigation subsequent to your return to a working role at the agency?

8 A The investigation was stopped at the time. I came back until we got notice
9 from the -- from Congressman McCaul's office.

10 Q And when was that?

11 A March of -- mid-March of 2021.

12 Q Okay. And then what was your understanding of the ongoing -- of, I should
13 say, of the investigation that had been opened into these internal allegations against you?
14 Did it continue?

15 A It continued. I found out from LER that I have to go for another interview,
16 yes.

17 Q Okay. And what's your understanding of what transpired subsequently?
18 Did you understand the investigation to eventually reach a conclusion or be closed?

19 A From what I understood, my understanding was that USAGM put out a
20 report saying that they have gone through all these allegations, and there were responses
21 to all these allegations, and as far as they were concerned, that investigation was over.
22 And there was a report, yes.

23 Q Okay. But do you have any understanding that the investigation was then
24 reopened or re-reviewed subsequent to USAGM's own findings that you just
25 characterized?

1 A It was opened -- again, my understanding, that it was opened when the
2 committee asked for it to be reopened.

3 Q Okay. And then I think we'll get to this later, but you spoke to my
4 colleagues, I believe, about a letter of reprimand --

5 A Yes.

6 Q -- that you received. When did you receive that letter of reprimand?

7 A May of this year.

8 Q Okay. So you understood that the investigation that started in
9 October 2020 into these internal allegations had been stayed, had paused while you were
10 placed on administrative leave, and there was an attempt to remove you that was later
11 overturned and you were brought back. The investigation then continued sometime in
12 spring 2021.

13 You received a letter in, I'm sorry, May 2024, with the letter of reprimand? Do
14 you understand the investigation to be closed now based on that letter of reprimand?

15 A From USAGM? Yes.

16 Q Okay. So do you have any additional knowledge or impressions of the
17 roughly 3 years during which an investigation remained open against you? And if so,
18 can you characterize what your understanding was over those 3 years of what was going
19 on?

20 A I want to go back, because there was one report that came out from USAGM
21 saying -- rejecting all these charges. So that was the conclusion that they had at the
22 beginning. And then the committee asked for more reinvestigations, and then I got the
23 letter of reprimand in May of this year.

24 Q Okay.

25 A I just -- I forgot to tell you that there was a report by USAGM saying that we

1 are not going to investigate that anymore and it's done.

2 Q Okay.

3 A They've done it.

4 Q In general, you've been a manager at the agency. You've overseen staff.

5 Does it strike you as unusual that an investigation would continue for 3 years into
6 allegations about a personnel matter?

7 A Yes.

8 Q And do you believe that the allegations against you were investigated
9 thoroughly over those 3 years?

10 A More than six times, yes.

11 Q Can you describe that answer in a little more detail? What do you mean
12 more than six times?

13 A I was interviewed by the agency six times, by LER, different investigations.
14 And there was also an independent panel that, I believe it was November of last year, I
15 also was interviewed by them and they had their findings as well.

16 So it's been several investigations, yes, and it is very surprising to me that it's
17 continuing.

18 [Sieg Minority Exhibit No. 1
19 was marked for identification.]

20 BY [REDACTED]

21 Q Okay. I want to turn, in the remaining time that we have, to the
22 exhibit -- minority exhibit 1, because I lose track of numbers otherwise. I'll give you a
23 minute to take a look and then ask you a few questions about this exhibit.

24 [Pause.]

25 So I'm specifically going to call your attention to some content on page 5 of this

1 exhibit. Let me know if you need more time, but let's start to walk through it now.

2 So you see on page 1 of this -- for the record, there's a logo and it says U.S. Office
3 of Special Counsel. It's a letter to the President dated May 10, 2023.

4 And it begins, "Dear Mr. President, I am forwarding to you a report transmitted to
5 the U.S. Office of Special Counsel by the U.S. Agency for Global Media in response to the
6 Special Counsel's referral of disclosures of wrongdoing at the agency made by eleven
7 whistleblowers."

8 And you see footnote 1 refers specifically to December 2020 as the date in which
9 these whistleblower allegations were referred to the agency to investigate. Is that
10 correct?

11 A Yes.

12 Q Have you ever seen this letter before?

13 A No.

14 Q Do you understand -- or what's your understanding of the U.S. Office of
15 Special Counsel and who they are and what they do?

16 A I have a general understanding that if there's any wrongdoing it can be
17 referred to that, and they would do an investigation to find the truth.

18 Q Okay. So if I told you that OSC's primary mission is to safeguard the merit
19 system by protecting Federal employees and applicants from prohibited personnel
20 practices, that comports with your understanding of what OSC does?

21 A Yes.

22 Q I want to turn to page 5 of this exhibit. And as you can see in the first full
23 paragraph, which begins, "The report found," the letter is characterizing in broad strokes
24 the report that is being -- that it is -- that is appended to it that it is transmitting.

25 So in that first full paragraph, beginning, "The report found" -- "The report found

1 that Mr. Pack acted inconsistently with the firewall in various ways."

2 First of all, can you just explain for the record what is the firewall in this context?

3 A The firewall is -- we are funded by Congress, of course, but the firewall is
4 there to protect our journalistic integrity, and the government agencies cannot have any
5 influence over our content.

6 Q Okay. So this seems to relate to what you testified to earlier when there
7 were -- I think when you mentioned that VOA didn't want journalists to be perpetuating
8 particular policies, correct? You wanted them to be reporting fact-based news and
9 information?

10 A Correct, yes.

11 Q And that's informed by this firewall that exists?

12 A Yes.

13 Q Per statute?

14 A Yes.

15 Q Okay. So let me call your attention to the very last sentence in this
16 paragraph summarizing the report's findings.

17 It says, "Fifth, the report highlighted Ms. Namdar's efforts to have the Director of
18 VOA's Persian Service removed, which the report suggested was due in part to
19 disagreement with the Service's editorial choices."

20 And then footnote 14 in that sentence says, "The report alluded to the following
21 news article: Brian Hook, Why are U.S. taxpayers funding a 'Voice of the Mullahs' in
22 Iran?" that appeared in the New York Post in May 2020."

23 I'd like to unpack this. Do you understand this sentence to be referring to your
24 case and the allegations made against you and how the agency responded to those
25 allegations?

1 A Yes.

2 Q Who is Ms. Namdar?

3 A She was the -- I don't remember her title, but she worked with Mr. Pack. I
4 think she was -- I don't remember her exact title, but she was an adviser to Mr. Pack, I
5 believe.

6 Q Was she a political appointee?

7 A Yes.

8 Q So she was brought in at the same time as Mr. Pack in the latter part of the
9 Trump administration?

10 A Yes.

11 Q Okay. Did you have interactions with Ms. Namdar?

12 A While she was there, no.

13 Q What did you understand her reputation to be while she served at the
14 agency?

15 A That she was not following the rules.

16 Q And you said in your earlier answer that while she was at the agency you
17 didn't have interactions with her.

18 Were there times you had interacted with her when she was not at the agency?

19 A Prior to that, my -- I believe that she worked at the VOA Persian many years
20 ago, about 10 years ago prior to that. So I was -- at that time I was there, but I was not
21 the director, and she was working there as well as a contractor.

22 Q So did you know her personally, or no?

23 A I saw an email exchange between the two of us.

24 Q Can you describe the content of that email exchange?

25 A Yes. She was hired by the then -- the Persian director, who was the State

1 Department -- he was there for a year. I don't remember his name, I'm sorry. And she
2 was booking guests for the Persian Service to appear on the programs and experts and so
3 forth.

4 Q Okay. So you were cc'd on an email about booking of guests that
5 Ms. Namdar had --

6 A Yes. And I had an interaction with her asking her to -- if she can help us
7 with this, with this guest, and so forth, yes.

8 Q Was there anything out of the ordinary about that interaction that you had
9 with her?

10 A Not at all, no.

11 Q Okay. I want to go back to the exhibit and the sentence that we
12 highlighted or that we focused on. It describes Ms. Namdar's efforts to have you
13 removed, and then it says, quote, "which the report suggested was due in part to
14 disagreement with the Service's editorial choices."

15 Can you explain that in more detail? Did you understand Ms. Namdar to be
16 opposed to the editorial lines that VOA Persian was taking?

17 A Well, I'm going to give an explanation after that or my understanding. But
18 what happened -- I can go over the course of what happened.

19 Ms. Namdar, when she was, I believe, appointed to be at the State Department,
20 she had not started that, she send me an email -- as the head of VOA Persian, she sent me
21 an email and had several questions about the content of our coverage. She also asked
22 about personnel matters.

23 I reported that immediately, because I thought, since she was advising the State
24 Department, that this was a firewall issue. And I responded to her cordially,
25 professionally, that there are things that I can respond, there are other things that I

1 cannot respond because of the firewall.

2 And I reported that to Amanda Bennett and the VOA director and my immediate
3 supervisor Kelu Chao. Amanda Bennett immediately told me to cease talking,
4 corresponding with Ms. Namdar. And that was the end of it.

5 Q Okay. So then it's fair to say that you personally had concerns that
6 Ms. Namdar may not have fully respected the firewall?

7 A I did.

8 Q And were you aware of her specific disagreement with the reporting that
9 VOA was producing at the time?

10 A It wasn't very clear in her email. She was just asking questions -- and also
11 asking questions about contracts. Why is it that this contract was not awarded to this
12 particular organization? And there were personnel matters as well, as well as content.

13 Q Can you describe the personnel matters?

14 A There was a gentleman who was a, if I remember correctly, from -- it's been
15 a while, but he was a contractor in the northern part of Iraq. And she was asking about
16 him, why is he there, or why isn't he protected enough and that type of -- I don't
17 remember the details.

18 Q Okay. But this is, at any rate, when she was not a VOA or USAGM
19 employee. She was asking you these questions --

20 A Yes.

21 Q -- from the State Department?

22 A Yes. Not -- she was wasn't -- that's correct, yes.

23 Q And approximately when did this exchange happen?

24 A This was even before Mr. Pack came on board. That was -- I can't
25 remember, but it was way before that.

1 Q Last question on this exhibit: I referenced, or I read into the record the
2 footnote, and it references an article in the New York Post raising questions and concerns
3 about VOA Persian's work.

4 Were you familiar with that article?

5 A Yes.

6 Q Can you describe your understanding of it?

7 A I thought this was a breach of firewall because Brian Hook was with the State
8 Department. I brought it up again with Amanda Bennett, and I didn't think that was
9 appropriate for a State Department official to make a comment.

10 And this was the time -- it coincided with the time of Mr. Pack's confirmation.
11 And Amanda Bennett thought that this was perhaps an article to help the confirmation.
12 That was her understanding, and she relayed that to me.

13 [Sieg Minority Exhibit No. 2
14 was marked for identification.]

15 BY [REDACTED]:

16 Q Okay. For the purposes of a clear record, I'm going to submit this article as
17 minority exhibit 2, one for you, one for the transcriptionist.

18 So we won't spend too much time on this, but this is the article that you recall
19 seeing --

20 A Yes.

21 Q -- correct?

22 A Yes.

23 Q And it's written on May 27th, 2020, by Brian Hook?

24 A Yes.

25 Q And at the end of the article it says, quote, "Brian Hook is the U.S. special

1 representative for Iran and a senior adviser to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo," on the
2 last page, correct?

3 A That is correct, yes.

4 Q And this was the basis for the concern you had that Brian Hook may have
5 also been inappropriately disrespecting the firewall?

6 A Breaching the firewall, yes.

7 Q Okay.

8 A May I add something?

9 Q Please.

10 A I don't know if I have time.

11 This article, I don't know for the purpose for this investigation or this interview or
12 not, but this couldn't have been further from the truth. The Voice of America was not
13 the voice of Mullahs, and these were pressure groups from outside who made this look
14 like the voice of Mullahs.

15 I was the first person who created a virtual office in Jerusalem. I was the first
16 person who had -- who created a talk show with Israel. And because of what had
17 happened to myself, it could've never been the voice of Mullahs. I started getting death
18 threats from Iran. The FBI got involved. The Office of Security got involved.

19 So this is not accurate, and I don't believe Brian Hook wrote this. I believe that
20 this was given to him.

21 The other point for the record that I would like to make is that I heard from
22 USAGM that Ms. Mora Namdar, who was with the Persian Service before, was under the
23 impression that I terminated her contract while she was working with the Persian Service.

24 This is inaccurate as well, because I never had anything to do with contracts.
25 And there's an email by the chief of staff saying that Ms. Namdar has to go. My email

1 response was, I don't think she should, because she's helping the VOA Persian.

2 So I want to clarify this for whatever it's worth and whether she will get a
3 transcript of this or she would know about that.

4 Q Okay. Thank you. I think that is helpful clarification for the next exhibit I
5 want to introduce. We will probably run out of time in this round to ask all the
6 questions that we want to ask on this, but we'll go ahead and get started.

7 This is minority exhibit 3?

8 [Sieg Minority Exhibit No. 3
9 was marked for identification.]

10 BY [REDACTED]

11 Q So two exhibits ago I had shown you a letter of transmittal referring to and
12 summarizing a report, and, as you can see, this exhibit is that report. This is dated
13 February 15, 2023. Logo at the top U.S. Agency for Global Media. It's transmitted to
14 the special counsel.

15 It reads on the transmittal letter at the front:

16 "I am hereby transmitting U.S. Agency for Global Media's response to the referral
17 letter of December 2, 2020, and the Supplemental Letter of February 16, 2021. This
18 investigation report and Corrective Actions summary were prepared pursuant to 5 U.S.C.
19 sections 1213(c) and (d).

20 "This report is a product of an independent investigation, informed by the review
21 and findings of reports issued by the U.S. Department of State Office of Inspector General
22 and the U.S. Government Accountability Office, addressing the allegations contained in
23 both letters."

24 And if you turn the page, you see the title page of the report itself, "U.S. Agency
25 for Global Media, Review of Management Actions June 2020 through January 2021,"

1 issued in February 2023.

2 So is it your understanding that this is the report that you referred to previously
3 where USAGM reviewed actions that had been taken during Mr. Pack's tenure at the
4 agency?

5 A Yes.

6 Q Including with respect to you?

7 A Yes.

8 Q Okay.

9 Let's turn to page 87 of this report. And there's a section with a bold subheaded
10 title at the bottom of page 87 that reads, "CEO Office Efforts Regarding VOA Persian
11 Leadership."

12 Have you seen this report before?

13 A Yes.

14 Q Have you seen this section --

15 A Yes.

16 Q -- that we're about to read?

17 Okay. So I'd like to go through it. And, again, we'll probably run out of time,
18 but just to get more detail from you on the facts and findings as OSC is reporting them
19 with respect to this case.

20 It begins, "A particularly complex matter involves the then-head of VOA Persian."
21 That's you, correct?

22 A Yes.

23 Q "It is beyond the scope of this review to evaluate the merits of several
24 allegations made against the individual; however, CEO Office involvement will be
25 examined."

1 Just to clarify, while this report states here that it's not looking at the merits of the
2 allegations against you, the allegations against you and the merits of those are what you
3 understand to have been the subject of 3 years of thorough investigation by the agency,
4 correct?

5 A Yes.

6 Q The next paragraph begins, "That language service" -- VOA Persian -- "has
7 faced criticisms over the years, including criticisms that preceded the individual's time as
8 director of that office."

9 Does that comport with your understanding?

10 A Yes.

11 Q The next paragraph reads, "Ms. Namdar became the recipient of several
12 complaints regarding VOA Persian from sources inside the service as well as outside.
13 She had preexisting professional relationships with some of these sources. CEO Pack
14 had also" -- "also had," excuse me -- "identified changes at VOA Persian as part of his
15 agenda for the Agency, according to his June 23 to-do list."

16 Does this paragraph comport with your understanding of Ms. Namdar's
17 possession of complaints about the agency and you?

18 A Yes.

19 Q The next paragraph reads, "Ms. Namdar provided these complaints to
20 USAGM's career Labor and Employee Relations (LER) investigators, who focused
21 appropriately on non-journalistic coverage issues."

22 And, again, just to clarify, non-journalistic coverage and the appropriateness of
23 focusing on those matters is because of the firewall?

24 A That's correct.

25 Q That paragraph continues, quote:

1 "During the course of their investigation, the LER investigators and other career
2 staff involved faced intense pressure from her to reach a conclusion that the allegations
3 against the VOA Persian Director justified her termination.

4 "One long-time career attorney within the Office of General Counsel who was
5 involved in the matter said Ms. Namdar threatened her with discipline if the investigation
6 did not find a basis to remove the VOA Persian Director. The two veteran LER
7 investigators told the Review Team that Ms. Namdar showed an unusual amount of
8 interest in their efforts, which they saw as an attempt to pressure their investigation."

9 So in your understanding, is this referring to the investigation internally that began
10 against you in October 2020?

11 A Yes.

12 Q And does this description of Ms. Namdar's keen interest in that investigation
13 and efforts to spur LER to investigate it comport with your understanding?

14 A Yes.

15 Q What's the basis that you have for that understanding?

16 A I was told that she was putting pressure on everyone to make sure that I
17 would be terminated.

18 Q How did you become aware of that?

19 A I believe that -- I'm not sure who I heard it from, but one of my colleagues.
20 But I'm not really sure. I don't remember who it was.

21 Q Okay. So you had an understanding at the time that she attributed to you a
22 prior termination of her contract at the agency and that she was now focused on these
23 internal allegations because she wanted to ultimately see you removed.

24 A Anonymous allegations, correct.

25 Q Anonymous allegations.

1 The paragraph prior reads, "Ms. Namdar became the recipient of several
2 complaints regarding VOA Persian from sources inside the service as well as outside."
3 I'd like to unpack that a little bit further.

4 Was Ms. Namdar in a role at the organization where she would've been the
5 appropriate recipient of personnel-related complaints?

6 A I don't believe so.

7 Q Do you recall -- you said her role, previously, you characterized as the senior
8 adviser to Mr. Pack?

9 A She was an adviser, yes, yes, but she had connections with people inside.

10 Q Okay.

11 A She knew a lot of people inside the service.

12 Q Do you have any understanding of how she may have become the recipient
13 of some of these complaints about you?

14 A I don't know.

15 Q Do you have any understanding of her preexisting professional relationships
16 with some of these sources, maybe people inside the agency?

17 A No.

18 Q Okay. Let's continue on the third paragraph on that page. It says, "In
19 mid-October, the investigators provided an initial report of investigation on the matter to
20 Ms. Namdar, who provided it to CEO Pack and other appointees. It found numerous
21 areas of concern that would require follow-up, but nothing that justified removal without
22 more information.

23 "The LER investigators made it clear that their investigation was not complete as
24 they would need to further interview the VOA Persian Director. According to the head
25 of the USAGM Human Resources, Ms. Namdar 'didn't accept the results of the

1 investigation."

2 Does that paragraph comport with your understanding?

3 A Yes.

4 Q The fourth paragraph continues, "As LER continued its work over the coming
5 months, VOA's new Deputy Director proposed the individual's termination on January 5,
6 2021, and placed her on administrative leave."

7 Quickly, let's unpack that.

8 Who is VOA's new deputy director?

9 A It was Elizabeth Robbins.

1 [12:09 p.m.]

2 BY [REDACTED]:

3 Q And this proposed termination on January 5th, 2021, is it your understanding
4 that that's the exhibit 1 that we already reviewed during your majority round of
5 questioning?

6 A [Inaudible.]

7 Q Okay. This continues. "This was one week after the Deputy Director's
8 first day on December 28, 2020. According to the HR Director, the proposed
9 termination 'was issued without our knowledge and it referenced the investigation that
10 our office had begun, which had not been concluded.' The proposed removal was also
11 issued without the knowledge of USAGM's Office of General Counsel. The established
12 Agency practice for employee discipline cases is this the offices of General Counsel and
13 Human Resources collaboratively review and advise on proposed discipline, especially for
14 the severe penalty of removal from federal service."

15 Does this paragraph comport with your understanding of what was going on at
16 the time?

17 A Yes.

18 Q And you had testified previously that you've managed people at the agency
19 for well over a decade. Had you ever been involved with removing somebody?

20 A Yes.

21 Q And did it follow the established agency practice that's referenced here, that
22 the Office of General Counsel would have been advising in and aware of and weighing in
23 on a proposed effort to remove someone?

24 A Yes.

25 Q Next paragraph begins, "On January 14, the Office of Special Counsel sought

1 a stay of removal -- temporarily blocking it as OSC investigates an allegation of prohibited
2 personnel practices. A USAGM career attorney agreed to stay the removal."

3 Does this comport with your understanding of why the proposed removal of you
4 from the agency was ultimately paused and then later reversed?

5 A Yes.

6 Q Next paragraph: "Despite the USAGM agreement, on January 21, the VOA
7 Deputy Director told the VOA Persian Director's attorney that the process of removing her
8 would continue."

9 You understood the VOA deputy director there to be Beth Robbins?

10 A Yes.

11 Q "Then the Deputy Director was put on administrative leave later that day
12 and removed from her non-career position by new USAGM leadership named the day
13 before by the new administration.

14 "The following day, the HR Director informed the VOA Persian Director and her
15 attorney of 'possible due process violations' -- a reference to the Deputy Director's
16 proposal to remove her given that the LER investigation was still complete [sic]."

17 Does this comport with your understanding of the facts?

18 A Yes.

19 Q And, finally, the paragraph that concludes this section reads:

20 "This effort by an outgoing political appointee to pursue a career employee's
21 removal was contrary to established Agency practice, and Agency representations made
22 to OSC support an inference that the discipline case was being prosecuted due to animus.

23 "The proposed removal from federal service was not completed; the former VOA
24 Persian Director was assigned to a position in VOA on February 17, 2021, pursuant to a
25 settlement agreement."

1 Does this comport with your understanding?

2 A Yes.

3 Q And in the 3 minutes that remain, I'd like to draw your attention to the part
4 of this paragraph that we just read that says, "The discipline case was being prosecuted
5 due to animus."

6 Is there anything more that you'd like to say with respect to that finding by the
7 OSC?

8 A I believe that, as it says and based on this report, that Ms. Namdar pursued
9 that. And I also believe that, yes, it was the fact that perhaps I reported her for violating
10 a firewall, but from what I was told by my colleagues -- and I don't know specifically
11 whom -- that she held some grudges and she was disgruntled for what had happened
12 10 years prior to that.

13 Q Okay. So by "10 years prior to that" you mean her --

14 A And 15 years prior to that.

15 Q -- the termination of her contract, which she attributed to being an action by
16 you?

17 A Yes.

18 Q Okay. And you also just stated that you believe the animus to also be
19 related to the fact that you had raised concerns with her directly about the firewall and
20 her possible breaching of it?

21 A Yes. I also would like to add that after I wrote based on my -- based on
22 Amanda Bennett's recommendation, suggestion, she actually helped me draft the letter
23 to send to her. She recommended that I send the letter to Ms. Namdar's boss. And I
24 don't remember her name.

25 Q This was the boss at the State Department?

1 A At the State Department.

2 Q Okay.

3 A And, again, this was through Amanda Bennett and Kelu Chao. They both
4 directed me, instructed me to do that. And we drafted the letter and I sent it to her
5 boss saying that I have responded to Ms. Namdar and we would appreciate if you would
6 talk to her so she would not continue her questioning because this is a breach of the
7 firewall.

8 Q Okay. So, to your knowledge, Ms Namdar associated you with her removal
9 10 to 15 years prior?

10 A Yes.

11 Q And with calling out directly to her and to leadership at the agency and to
12 her own boss her disrespect for the firewall?

13 A Yes.

14 Q Okay. We don't have any further questions. Thanks.

15 [REDACTED]. Okay. Should we take a lunch break or do you guys want to keep
16 going? Do you want to take 15 minutes real quick, or 20, 30? It's up to you.

17 We're off the record.

18 [Recess.]

19 [REDACTED] Before we dive into substance, just one housekeeping issue, and
20 then wanted to respond to some points that my minority colleagues made.

21 First, for agency counsel, [REDACTED].

22 Ms. Sieg claimed that she told agency counsel in April that she was ready to testify
23 at a TI. Does this comport with your recollection?

24 [REDACTED] I do not recall.

25 [REDACTED]. You don't recall. Do you know anyone in your office who may

1 recall?

2 [REDACTED] Not that I'm aware of.

3 [REDACTED] It strikes us as odd that no one at the agency remembers Ms.
4 Sieg's outreach in this regard, but --

5 Mr. Zaid. I will say for the record, I was in touch with the agency and was
6 notified of the request and was told the agency was going to deal with it, and I said that's
7 fine.

8 [REDACTED] In April?

9 Mr. Zaid. In April. And my representation of the witness was known to the
10 committee since at least 2020.

11 [REDACTED] You're what? Sorry?

12 Mr. Zaid. My representation. But no one ever reached out to me directly.

13 [REDACTED] Okay.

14 BY [REDACTED]:

15 Q A few comments and questions about some points made by the minority.

16 First, Ms. Sieg, you had referenced a letter by former Chairman Ed Royce who you
17 alleged praised your efforts at reform of VOA Persia. Would you be able to, through
18 your counsel, furnish a copy of that letter to the committee?

19 A Yes.

20 Q Thank you.

21 There was some insinuation under the previous round of questioning that because
22 of Ms. Sieg's admittedly quite extensive experience that she was entirely qualified for the
23 job and that this whole business about the Ph.D. may be somewhat irrelevant.

24 Just wanted to say that, regardless of whether or not the Ph.D. was strictly
25 necessary for a job that Ms. Sieg applied for, not possessing the credential that one

1 alleges to possess is a problem in many respects, not least of which it indicates the
2 applicant raises issues regarding his or her credibility, judgement, and trustworthiness,
3 that sort of thing.

4 There also happens to be a Federal law that prohibits making material
5 misrepresentations to Federal agencies in employment matters.

6 As far as people who worked for Ms. Sieg being unhappy with her management
7 and attempts at reform, majority does not take issue with that; it may or may not be true.

8 But even if it is true, multiple things can be true at once. So perhaps Ms. Sieg's
9 subordinates were unhappy with her efforts and resistant to reform, but at the same
10 time, Ms. Sieg may have engaged in misconduct. It's not an either-or. Multiple things
11 can be true at the same time.

12 As far as the investigation lasting 3 years and that it was, quote, "odd" that it's
13 gone on so long, implying that there may be something untoward, that there may be
14 some vendetta being alleged here, look, majority is equally frustrated this has gone on as
15 long as it has, Ms. Sieg. The chairman wrote a letter in 2021 indicating that he had been
16 in touch with the French Ministry of Higher Education, the French Embassy here,
17 indicating what he had learned from the embassy.

18 What the agency then followed or did or did not do following his letter is basically
19 why we're here. It is the chairman's view that the agency did not handle this well and it
20 raises larger issues about competency and management of the agency itself.

21 So, yes, we're here to discuss your credentials and other allegations that were
22 made in the Robbins notice, but we're also here because of this broader issue about the
23 functionality of the agency itself.

24 As far as the big bad boogeyman, Michael Pack, and Ms. Namdar, don't really have
25 much to say there. It's my understanding -- Ms. Sieg, please correct me if I'm

1 wrong -- that neither one of them is currently at the agency as of now.

2 A Correct.

3 Q That neither one of them worked at the agency when the letter of reprimand
4 was issued to you earlier this year.

5 A Correct.

6 Q Thank you.

7 I don't know if Ms. Namdar was an effective or ineffective employee. Allegations
8 that she was exerting pressure, from the majority's standpoint, may have been something
9 as simple as a political appointee trying to exert influence to get things done in a
10 bureaucracy that, regardless of the agency, sometimes is slower than appointees would
11 wish.

12 So I don't know, [REDACTED], if you have anything to add on any of those points.

13 BY [REDACTED]:

14 Q Yeah, I just wanted to highlight from the last exhibit, the Office of Special
15 Counsel report. As our colleagues read out loud into the record and just want to
16 reiterate, page 87: "It is beyond the scope of this review to evaluate the merits of
17 several allegations made against the individual. However, CEO Office involvement will
18 be examined."

19 So just to clarify that the prior report does not evaluate the actual
20 fundamentals -- the factual allegations regarding your situation. Do you see that on
21 page 87?

22 A Yes.

23 Q Thank you.

24 And then, moving forward, as we've started before, the Robbins report was issued
25 in 2021, the report of investigation, that was the first exhibit.

1 And as you mentioned before, and as your counsel helpfully provided to the
2 committee, and we appreciate your cooperation in that matter, a copy of the letter of
3 reprimand.

4 And I'll pass this out as the next exhibit. I believe this is majority exhibit 5.

5 [Sieg Majority Exhibit No. 5
6 was marked for identification.]

7 Mr. Zaid. And, if I might, I know you guys call it in your report a report of
8 investigation, but the Robbins letter is just a notice of proposal to remove, it's not an
9 investigative report.

10 ██████ Thank you.

11 BY ██████████

12 Q Ms. Sieg, could you please confirm for the record that this is a copy of the
13 letter of reprimand you received from the agency?

14 A Yes.

15 Q Do you mind reading the date at the top left?

16 A May 31, 2024.

17 Q And, Ms. Sieg, this is regard -- do you mind stating the basis for this letter of
18 reprimand that is in that first paragraph of the letter?

19 A You want me to read it?

20 Q Yes, please, if you don't mind.

21 A Sure.

22 "This is an Official of Letter of Reprimand and is given for submitting inaccurate
23 information regarding your education credentials and inappropriate behavior during an
24 administrative investigation."

25 Q Is Mr. Pack or Mrs. Namdar still at the agency at the time of this letter being

- 1 sent to you?
- 2 A Not that I know of.
- 3 Q Do you have any reason to believe that they wrote this letter?
- 4 A I'm sorry, who wrote this letter?
- 5 Q Mr. Pack or Ms. Namdar?
- 6 A Um --
- 7 Q Is this letter signed by either individual?
- 8 A This letter is signed by someone by the name of John Featherly.
- 9 Q Yes. So neither of those individuals wrote or signed this letter, correct?
- 10 A It's signed by John Featherly, yes.
- 11 Q Mrs. Elizabeth Robbins, is she still at Voice of America at the time of this
- 12 letter?
- 13 A No.
- 14 Q So this letter found -- reprimanded you for submitting inaccurate
- 15 information regarding your education credentials and inappropriate behavior during an
- 16 administration investigation.
- 17 Does that sound familiar to or similar to the Elizabeth Robbins notice of proposal
- 18 to suspend and remove?
- 19 A No.
- 20 Q Which aspect, the lack of candor charge or the voice of agency -- I guess both
- 21 of these specifically apply to the lack of candor charge, correct? One would be under
- 22 the -- your behavior during the investigations, administrative investigations, and then the
- 23 other would be directly to the point of academic credential?
- 24 A I'd like to take a moment to reread Elizabeth Robbins.
- 25 Q Particularly, just to help guide, it would be the lack of candor portion.

1 [Witness reviewing.]

2 A Okay.

3 Q In the 2024 letter of reprimand, did the agency -- turn on my mike -- did the
4 letter of reprimand affirm the Foreign Credentials Services of America's assessment that
5 you had -- assessment of your education credentials, stating, quote, "no degree
6 awarded," close quote, regarding the holding of a Ph.D.?

7 A That's --

8 Q This would be on page 3 of the letter.

9 A I'm sorry, your question is do I see that?

10 Q Yes. Does the agency include that as a basis for coming to the conclusion
11 of your -- regarding your academic credentials?

12 A According to this letter, yes.

13 Q Okay. Do you have any reason to believe that Mr. Pack, Mrs. Namdar, Mrs.
14 Robbins, any of those individuals worked or were involved in the Foreign Credentials
15 Services of America's assessment?

16 A Not in the 2024 letter.

17 Q It states Robert Watkins, vice president for international education at the
18 Foreign Credentials Services of America.

19 Do you believe that Mr. Pack, Mrs. Robbins, or Mrs. Namdar know or do you have
20 any reason to believe that they have spoken to Mr. Watkins, that they have influenced his
21 assessments at all, that they've influenced anything regarding the Foreign Credentials
22 Services of America?

23 A I don't know. I can't answer that.

24 But I'd like to add, if I may, something in paragraph -- where the Foreign
25 Credentials Services of America, there is one paragraph that says -- that I disagree with.

1 It says the final document would be the actual award of the Doctorat d'Etat,
2 Doctorat d'Etat. This is not accurate. Doctorat d'Etat is for people who continue their
3 Ph.D. beyond the years that they've put in. And anyone can -- I mean, you can Google
4 that and know that.

5 Not everyone can get a Doctorat d'Etat unless you are a professor emeritus. So
6 I'm not sure why it says that there is one Doctorat d'Etat or I don't even -- I might have
7 misunderstood the explanation.

8 ██████████ So are you alleging that you're more of an expert into this matter
9 than the Foreign Credentials Services of America?

10 Ms. Sieg. No, that's my opinion.

11 ██████████. So it's a subjective opinion.

12 Ms. Sieg. It's my opinion, but you can also research it. And that's this
13 gentleman's opinion. I didn't say I was more qualified.

14 BY ██████████:

15 Q Well, turning earlier into it, page 2 of the letter, there's an assessment from
16 the French -- the Cultural Services French Embassy in the United States, October 2023,
17 stating that you do not hold the -- oh, sorry, I apologize.

18 The 2024 memo from the French Embassy from Jean-Christophe stating he found
19 no evidence that you hold a Ph.D. degree in France. You had not produced a certified
20 copy of a diploma that bears the title "doctorate." He was unable to find your Ph.D.
21 dissertation in the national, freely searchable, database of Ph.D. dissertations, thesis.fr.
22 And you had not produced the defense report signed by all members of the jury.

23 Do you disagree with that assessment?

24 A That's an opinion. That's his opinion.

25 Q His opinion being the French Embassy's assessment, correct?

1 A The assessment of the French Embassy, yes. I can't speak for him.

2 BY [REDACTED]:

3 Q And what weight do you ascribe the Foreign Credentials Services of America
4 and the French Ministry of Higher Education or the French Embassy in this matter?

5 A I'm sorry, I couldn't hear you.

6 Q What weight do you ascribe their opinions? You're saying that it's all
7 relative and all this is the embassy's opinion, this is the credentialing service's opinion.

8 What weight, how do you order those opinions relative to your own?

9 A There is -- I acknowledge that there's controversy and there are conflicting
10 opinions. I have my opinion and I have the letters from people who have attested that
11 this is an equivalent to a Ph.D., and I recognize that there are conflicting opinions.

12 Q But, ma'am, these are two objective expert entities, one governmental.

13 A Uh-huh.

14 Q One private. All it looks at is credentials of individuals like yourself. These
15 are masters at that discrete task. They are saying you do not possess the degree that
16 you claim to possess. And you're saying, well, I don't care, because the government can
17 have its opinion and this credentialing service can have its opinion, but I know what is
18 right.

19 Why should we trust your opinion more than these two objective observers who
20 don't know you, don't care what the outcome of this investigation is?

21 A I did not say I didn't care. I do care, because it's my life. But I also have a
22 letter from the top two doctorate committees program of my university.

23 And, again, I would like to acknowledge that there are conflicting opinions and
24 there is a controversy. But I did not say that, that their opinion does not matter.

25 Q Thank you for clarifying. I did not mean to put words into your mouth, so I

1 appreciate that. We'll get to the letter in a moment.

2 But just to backtrack, you're referring to a letter by two professors at the
3 university that you attended. Could you just clarify for the record which university that
4 is?

5 A Paris 7.

6 Q Okay. Are you aware that earlier in this investigation the agency alleged
7 that you had attended the University of Paris 1 Pantheon?

8 A Yes.

9 Q Did USAGM's findings surprise you at all?

10 A I'm sorry, can you clarify these findings?

11 [REDACTED] Sorry. And actually we'll pass out another exhibit too. This will be
12 the April 2021 report of investigation by USAGM.

13 [Sieg Majority Exhibit No. 6
14 was marked for identification.]

15 [REDACTED] We're backtracking. We'll get back to the professors in just a
16 moment. But this relates to our earlier discussion about why this has dragged on for
17 3 years.

18 What you're about to see is a report by the agency that alleged that you had
19 attended a university that you never claim to have attended.

20 [REDACTED]. For your Ph.D.

21 BY [REDACTED]

22 Q Right. So this speaks to the larger issues about competency at the agency.
23 They're saying: Don't worry, we did our investigation, and, yes, she has a Ph.D. And
24 when they named the university that you attended, it's one that you never even claim to
25 have set foot in, as far as I know.

1 A Paris 1?

2 Q Yes.

3 A I have my master's degree from Paris 1.

4 Q Okay, fair enough, but not for your Ph.D. And I don't think you have --

5 A I have my -- I'm sorry, go ahead. Sorry, go ahead, go ahead.

6 Q Please correct me if I'm wrong, but I don't recall you ever claiming to have a
7 Ph.D. from that school.

8 A But you said I never set foot in that university and that's not accurate. I've
9 been there for 7 years. So --

10 Q This is not directed at you, this is just commentary about the agency.

11 A I'm sorry, I --

12 Q They acknowledged the error. As you'll see on the report, later they said:
13 Oops, we messed up.

14 But this is one small example of a larger problem that we've faced repeatedly,
15 which is we provide information and/or ask questions and the agency either refuses to
16 acknowledge the information that they've provided with or follows up in cursory fashion,
17 ignoring the merits of whatever the issue happens to be and/or misstating information
18 that we all have equal possession of.

19 So I don't mean to make a mountain out of a molehill, but I just want you to know
20 your frustration about this dragging on for so long has much to do with small episodes
21 like this one where the university -- or, sorry, the agency -- attempts to clear your name,
22 but then in so doing indicates something that from Congress' standpoint makes no sense.

23 They say you have a Ph.D. from a university you didn't claim to have a Ph.D. from.
24 And then matters drag on to now 3 years later and they do an about-face and the agency
25 is now saying: Oh, you know what, I don't think she does have a Ph.D., as stated in your

1 letter of reprimand. So the story constantly changes and the agency can't get its act
2 together.

3 So I just -- I provide that commentary to just give you a sense from what we've
4 been facing, for what we've been facing on our side. I acknowledge that this is highly
5 irregular, but it's the result of the agency that we have jurisdiction over not being able to
6 conduct a thorough investigation in a timely fashion, in our opinion.

7 That brings us back to the letter that you referenced.

8 A I'm sorry, may I add something?

9 Q Yes.

10 A I can't speak for the agency because I wasn't involved in the investigation, so
11 I don't know what they have done.

12 Q I understand. Yes, ma'am.

13

BY [REDACTED]

14 Q Were you ever informed in April of 2021, when you were brought back, what
15 the findings of that investigation that you had asked to be completed were?

16 A I don't remember. I don't believe so.

17 Q Did no one ever notify you from the agency what their findings were?

18 A No one did.

19 Q So were you ever informed that the investigation had been completed?

20 A Yes.

21 Q Yes. And what was communicated to you with that information of the
22 completion? No general discussion or even "clear on all accounts" or any kind of
23 characterization of the results of the investigation?

24 A I don't remember the details, but I know that I was told that the
25 investigation is over by the agency.

1 Q And who informed you?

2 A John Lippman.

3 Q John Lippman.

4 And whenever the -- and there was no further communication with LER or
5 anything else regarding their findings in April 2021? Once the investigation was
6 completed, they didn't brief you at all, they didn't send you an email, they didn't clarify or
7 ask any follow-ups?

8 A LER did not. I don't remember anything else about it. I don't recall
9 anything about it.

10 Q If you were informed at the time that USAGM had told Congress that
11 you -- that they'd found evidence that you had a Ph.D. from the University of Paris 1,
12 would you have been surprised?

13 A Can you rephrase that, please?

14 Q So one of the findings in the April 2021 report of investigation, allegation 1,
15 the first finding on page 1, you are Person A. Do you see where it says, "This allegation
16 is not substantiated. LER has in its possession evidence that Ms. -- Person A earned the
17 equivalent of a Ph.D. from the University of Paris 1 Pantheon - Sorbonne."

18 A Okay. I have to look at that document, please. I'm not sure which one it
19 is.

20 [REDACTED] Can I just say, I believe that this version that you've presented to
21 Ms. Sieg is a draft version and not the finalized copy of that report of investigation.

22 [REDACTED]. Okay. This was in the release of documents. Okay.

23 [REDACTED] I don't -- well, I don't know which is a draft or not. But USAGM
24 did subsequently come back and say: We made a mistake. So they've acknowledged
25 that this was in error.

1 Anyway, we can move on.

2 ██████████ And our main purpose for that is just to provide better background
3 into our -- we share your frustrations in the sense that this has been a multiyear process.

4 This was never -- we were approached by whistleblowers and we were following
5 on a factual basis. We believe that personnel investigations should be done in a prompt
6 manner. That's only fair to everyone involved.

7 ██████████. If we can turn back to the letter that you referenced, ma'am, that
8 is mentioned in the letter of reprimand. I believe your counsel provided a copy to all
9 prior to today's interview. It is dated 18 March of this year.

10 Mr. Zaid. Do you have a copy for the record?

11 ██████████ I have the copy you gave us.

12 ██████████ I have a copy.

13 ██████████ Is it this?

14 ██████████ I assume -- do you have a copy?

15 Mr. Zaid. I do. But it should go into as a marked exhibit for her.

16 [Sieg Majority Exhibit No. 7

17 was marked for identification.]

18 ██████████ So, again, this is a letter that was "to whom it may concern."

19 That was a typo. The two professors -- well, why don't I ask you to explain?

20 Who are these folks, ma'am? And why did they write a letter? And how did
21 you find them? And just walk us through that.

22 Ms. Sieg. Their titles are on the letter.

23 ██████████ Do you mind reading them out loud?

24 Ms. Sieg. Yes, of course. [Speaking foreign language.] And the other one is
25 [speaking foreign language.] Yeah, sorry. Do you want me to -- okay.

1 Okay, one is [speaking foreign language.] I can --

2 Mr. Zaid. Can she translate it into English to the best of her ability? Yeah, she's
3 reading the titles on the exhibit.

4 BY [REDACTED]:

5 Q If you could just translate to the best of your ability, that would be good.
6 Director of the 624 Doctorate School?

7 A Correct. One, Antoine Reberieux, is the director of the Doctoral School.
8 And the other one is the directrice. So the director -- they are co-directors of the
9 Doctoral School.

10 Q Okay. And do you know them in a personal capacity or did you just contact
11 them regarding this matter? Or how did you get in touch with them?

12 A I don't know them.

13 Q You don't know them? Okay. Did you reach out to them or did someone
14 reach out to them on your behalf?

15 A I did.

16 Q And why did you contact them as opposed to anyone else at the university?

17 A I inquired. I did research to see who were the top two, as I want to use
18 your own word. You said the masters when you were referring to the embassy, the
19 masters for the -- for deciphering or explaining what a degree is and equivalency is. And
20 I found out their names and I reached out to them.

21 Q And just to read into the record what this letter states, it says that "We
22 confirm" -- "we" meaning the two professors -- "confirm that Ms. Sieg holds the
23 equivalent of a Doctoral degree in history. This doctoral degree is equivalent to a Ph.D.
24 in the United States."

25 I'd like to introduce into the record -- what is it? Exhibit 8.

1 [Sieg Majority Exhibit No. 8
2 was marked for identification.]

3 [REDACTED] And this is an email from one of the professors, whose name I will
4 butcher, but Mr. Antoine Reberioux. And he is writing on behalf of both himself and the
5 other professor, Ms. Veronique Petit.

6 If you could just read the first and second paragraph of the email out loud.

7 Ms. Sieg. Yes.

8 "Veronique Petit and I are directors of the Doctoral" -- it's addressed to
9 you -- "Doctoral school in social sciences (geography, history, sociology, anthropology and
10 economics) at the Universite Paris Cite.

11 "As such, we cannot claim to have an informed overview of the French higher
12 education system. We therefore invite you to turn to the relevant departments/services
13 at the Ministry of higher education in particular or the French embassy in the US.

14 "We regret that we are unable to respond to your request.

15 "Yours sincerely, Antoine Reberioux."

16 [REDACTED] So here you have the two folks who are vouching for the
17 equivalency of your degree saying: We defer to the embassy, we defer to the Ministry
18 of Higher Education -- which of course the committee contacted 3 years ago and which
19 3 years ago gave us its professional opinion about these matters.

20 And so majority just notes that the folks that Ms. Sieg has alleged to support her
21 case regarding the possession of a doctoral degree are themselves not able to provide the
22 committee with information and indeed say: We don't have an informed overview of
23 the French education system. We're not experts. You need to go talk to the ministry.

24 BY [REDACTED]

25 Q Do you agree with their self-assessment?

1 A Which one?

2 Q That they are not experts and that they -- that a proper assessment must
3 come from the French ministry.

4 A I'm seeing this letter for the first time.

5 Q Feel free to take a moment to review, if you need to read through it.

6 A What's your question again? I'm sorry, I'm not following you.

7 Q Do you agree with their self-assessment that they -- that the proper
8 assessment for your academic credentials should come from the French ministry?

9 A I have their letter saying that I do have an equivalent of a Ph.D. from the two
10 of them.

11 [REDACTED] But why should we give that letter any weight when they claim
12 that they don't understand the French education system and that we should instead
13 contact the ministry?

14 Ms. Sieg. It's your decision, it's your opinion. I have a confirmation. The
15 people I thought would give me the confirmation or would be the highest people that I
16 could reach at my university, I contacted them and I have that letter from them. I didn't
17 know you were going to pursue that and contact them and question what they knew.

18 But that's their opinion. I know, as I said, I acknowledge that there are
19 conflicting opinions from the very beginning and there is a controversy. I do
20 acknowledge that.

21 [REDACTED]. And our view would be that certain opinions are more trustworthy
22 and should be ascribed more weight than others. And these folks, who are themselves
23 deferring to the French Government, they cannot be -- well, they themselves admit that
24 they don't have an informed overview of the French education system. So I'll just leave
25 it at that.

- 1 [Sieg Majority exhibit No. 9
- 2 was marked for identification.]

1 ██████████ Now we'll turn to the ministry and the embassy. This will be
2 exhibit 9.

3 BY ██████████

4 Q I believe you may already be familiar with this document that's cited in the
5 letter of reprimand, but we just want to make sure it's entered into the official record.

6 Do you mind just reading the title of -- at the bottom -- of the signatory of the
7 letter, as well as just -- do you mind reading the date and characterizing exactly just
8 who --

9 A Okay, I'm sorry, these are several things. What did you want me to read
10 first?

11 Q Do you mind just describing what -- who that letter is from?

12 A It says Jean-Christophe Dissart, higher education attache.

13 Q From the Embassy of France?

14 A Embassy of France, yes, in Washington.

15 Q And do you mind reading just the final sentence right above the bullet
16 points, starting with, "In addition"?

17 A Yes.

18 "In addition, we have found no evidence of Ms. Derakhcheche holding a PhD
19 degree in France. Ms. Derakhcheche has not produced a certified copy of a diploma
20 that bears the title of doctorate. We have not been able to find Ms. Derakhcheche's
21 PhD dissertation in the national, freely searchable, database of PhD dissertations. Ms.
22 Derakhcheche has not produced the 'rapport de soutenance' (defense report) signed by
23 all members of the jury."

24 Q And are you familiar with the referenced searchable database of Ph.D.s in
25 France?

- 1 A I was not. I became when I saw this.
- 2 Q Have you ever searched yourself in the database --
- 3 A No.
- 4 Q -- at any point during this process?
- 5 Are you aware of whether or not any of your counsel, either present or prior
- 6 counsel, have ever searched you in the database?
- 7 A I don't know.
- 8 Q Would it surprise you to know that you weren't in the database?
- 9 A No.
- 10 Q Why not?
- 11 A Because at the time when I got my Ph.D. it was not digital, it was just hard
- 12 copy.
- 13 Q So you wouldn't expect to see yourself in the database?
- 14 A I did not.
- 15 Q We have some exhibits we just need to make sure they are entered into the
- 16 record as well.
- 17 A Sure.

1 [Sieg Majority Exhibit No. 10
2 was marked for identification.]

3 [REDACTED] The next exhibit is exhibit 10, which is the result of the thesis database
4 searches referenced. This is the majority's conducting of thesis database searches,
5 these are not copies of the French Embassy's own databases searches.

6 As you can see, there are attached English -- Google Translate of the English page
7 as well as the original French.

8 Ms. Sieg. Okay.

9 [REDACTED] Search results for your name, including both simple searches as well as
10 specific author searches, do not pull up any results. Also separate -- we can put this as
11 the same exhibit, but it's also the title of your thesis as well. And this is just searches of
12 the title of your dissertation as well.

13 Mr. Zaid. I'm sorry, was that 11 or is it combined?

14 [REDACTED] It's all 10.

15 So at no point during this investigation and anything you never looked up yourself,
16 you never informed someone to look? Were you ever shown or did the agency ever
17 raise with you the concerns about not appearing in the database?

18 Ms. Sieg. No.

19 [REDACTED] And this will be exhibit 11.

1 [Sieg Majority Exhibit No. 11
2 was marked for identification.]

3 BY [REDACTED]

4 Q Are you aware of what these documents are?

5 A Yes.

6 Q Do you mind describing them to me and what their role is in the French
7 education system?

8 A I will, but I also have to say that this is a draft, and there's another one with
9 the -- that we submitted -- that's not the correct one either. There's another one that
10 was submitted with the registration number that you might not have. But I can pull it if
11 you would like. There is a registration number, it's like a Social Security number.

12 Yes, thank you.

13 I'm sorry, you said what it is?

14 Q Do you mind just describing what these documents are and explaining what
15 their role is in the French education system?

16 A Yes. It's the form, the registration form that you have to fill out when you
17 submit your dissertation to be filed.

18 Q And did you fill out this form?

19 A That's my form, yes.

20 Q Did you submit it?

21 A Yes.

22 Q Is there a record of you submitting it?

23 A You have to ask the university.

24 Q And these are national forms, correct?

25 A Yes.

1 Q In the top left it says Ministry of National Education, correct?

2 A Correct.

3 Q And that reflects that French doctorates are nationally regulated degrees,
4 correct?

5 A It does say that it's from the higher education [speaking foreign language]
6 yes.

7 Q And just to clarify, you're claiming to have a nationally regulated doctorate,
8 correct?

9 A I'm under the impression, and my understanding is that, yes, it is.

10 Q Thank you.

11 And just on the letter of reprimand, do you still challenge the factual findings of
12 USAGM regarding your academic credentials?

13 A What do you mean still challenging?

14 Q Do you agree with the letter of reprimand's findings?

15 A As I said before, I acknowledge that it's been very controversial and there
16 are differences of opinion, and that was one opinion from LER.

17 Q Just to further clarify, do you agree or disagree with the finding that -- on
18 page 4 of the letter of reprimand.

19 A Okay.

20 Q Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Quote, "From the
21 all assessments and materials I have reviewed, I conclude that it is more likely than not
22 that you do not hold a Ph.D. and submitted your resume with inaccurate information
23 when you stated you obtained a Ph.D. in International Relations, Summa cum laude,
24 Sorbonne, Paris, France in 1995," close quote.

25 Do you agree or disagree with that finding?

1 A As I said, there's one part that says yes, one part that says no. So it's
2 very -- there are conflicting opinions, and that's one opinion.

3 Q But just to clarify, do you agree or disagree with the conclusion, quote, "that
4 it is more likely than not" that you hold a Ph.D.?

5 A The LER person is -- I don't believe is a specialist of the French education.
6 So, again, it's very controversial. There are conflicting opinions, and that's one opinion
7 as well.

8 Q And what is your -- do you agree or disagree with that opinion?

9 A Again, I have to do more research on that. I can't say yes or no.

10 ██████████ Ma'am, that's the most absurd answer I've heard in a long time.

11 BY ██████████

12 Q Just to also -- another finding further down on that page on the next
13 paragraph. Quote, "You also exhibited inappropriate conduct during the administrative
14 investigation," close quote.

15 Do you agree or disagree with that assessment by USAGM?

16 A I disagree.

17 Q What's your basis for disagreement?

18 A I was -- my counsel was corresponding with LER, and they wanted me to
19 correspond with them directly, and that was the inappropriate conduct.

20 Q And you were informed that you did not have a right to legal representation
21 at that stage of the investigation?

22 A That's correct.

23 Q And you still disregarded USAGM's request to directly communicate with the
24 agency?

25 A I did not disregard it. I was communicating with them but so was my

1 counsel.

2 Q And just to clarify, this letter was issued on May 2024, correct?

3 A Yes.

4 Q Did you receive it on the --

5 A May 31st.

6 Q Of May 31st. Did you receive it on May 31st, 2024? Were there
7 discussions prior to the issuance of the letter of reprimand? Were you given a copy
8 ahead of time? Anything like that.

9 A No.

10 [REDACTED] So I'm going to take issue with your characterization of this -- oh,
11 well, there are so many different opinions floating around and one person thinks this and
12 one entity thinks that.

13 There is really only one opinion, ma'am. The agency now says you don't have
14 the credential that you claim to have possessed, the foreign credentialing service says you
15 don't have that credential, the French Government says you don't have the credential,
16 and the professors who you somehow contacted but you're not really clear on the details
17 of why and when and who they are, they say they defer to the ministry, who says you
18 don't have the credential.

19 So I just want to clarify for the record that this whole let's muddy the record and
20 confuse people and try to make this into a much more complicated scenario than
21 necessary, that doesn't work for us.

22 And we need to clarify for the record that there is actually only one opinion now
23 after 3 years of everything that we've gone through. I want that to be perfectly clear in
24 the record.

25 Thank you. Nothing further from us.

1 ██████████ Actually, sorry, one.

2 BY ██████████:

3 Q Just so I understand, so you disagree with the LER assessment, correct?

4 A Again, I'm saying I have to do my research. I'm having my own doubts right
5 now because this has been going on for 3 years. I am acknowledging that.

6 Q Do you -- have you presented yourself as having a Ph.D. since the letter of
7 reprimand was issued?

8 A No.

9 Q Do you intend to represent yourself as having a Ph.D. following the issuance
10 of this letter of reprimand?

11 A I have to acknowledge the controversy if there is an instance where I have to
12 present myself with a Ph.D. or not, with an equivalent of a Ph.D.

13 ██████████ Thank you very much.

14 ██████████ Go off the record.

15 [Discussion off the record.]

16 ██████████ I'm not going to offer my personal views or reactions to your
17 testimony or the questions you've been asked today because U.S. taxpayers are not
18 paying a transcriptionist to be here to hear my views. They're paying for a transcribed
19 interview of your testimony.

20 So, again, I just want to thank you that you're here voluntarily today providing
21 your testimony and answers to our questions.

22 Again, I apologize if I jump around from issue to issue, but I do have a few
23 follow-up questions from what we were just discussing -- or what you were just discussing
24 with my majority colleagues.

25 Exhibit 8, I believe -- what was exhibit 8?

1 Mr. Zaid. That's the email from the university to the committee.

2 ██████████ Ah, yes.

3 And exhibit 7 was the letter that, Mr. Zaid, you provided to the committee from
4 Veronique Petit and --

5 Mr. Zaid. I believe you are -- the committee already had that, at least according
6 to the report of investigation.

7 ██████████ But for purposes of recordkeeping sake, am I correct that that was
8 exhibit 7.

9 Mr. Zaid. Yes.

10 BY ██████████:

11 Q Okay. So let me turn your attention back to both exhibits 7 and 8.

12 So from these two exhibits it looks like the letter directly from Veronique Petit and
13 Antoine Reberieux was furnished on March 18. And then on March 28 there was this
14 exchange between majority committee staff and one of these individuals, Antoine
15 Reberieux.

16 Am I correct in understanding that in exhibit 7 what they are speaking to is
17 specifically your studies undertaken at that -- at this particular institution and the degree
18 that you claim to have received there, correct?

19 A Yes.

20 Q And if we look at exhibit 8, at the bottom, this is the majority's original email
21 to Mr. Antoine Reberieux, one of the signatories of the letter in exhibit 7.

22 It says, "Good afternoon. My colleague" -- I'll skip the name -- "and I work as
23 counsels in the U.S. House of Representatives, and we were hoping to schedule a call with
24 you all to draw upon your expertise and ask a few questions about the French higher
25 education system. Might you be available the week of April 8? Best regards." And

1 it's signed by one of the majority staffers.

2 Is there any mention in this email of your name or your specific activities
3 undertaken at a French university?

4 A No.

5 Q So the response that we see at the top of this page that was read into the
6 record previously, so I'll spare everyone's time, when they say, "We cannot claim to have
7 an informed overview of the French higher education system," is it possible that one
8 cannot be an authoritative voice on the entire French education system, higher education
9 system, but can have specific expertise or knowledge that relates to your individual
10 studies?

11 A Yes.

12 Q This is just for clarity of the record.

13 When the studies that you undertook that you believe to have resulted in the
14 conferring of a degree equivalent to the U.S. Ph.D., when did those studies conclude,
15 when did that event occur? 1995?

16 A The diploma itself?

17 Q Yes.

18 A Yes, 1995.

1 [1:27 p.m.]

2 [REDACTED] Okay. Was the letter of reprimand already introduced into the
3 record? And if so, I'm sorry, which exhibit was it?

4 Mr. Zaid. Exhibit 5.

5 BY [REDACTED]:

6 Q Okay. Then let's go back to exhibit 5. I just want to walk through a couple
7 pieces of this.

8 In the first full paragraph on page 1, under "Background," it reads as follows: "I
9 am writing to formally address a serious matter regarding inaccurate information on your
10 resume. You submitted a resume when you applied for the General Manager position in
11 the Persian News Network (PNN) announcement number BBG-14-14 GS-15 on
12 December 12, 2013. While this position did not require a specific degree, information
13 about your educational background was included in your resume."

14 I'm going to stop there.

15 At the time that you applied for that position, was it ever communicated to you
16 that your eligibility for the position or your qualifications for the position were dependent
17 on whether or not you had obtained a degree equivalent to a U.S. Ph.D.?

18 A No.

19 Q Was it ever communicated to you as such subsequently?

20 A No.

21 Q And to your knowledge, to this day, is the question of what type of degree
22 you hold germane or determinative in your being qualified to take -- to undertake the
23 duties that you undertook as VOA Persian director?

24 A No.

25 Q Okay. And if we can go to page 4 of this exhibit. And, again, I apologize

1 for rereading something that's already been read into the record, so I'll go quickly.

2 But just to clarify, the third paragraph on the page, second full paragraph, begins,
3 "From the all assessments and materials I have reviewed, I conclude that it is more likely
4 than not that you do not hold a Ph.D. and submitted your resume with inaccurate
5 information when you stated you obtained a Ph.D. in International Relations, Summa cum
6 laude, Sorbonne, Paris, France in 1995."

7 I'd like to focus on the phrase "more likely than not." And if you'll indulge me,
8 does "more likely than not" mean absolutely do not or absolutely did not hold a Ph.D.?

9 A No.

10 Q "More likely than not" is an assessment, correct?

11 A An assessment, absolutely.

12 Q And it was characterized by the majority as, quote, "the one opinion that
13 matters." But, in fact, the opinion is simply that something is more likely, not less likely.

14 A Yes, correct.

15 Q That's not tantamount to an unimpeachable fact?

16 A Yes.

17 Q Okay. This was minority exhibit 1 in the last round. This very
18 large -- actually, I think this might've been minority exhibit 3, I'm sorry. We introduced
19 the transmittal letter, the article that was referenced in it, and then this was minority
20 exhibit 3. Do you have it in front of you again?

21 A Yes.

22 Q I think there was some back-and-forth about the relevance or lack of
23 relevance between Mr. Pack and Ms. Namdar and the letter of reprimand that you
24 received, because you received it at a point at which those two people were no longer a
25 part of the agency.

1 I think, for purposes of clarity in the record, I'd like to go back and go over page 5
2 of exhibit -- minority exhibit 3 so the record is crystal clear on the OSC report's
3 conclusions about Mr. Pack's tenure specifically.

4 This report is about 150 pages, correct?

5 A Yes.

6 Q And we went over about a page and a half in the last round, correct?

7 A Yes.

8 Q So presumably the report has a lot to say about other things that were
9 reviewed that were management actions that were undertaken between June 2020 and
10 January 2021, correct?

11 A Yes.

12 Q Okay. So on page 5, this starts with "Key Findings," and I'm going to read
13 the bolded language to you.

14 "The Review Team found that CEO Pack abused his authority when he:

15 "improperly suspended the security clearances of six senior executives and
16 another management employee and placed them on administrative leave;" -- again,
17 moving to the next bolded phrase --

18 "attempted to debar the Open Technology Fund;" continuing with bolded
19 phrases --

20 "violated the International Broadcasting Act of 1994 by attempting to enshrine a
21 provision into grantee bylaws and employment contracts imposing limitations on removal
22 of CEO-appointed board members and presidents;" -- continuing on --

23 "directed employee-related materials covered by the Privacy Act be sent to
24 individuals outside of the government."

25 It continues, "The Review Team found that CEO Pack engaged in gross

1 management when he detailed VOA's Standards Editor into a position with no assigned
2 duties or functions."

3 Continuing, "The Review Team found that CEO Pack engaged in gross
4 mismanagement and gross waste when he" -- and I'll finish the sentence -- "spent
5 \$1.6 million to engage a private law firm to perform work that did not produce the
6 benefit reasonably expected and could have been performed by federal employees."

7 It continues, "The Review Team found that CEO Pack took actions that were
8 inconsistent with the statutory mandate that he respect the networks' journalistic
9 independence and integrity (commonly referred to as the 'firewall')."

10 And, finally, last bolded phrase on page 5, "The Review Team found that CEO Pack
11 did not engage in gross mismanagement or abuse of authority when he:" -- and on page
12 6 -- in the interest of time, and since it's not bolded, there are about eight bullets of
13 things that the Review Team investigated that they did not find sufficient evidence to
14 support.

15 And, finally, the last part of this key finding says, "The Review Team found that
16 CEO Pack violated laws, rules, or regulations in the following instances," and provides
17 three examples of additional violations of Federal law.

18 So I read that into the record and will ask you, does that comport generally with
19 your understanding of Mr. Pack's tenure at the agency?

20 A Yes.

21 Q And the fact that he doesn't appear on your letter of reprimand is irrelevant
22 to the conclusions that OSC reached that comport with your general understanding of his
23 tenure?

24 A Yes.

25 Q It was also asserted in the last round that -- tell me if this is an unfair

1 characterization based on the exchange that you had with my colleague -- but that the
2 letter of reprimand essentially was reaffirming the charges, Charge 1 and 2, of the
3 January 5, 2021, proposal to remove you from Beth Robbins, that those two things were
4 essentially similar, right?

5 And I think you took some issue with that and contended to the contrary in some
6 cases.

7 But at any rate, Robbins and Namdar are no longer at the agency, so they, by
8 definition, couldn't have signed an agency document in May 2024, correct?

9 A Yes.

10 Q And the hypothetical of whether they would have is not relevant because
11 you testified previously that these two individuals wanted to remove you, correct?

12 A Yes.

13 Q Not issue a letter of reprimand, not put something in your personnel file for
14 2 years. They wanted you fired. Is that accurate?

15 A That's accurate.

16 Q And the letter of reprimand that was the result of 3 years of investigating by
17 the agency is not tantamount to being removed, correct?

18 A Yes.

19 Q I'll leave it to others to hypothesize then on whether Robbins and Namdar
20 would've actually signed that letter of reprimand.

21 [Pause.]

22 Sorry. Just give us a minute. We can let the clock run.

23 [Pause.]

24 So the last thing we'll submit for the record is actually Chairman McCaul's own
25 report on this investigation that was issued prior to this transcribed interview being

1 conducted.

2 [Sieg Minority Exhibit No. 4
3 was marked for identification.]

4 BY ██████████:

5 Q Have you seen this report before?

6 A Yes.

7 Q Do you recall when you saw it?

8 A Not exactly.

9 Q Okay. You can see from the first title page that it was issued in June 2024.
10 So you saw it sometime shortly thereafter?

11 A Around that time, yes.

12 Q What was your reaction when you saw the report?

13 A Shock.

14 Q Can you say more? Why were you shocked?

15 A Well, I believe that I have been a dedicated government employee, a civil
16 servant, who has always put the interest of the United States first. And I went through a
17 difficult time shaping up the Persian Service. I received death threats from inside Iran.

18 And I was surprised that with my background, with my family's background and
19 how we fled Iran, that a Member of Congress that I respect so very much, that I follow
20 what he does, and I respect what he does regarding Iran, would have this assessment of a
21 civil servant like me.

22 Q Okay. Let me turn to page 51, the conclusion of this report. And I just
23 want to get your reaction to a specific piece of it.

24 At the top of the conclusion it reads, "It is troubling that, faced with clear evidence
25 of corruption and mismanagement, USAGM management failed to follow through on

1 Elizabeth Robbins' decision to terminate Ms. Sieg, which has since been vindicated."

2 Do you have any particular reaction to that sentence?

3 A I do take -- the words "corruption" and "mismanagement," I don't know if
4 they're related to me or USAGM management. But this is what I was put in at VOA
5 Persian to do, to stop corruption, to stop mismanagement. And when it's turning back
6 at me it was shocking, and it was -- I was saddened by this, by this assessment.

7 Q Do you think the focus on your case was motivated by a desire to vindicate
8 Elizabeth Robbins?

9 A I think the agency followed through. This was something that was started
10 by Elizabeth Robbins, whether she was there or not, and it continued. I think she did
11 play a role even though she was not there physically.

12 Q Okay. I want to go back to the letter of reprimand. I forgot to ask you this
13 when I was questioning you on it earlier.

14 What was your reaction when you received the letter of reprimand?

15 A I was very upset about it.

16 Q Did you reject it in any formal way?

17 A Not in a formal way, but I thought it was unfair.

18 Q But you've accepted it as part of your personnel record for the next 2 years?

19 A I have.

20 Q And you've subjected yourself to questions today --

21 A I have.

22 Q -- in addition to six other instances. You testified earlier that you'd been
23 asked questions about these allegations by personnel at the agency, correct?

24 A Yes.

25 Q Is there anything about the committee's investigation into the agency's

1 investigation of allegations against you that you think we're missing or need to know?

2 A I think the committee never considered my background when I was a
3 manager with outstanding performance, and what I did for the Persian Service and what I
4 did to Iran, and this was our mission.

5 And that's why I'm a hated person among the Islamic Republic of Iran. And they
6 also investigated me, and there was a trial in absentia a few months ago that they put me
7 through. I don't know what the charges are going to be.

8 But this is what I did. Again, I put everything, I put the United States first ahead
9 of my family, ahead of my health, ahead of my security, and that's what I did. And I find
10 it a bit odd that with what I have done with integrity, with good intentions, that this
11 would turn back at me.

12 And I also, for the record, I want to make it clear that I was never -- or I was not
13 the last word on the decisions, whether it was for budget, contract, personnel,
14 production, content. I had a very much hands-on supervisor, and I was referring
15 everything to her. I was consulting with that particular person. I was getting that
16 particular person's advice. And I don't think that has been mentioned anywhere.

17 I also have been teaching at the university. I couldn't have taught at a university
18 if I didn't have a degree.

19 So these are the things that were not mentioned, and I'm very glad that I was
20 given the opportunity today to mention these.

21 Q Okay. So your concern that -- your concern, if I'm understanding it
22 correctly, just to make sure we're taking the right lesson away here, is that congressional
23 investigators, we need to ensure appropriate context and that we understand the context
24 around the decisions that were taken?

25 A Yes.

1 Q And that's because context matters, and the way an investigation starts and
2 what may have motivated it, all that matters to the broader conclusions that Congress
3 should draw?

4 A I agree. Yes, absolutely.

5 And I was never by myself. This is a group of people who make decisions. And
6 if there were changes, if there were unhappiness within the service, everything was going
7 through my supervisor.

8 I never -- I did not do anything on my own. I don't think that context was there,
9 or what I did for the service, and the numbers that I got for the Persian Service as one of
10 the top as far as digital viewership and everything. Those were not considered.

11 [REDACTED] Okay. We don't have anything further. Thanks for your testimony
12 today.

13 [REDACTED] We just have, like, one or two more questions and then we are
14 done.

15 [REDACTED] Before we begin, do you want to take 5 minutes or anything?

16 Ms. Sieg. Is it going to be an hour?

17 [REDACTED] No, it will be like 5 or 6 minutes.

18 Ms. Sieg. That's fine. Thank you.

19 BY [REDACTED]

20 Q Okay. Just to wrap up, ma'am.

21 Earlier today you referenced, in response to some of my minority colleagues'
22 questions, and pardon me if I'm misstating what you said, but something along the lines
23 of you had worked with Ms. Amanda Bennett about a letter that was sent to State
24 Department perhaps regarding Ms. Namdar or something. The substance of the letter is
25 not what I'm focusing on.

1 The letter raised the issue of the extent to which you know and/or interact with
2 Ms. Bennett herself. Can you indicate when you first met Ms. Bennett, and over the
3 years in what capacities you've worked with her?

4 A I believe that I met her when she came to the Voice of America as director.
5 I do not remember the date when she started. And I'm an employee and she was the
6 VOA director.

7 Q And would you call her a personal friend?

8 A No.

9 Q You don't associate outside of work?

10 A No.

11 Q Have you corresponded with her verbally or in email at any point during this
12 investigation?

13 A Yes.

14 Q When?

15 A I don't remember. I would say at the beginning of the investigation.

16 Q And was that in response to her contacting you, or you reached out
17 proactively to provide her with information or context or something?

18 A I don't remember. And it wasn't the investigation, it was the position I was
19 in. But it was after Mr. Pack was gone and she became the CEO.

20 Q So it was not in reference to this investigation? It was in reference to your
21 normal day-to-day job and responsibilities?

22 A Not directly to the investigation, but I was transferred to another position or
23 I was assigned to another position and I was talking about that. But not about the
24 investigation per se. I had strict advice and instructions from my counsel not to talk
25 about the investigation about -- with anyone.

1 Q Did you ever email Ms. Bennett regarding articles that were published by
2 VOA that referenced you and this -- in the context of this investigation?

3 A I don't remember. I don't recall.

4 [REDACTED] Nothing further, unless you've got anything.

5 [REDACTED] No.

6 [REDACTED] Go back on the record.

7 That concludes today's TI. Thank you for the cooperation of the agency and
8 Ms. Sieg and her counsel. It was very informative and helpful to the chairman. And --

9 Mr. Zaid. Can I say one thing or ask one thing?

10 [REDACTED] Sure.

11 Mr. Zaid. I would ask either the majority or the minority, as both knows, I
12 provided 35 pages of relevant records to this. Six of them are in the record. I'd ask
13 that the other pages please be put in as either exhibit 12 for the majority or exhibit 5 for
14 the minority. Does not matter to me.

15 [REDACTED] Okay. I'll have to take that back, but we'll get back to you.

16 [REDACTED] I have them in a package, and I'm happy to submit them in my last
17 45 seconds of time that I didn't claim.

18 [REDACTED] I mean, I just want to verify with others on the committee that
19 that's standard procedure, and if they don't object then we don't have a problem. But I
20 just don't want to commit right now before I check the box.

21 But, Mark, we'll get back to you. Thank you.

22 Ms. Sieg. And we will send you Chairman Royce's through --

23 Mr. Zaid. I will provide a copy -- as soon as I get it, I'll provide a copy of that
24 letter.

25 [REDACTED] Thank you very much.

1 [Discussion off the record.]
2 [REDACTED] Back on the record for housekeeping.
3 Majority exhibit 12 will be the documents provided by Ms. Sieg's personal counsel.
4 [Sieg Majority Exhibit No. 12
5 was marked for identification.]
6 [Whereupon, at 1:52 p.m., the interview was concluded.]

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Certificate of Deponent/Interviewee

I have read the foregoing 115 pages, which contain the correct transcript of the answers made by me to the questions therein recorded.

Setareh Sieg

Witness Name

10/29/24

Date

**Errata Sheet for the Transcribed Interview of
Setareh Sieg dated 10/15/2024**

1) majority errata, (2) minority errata, (3) agency counsel, (4) private counsel (as applicable) and witness errata

Page	Line	Change	Reason
3	5	Change “special assistant to the Voice of America programming director” to “Special Assistant to the Voice of America Programming Director”	
4	24	Change “witness” to “witness’s”	
4	25	Change “witness” to “witness’s”	
10	22, 24	Change “Zaid” to “Seide”	
11	9	Change “?” to “.”	
20	22	Change “Zieg” to “Sieg”	
39	8	Change “no take” to “not taken”	
48	7	Change “and brief” to “in brief”	
85	25	Change “food” to “foot”	
99	4	Change “hold” to “do not hold”	
107	1	Change “management” to “mismanagement”	