

AFFIDAVIT OF BIJAN BIRANG

I, Bijan Birang, hereby declare under penalty of perjury that the following statements are true and correct to the best of my knowledge and recollection. I am writing this affidavit in support of Ali Birang's I-140 Immigrant Petition for Alien Worker.

- My name is Bijan Birang. I am a producer, director, showman, screenplay writer, and the father of Ali Birang. I was born in 1950 in Tabriz, Iran. I studied Dramatic Art at the University of Tehran and Art Education at the University of Southern California. From 1988 to 2000, I was employed by the Iranian National Radio and Television (IRIB) as a director and producer. My works, which include *Chagho Laghar* (The Thin and the Chubby, a TV series for youth, which narrated the story of two gullible detectives and was broadcast from 1986 to 1989 on Channel One of the IRIB), *Doniaie Shirin* (The World of *Shirin*, another TV series for youth which narrated the story of Shirin, an Iranian teenager, and her family which was broadcast in 1997 in 52 episodes), *Doniaie Shirine Darya* (The Sweet World of Darya, a TV series for youth which narrated the story of Darya, a female teenager from a small village who lived with her single mother in the north of Iran, which was broadcast in 1998), *Khaneie Sabz* (The Green House, a TV series which was broadcast in 1996 and narrated the story of the residents of an apartment building in Tehran who were all relatives), *Hamsaran* (The Spouses, a TV series broadcast in 1994 in 40 episodes which narrated the story of two couples who were also neighbors), were among the most popular series on Iranian Television. My works for children and young adults have made the childhood memories of generations of Iranians, and the TV series for adults were so successful that the expressions in them and references to them influenced slang and pop culture for a many years.
- I discovered Ali's talent for music when he was five years old. He was gifted a harmonica for his birthday. He asked me how to play it, and I said just by breathing in and out. I told him I learnt how to play harmonica by myself in my own room. He disappeared for an hour, and when he returned he started playing a Turkish song, which he had learnt by himself. I hired a piano teacher for him at the age of 7 who always used to tell me how Ali amazed him with his talent. Ali told me at the age of 8 that he did not want to only play music but to compose it as well, because the players only do the manual job for the composers. I agreed to hire a composition teacher for him. From the age of 8 to the age of 11 (when he finished elementary school), he was composing one song per week for his teacher. At the age of 12, we decided to register him at the Iranian Conservatory for Music in Tehran. It was the most prestigious school for music and unique in its kind, since it would accept youth from

the age of 12 until they finished a Master's Degree in Music. The school did not plan to admit piano students that year, but after they heard Ali playing his own compositions, they reopened the piano program again merely to admit him. That year Ali ranked one in the conservatoire's entrance exam.

- Simultaneously, Ali's professional career as a musician and a composer started at the age of 13. I remember that I was away from Tehran with my partner Mas'oud Rassam. When I returned to Tehran, Mas'oud's brother Mehran who was the producer of *Sib-e Khandeh* (Apple of Laughter, a comedy show for youth which was broadcasted on Channel 2 of the IRIB in 1997), told me: "Guess who I have chosen to be the composer for the series? Ali!" I was very surprised; I knew my son was very talented but I could not believe he actually could pass the audition to become a professional composer for the Iranian Television at such a young age.
- Over the course of a decade, until 2000, Ali composed numerous pieces for popular TV series. At the time, there were only two channels on IRIB. Using and owning satellite TV has always been forbidden by law, so these series were widely watched by every class of Iranian people. In addition, the fact that there were few channels meant that there was fierce competition for the artists to work on TV programs. My young son won many of these projects over the heads of many qualified musicians who were much more experienced than he was. For example, Ali composed for *Sib-e Khandeh* (Apple of Laughter, which was broadcasted in 52 episodes), *Doniaie Shirin* (Shirin's World, which was directed by Behruz Baghaei 1997 in 52 episodes), *Majid Jan Delbandam* (Dear Majid, Sweetheart directed by Reza Attaran in 1998), *Doniaie Shirine Darya* (The Sweet World of Darya directed by Behruz Baghaei in 1999), *Ghatare Abadi* (The Eternal Train directed by Reza Attaran in 1999), among others. Due to the censorship and lack of transparency at IRIB, there is no official data on the number of viewers of these series, but these series were immensely popular at the time. People still remember these TV series fondly, even a number of references and sentences out of these series have remained in Iranian slang and pop culture. For example, Majid, a long-armed puppet in the *Majid Jan Delbandam* series, would make several mistakes and would mispronounce several words in every sentence. Even now, when somebody mispronounces a word, people may call him or her "Majid."
- The music of these series has become part of the memories of an entire generation. Ali still receives messages on social media from his fans, who praise him for making such fond childhood memories and also express astonishment that he was only a child himself while composing those pieces. Ali was also praised by the officials of IRIB for his compositions. Considering that the Iranian Islamic

government generally disfavors music as *haram* (forbidden) under *Shari'ah* laws, this appraisal was great achievement for a young musician. For example, Ali Moallem, the Chairman of the Music and Chorus Group of IRIB, mentioned in a letter to Mohsen Mirmirani, the Chairman of the Movie and Series Group, on July 8, 2001 that the Supreme Counsel of Music supports the soundtrack of *Ghatar Abadi* and suggests promoting and praising the composer, Ali, who was 17 years old at the time. As the musician of *Doniaie Shirin*, Ali also received several prizes, such as *Jashne Khatereha* (The Festival of Memories) in 2007. As the name suggests, these ceremonies were held to pay respect to and remember the cast of TV programs and movies who made the most popular movies and series for children and adults which have become a permanent part of their childhood or memories, and my son's melodies are part of these memories. Moreover, he has fame in film composition since the age of twelve, as I will expand in the following paragraphs. His composition for the movie *Chaharshabeh* (Wednesday, directed by Soroush Mohammadzadeh) has been praised equally by the critics and professional musicians as well as laypersons.

- Ali was the composer of many series that I produced. Choosing my own son was not due to nepotism; it was for the simple fact that for many of the projects that I had in mind, there were no musicians like my own son who could meet the standards. For example, I could find no one that could write music for dialogue in Iran, or a musician that had the ability to write music for a long musical, which have rarely been made in Iran. Thus, I had to employ my own son, who actually had the talent and the skills to cooperate with my projects like *Cinderella* (2001) and *The Pop Singer* (a musical which started in 2003).
- Extreme forms of censorship in IRIB have always hindered our works and have affected Ali as a musician. During the years of my employment as a Senior Producer at IRIB, I was summoned and punished by *Herasat* (the Intelligence Units of the organization) numerous times. Once in 1984, I was unofficially suspended from IRIB for *Mahalleie Boro Bia*, a TV show for children similar to Sesame Street, which was followed by *Mahalleie Behdasht*, another show in the same style in 1983-1984. The Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei had seen one episode of the program on TV while leaving his residence for Friday prayers. He witnessed that his family was laughing at the program; he immediately called Mohammad Hashemi, the Director-General of IRIB, to stop the show. He told Hashemi: "You would stop airing this show if you had any respect for me." I was immediately summoned to Mr. Dadgu, the Director General of the Administration Council of IRIB, and questioned until the next morning. I was told of the dissatisfaction of the Supreme Leader and was accused of westoxification. Mr. Dadgu interpreted

everything in the series to reflect a conspiracy theory against the Revolution. For five years after this incident, I was unofficially blacklisted. None of my series or production would be accepted by IRIB. My works were branded as “Birangism” and would be rejected by the censorship apparatus automatically.

- After five years, I finally could return to work. However, the censorship was far from alleviated. For every series that I worked on with Ali, we had to overcome numerous problems with the censorship committees. For example, with *Majid Jan Delbandam*, the music of the opening credits, which was composed by Ali, was labeled “inappropriate” because it sounded like rock. Ali actually did that on purpose, wishing for the Iranian people to hear rock music on TV for the first time. I was summoned again and asked to change the music to tone it down. For *Doniaie Shirine Darya* (The Sweet World of Darya), another series whose music was by Ali, I was once again summoned by *Herasat* of the IRIB because Darya, the protagonist of the series, was a very strong and independent woman who became the village mayor. *Herasat* warned me to stop portraying women as fierce and smart leaders because “women have no right or intelligence to become decision makers.”
- I, along with my partner Masou’d Rassam, started an advertisement company, *Shabakeie Gostareh Tasvire Kala* (hereafter *Shabakeh*) in 1991. The Iranian revolutionaries did not have a favorable opinion on advertisement due to their leftist and anti-consumerism tendencies. Thus, at the onset of the Revolution, advertisement was restricted on IRIB. There was no law regulating advertisements. In Iran, for every branch of commerce, one would need a permit. At the time, there was no institution to grant advertising permits. Thus, only a few companies had been established, which on their face existed for other purposes but which would actually work on advertisement. This was especially troublesome because the authorities had the power to close and sanction these companies arbitrarily. In 1991, I along with a few other prominent figures in the advertisement industry, including Ms. Asghar Jahani, Mr. Katuzian, Mr. Rassam and Mr. Farhadi, decided to end this problem. A number of us met in secret in Gheitarieh Park, a park in Tehran, and made the first union for the advertisement industry since the Revolution, *Anjomane Tablighate Iran* (the Society of Advertisement of Iran). We chose a founding committee to pressure the authorities to pass laws for the industry. Finally, our pressure resulted in the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance forming a committee to regulate the industry. We started our business and the rules for the business followed our business model. I along with a few others founded the Union of Advertisement Companies. At the first meeting of this union, I was thanked in writing for my contribution to the industry.

- *Shabakeh* was a family-owned business. Once again, I employed my own son, Ali, in whose talents and ability I had a firm belief. As the first and most prominent advertisement company in the entire nation, we used to contract the giants of every industry in Iran. Famous and powerful companies such as Samsung, *Golrang* (Iranian famous brand for beauty products), *Gaam* (a prominent Iranian shoe brand), *Zarif Mosavvar* (successful brand for carpets), *Roshd* (Iranian giant in the food industry), and *Mahram* (another prominent company in the Iranian food industry). All of our teasers and commercials naturally were accompanied by music, which was composed by Ali after he proved himself to be an able composer at the age of 12. Commercials as we made them were very novel and exciting for Iranians, especially children, who had rarely heard cheerful music on television. Thus, the music and the slogans of these commercials with Ali's melodies became catch phrases for a generation.
- In late 2000, during a forced televised confession, Mr. Siyamak Pourzand declared a list of elites that were plotting to overthrow the Iranian government. The names of my partner and myself were on the list. I barely knew who Mr. Pourzand was. He was a prominent journalist and literary figure before and after the Revolution of 1979. He was forcefully disappeared on November 29, 2000, detained, tortured, and forced to make untruthful confessions against many elites. He falsely claimed that he, along with others on the list (including Mr. Rassam and I), had received money from the family of the former Shah of Iran and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to overthrow the Islamic Republic government. Mr. Pourzand spent a while in prison and committed suicide in 2011 under house arrest.
- Mr. Rassam and I were in shock. We had never spoken to Mr. Pourzand prior to the incident, let alone received any amount of money from him. We knew that an ominous fate was befalling upon us, since most people on Mr. Pourzand's lists were arrested. Shortly after the incident in early 2001, I was summoned to *Herasat* (the intelligence unit) of IRIB and was fired after twenty-two years of successful service. My life fell into ruin afterwards. The last of my series that was released on TV was *Ghatore Abadi*, which was aired from 1999 to the middle of 2000. I had also produced *Sarzamine Sabz*, whose airing was suspended for ten years. Simultaneously, IRIB refused to broadcast our commercials, so the companies could not contract us. Mr. Rassam and I had to shut down the company and split up.
- We later found out that our names were put on Mr. Pourzand's list because of Mr. Ali Kordan, who used to be the Chief of the

Commercial, Financial and Administrative Section of IRIB. In the 2000's, the advertisement industry in Iran had been well established mainly thanks to our company, *Shabakeh*. The corrupt high-ranking officials wanted a cut of the growing business and the money it would bring. At Mr. Kordan's office, a company could buy the exclusive right to produce and air commercials for one of the several TV channels. *Shabakeh* along with three other companies had purchased spots on Channel 2 for eleven billion tomans (approximately \$13.8 million USD in 2000). After Mr. Kordan took office, he started a consortium of TV channels for advertisement. In this system, the advertisement companies had to join the consortium and would receive advertising spots on all TV channels in the consortium. Thus, if we wanted to advertise on one channel, we would also have to pay for spots on all the consortium's other channels. Because at this time Channel 2 was under contract to my company, it was not included in the consortium.

- The consortium was marked with the increasing presence of intelligence services and companies affiliated with high-ranking officials. *Shabakeh* was not allowed to join the consortium; however, the other companies that we had purchased the rights to Channel 2 with did join the consortium and stopped advertising on Channel 2. This left *Shabakeh* alone to fill all the spots for this channel and forced us to make hundreds of commercials per month, which was practically impossible. Moreover, it left *Shabakeh* with the full financial obligation to pay for the rights to Channel 2, even though we had been sharing these costs with three other companies when we signed the contract. This meant that we had to terminate our contract with Channel 2. However, Mr. Kordan was not yet satisfied with our failure; he was outraged that we could terminate the contract without any penalty and wished to force us into bankruptcy. Thus, it was said that he arranged for our names to be on Mr. Pourzand's list to completely destroy our business, which he succeeded in doing.
- My life fell into complete despair after these unfortunate incidents. We could not successfully pass the censorship or get aired on TV. Mr. Rassam died of cancer on November 1, 2009 after years of battling with the disease and depression. I could see the products of my art wasted and ruined before my eyes. Worse than my own career failure, I was devastated to see that I had also ruined my son's life by affiliation, since many opportunities disappeared for Ali after these events. After a number of years, the IRIB started inviting me to work with them on ad hoc basis. However, they always made it clear that I was not going to be paid or even credited for my work. They also assured me that the ad hoc projects did not mean that I was hired again. I usually accepted those unfair offers. It might sound unreasonable or even insane to work under those conditions, but I

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do not work for taking credit or earning money. I firmly believe that television does not belong to the government but to the people. Thus, I could not give up on the people of my country, for whom and for whose children I had worked tirelessly and lovingly for decades. I have had a vision to educate the Iranian people about values that the government was trying to undermine, such as women's rights, through entertainment, and I would not be discouraged easily. For example, in 2004, I was invited to make a talk show about life skills, *Baz Ham Zendegi* (Life Again). I was told that it would be unpaid and my name would not be mentioned anywhere in the show. I accepted, however, and one of the directors of the IRIB became embarrassed by the situation and credited me in the show at the end.

- Ali, who was 16 at the time of *Shabakeh's* forced closure, suffered the consequences along with me. He was being punished for being affiliated with me. Other producers were afraid or unwilling to contract him for their independent projects. He fell from grace and fame overnight, not because of his qualifications but only because his father was on a blacklist. Over the years, he loyally made music for my productions, none of which could pass through the censorship. For example, in 2000 he made hours of music for my TV series, *Sarzamin-e Sabz* (The Green Land), which was a sequel to another popular TV series of the 1990's, *Khaneie Sabz* (The Green House). The music of this series was splendid and glorious to show the greatness of the Iranian homeland and history. Glorification of nationalism was disfavored by the Islamic Republic of Iran, thus the series was not favored by the officials of IRIB. Moreover, after I was fired from IRIB, the release of the series was delayed until 10 years later. At the time, the idea of it was already out of fashion and it was aired at an hour when nobody could watch it. Thus, Ali's months of hard work and one of his best TV compositions was never heard.
- Another example was a movie called *Khanadeie Pop* (The Pop Singer), which I directed in 2003. It was a musical that narrated the story of a pop singer in Iran. I chose Ali to compose the music of this movie. I sought out other movie composers at first, but not one of them had the ability to make a full musical that could meet my high standards. From a music perspective, Iranian cinema is more similar to European cinema, which disfavors the use of music for films. Thus, many Iranian film composers are not able to manage a musical. Ali made more than one hour of music over the course of two years for The Pop Singer. However, after Ahmadinejad's first presidential term in 2004, the censorship became much tougher and this project came to a halt. Two years of hard work disappeared into thin air, just like that.
- In 2004, we started a project called *Akharin Kourosh* (The Last

Cyrus) in response to the movie *300*. It was going to be financed by a foreign producer for 1 billion Tomans (0.874 USD at the time). The film composer was Ali and we worked on the project for 3 to 4 years. The movie was supposed to be screened at Sundance Film Festival in the United States. However, after the presidency of Ahmadinejad started, the producer refused to continue out of fear. We were never informed of what exactly scared him, but once again Ali's works were never heard.

- Another project, *Az Eshgh Mordan* (Dying of Love), was a project financed by *Golrang*, Co. and directed by me in 2005. Ali again composed the music. Once again, the project was terminated due to the political air of the time and the disagreement between the producers and myself. Ali's efforts once again were in vain. Gradually, we lost most of our opportunities and contacts. Ali was even once told that he was not to be named at the end of a movie because he was blacklisted. Thus, although Ali has made great music even recently, these pieces were not released.
- My son is still a very prominent and respected musician in Iran, against all odds. He works with prominent artists and directors and is a member of the Alliance for Film Composers, which is a highly selective organization that only offers membership to a very few high profile musicians. Ali has skills and knowledge of a wide variety of music styles, from jazz to classical. He can compose a great classical symphony as well as melodies for commercials. Thus, a wide variety of musicians, producers, and singers have worked with him. For instance, Ali's pieces were selected by Maestro Alexander Rahbar to be performed and recorded by the National Symphonic Orchestra of Iran in October 2014. This was a project that once again was terminated due to the restrictions the government was imposing on Maestro Rahbari, which led him to leaving Iran shortly after. Ali is also very skillful in mixing and mastering music. Thus, many pop stars and other singers have employed him for this very purpose. For instance, popular singers such as Bijan Mortazavi and Ehsan Khajeh Amiri have hired my son for arranging, mixing and mastering.
- Ali is one of the best musicians I know. As an experienced director who has worked for years for the children and adults of my country, it was a pleasure and honor to work with him. I believe that he would best flourish outside of Iran where his talents are not restricted by extreme censorship.

Sincerely,

Bijan Birang

B. Birang