



## **Afghan Arrivals Need U.S. Support**

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Recently, the Afghanistan security and humanitarian situation came to the attention of many Americans and other people. The media and many other people failed to mention that Afghanistan is one of the countries where torture and other human rights abuses have been committed for a long time, and many Afghans have directly and indirectly suffered from it.

TASSC has been following the situation consistently, and everyone should work toward peace and healing of Afghans in and outside Afghanistan. Now that a significant number of Afghans are going to be resettled in the US, how could the community, including TASSC, help the healing process?

### **A quick background on the Afghanistan situation**

The US first invaded Afghanistan in 2001, as intelligence reported that the Taliban were fostering al-Qaida members who organized the 9/11 attacks. The US managed to root out terrorists, but the increased attention to Iraq allowed the Taliban to re-organize. In recent years, they have managed to take back territory previously lost in the countryside. The reappearance of the Taliban in Afghanistan was amplified by Trump's decision to plan the pulling out of US troops in the region, and the signing of a peace deal with the Taliban, ensuring limited US military action. President Biden carried on this decision to end the US presence in Afghanistan.

In April 2021, he announced that the last troops would leave by September (AP NEWS). The Taliban were already starting to establish their presence once again in Afghanistan, as they pursued the seizing of territory across the nation and intensified their attacks against the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, all despite ongoing peace talks. The upcoming withdrawal of US troops then emboldened the Taliban. They carried out lightning strikes that permitted them to quickly capture major cities in a matter of days, as US and Afghan security forces split. Indeed, less than 700 troops were left in Kabul by July 2021. Finally, on August 6th, the insurgents seized Kabul, as the president fled the capital a few days prior and left the Afghan government to collapse (CFR). After the Taliban managed to regain control of the whole country, scenes of despair played out as thousands of Afghans hurried to the airport to attempt to escape the country and re-establish brutal Shariah law. Many clung to planes and lost their lives trying to escape (AP NEWS).

### **Background on the SIV**

During its two decades in Afghanistan, the US depended massively on the help of Afghans serving as interpreters, translators, and in a wide array of functions to aid the US military, diplomatic, humanitarian, and development efforts in the nation. Individuals who have assisted the



US military are often in highly vulnerable positions and suffer the most from retaliation and attacks by the Taliban. This is where the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) comes into play. Indeed, the SIV program was created by Congress to offer permanent protection to Afghans who have been associated with US missions. This program allows individuals to file for a visa for themselves and their spouse and any of their unmarried children who are under 21 years old. A similar program exists for people in Iraq.

Sadly, the program has suffered from an important backlog and has left thousands of Afghans behind and in highly vulnerable situations. Moreover, the process and requirements are complex. They have been plaguing the program even more, especially since the constantly increasing violence these past few days has left people stuck in an administrative quagmire. Indeed, the fact that applicants need to prove they served the US for a minimum of two years and need to get a letter of recommendation from their US supervisor, who most often than not is not in Afghanistan anymore because of the withdrawal of troops, are all reasons that are putting SIV applicants in immediate danger (Rescue). The Covid situation, of course, has not been helping, as medical clearances and in-person interviews that are part of the SIV process were halted for extended periods in 2020 and 2021 due to the deteriorating health situation (CSIS).

### **Current status of Afghan SIV resettlement in the US**

The Biden administration recently tried to accelerate SIV processing and made it a point to promise that thousands of SIV applicants will be evacuated from Afghanistan and welcomed in the US. On July 14<sup>th</sup>, the administration launched ‘Operation Allies Refuge’, whose goal is to evacuate 2,500 Afghans to Virginia. The House has also been acting, as it passed the “ALLIES Act” on July 22<sup>nd</sup>. This act effectively added 8,000 additional visas and has the goal of making the SIV application process less complex by removing in-person medical visits which had been rendered impossible due to COVID and instead allowing a “credible sworn statement” of threats to applicants to suffice. The act also expanded eligibility to include individuals who have assisted allied forces involved in Afghanistan.

On August 2<sup>nd</sup>, the State Department announced Priority-2 (P2) designation for eligible Afghan individuals and their families, giving them access to the US Refugee Admissions Program. This program widens the range of people allowed in the US, even though it comes with limiting restrictions associated with its application process.

Despite these promises and the US’ action plan to ameliorate the SIV process, most Afghans are left behind. More than 300,000 Afghans served with the US missions, and yet, only 16,000 Afghan SIVs have been issued since 2014. Currently, around 20,000 applicants are in the pipeline, while more than 70,000 who have not yet applied are considered eligible for a visa. The US has only managed to evacuate a small number of SIV applicants. At the same time, the rest of them are stuck in Afghanistan. They were told that they would have to wait at least three to five



months before the United Nations and the International Organization for Migration would come in and schedule flights for people to leave the country.

Moreover, those numbers will only grow as more and more Afghans are in dire need of support and are desperate to flee the violent landscape that has rocked Afghanistan in the past few days (Rescue). If the US loses control of the airport, evacuations and SIV access will be cut off. This is why the US will probably have to adapt the SIV process and the P-2 designation according to the increasing violence and instability. In a spur of panic after the tragic scenes at the Kabul airport a few days ago, the US has been negotiating with Central Asian and African states to come up with an agreement that they would host refugees until the latter complete their visa process. On August 15<sup>th</sup>, Kosovo, Albania, and Uganda agreed to host refugees seeking US visas. The two nations will be assisted by US security authorities (CSIS).

Domestically, a few states in the US have pledged support to Afghan refugees seeking to relocate to the country (The Hill). Moreover, Senators Joni Ernst and Jeanne Shaheen have been working on a bipartisan letter to President Biden, pleading for the urgent evacuation of SIV applicants and the immediate implementation of the language recently passed on SIVs so that Afghans who have been putting their lives at risk can seek refuge in the US (Washington Post).

### **The healing process for those resettled in the US**

The first Afghan arrivals, around 2,000, are being hosted on Fort Lee Military Base. More will head to a military base in Wisconsin. After being processed, they will be eligible to apply for the work employment permit and be resettled by local resettlement agencies like Catholic Charities, Lutheran Social Services, and more. As TASSC has been working with torture and war-trauma survivors, we will be on standby to support local resettlement agencies if they need our help. We continue to encourage everyone to get involved in welcoming the Afghans and all immigrants in need.

#### ***Sources:***

- [Center for Strategic & International Studies](#)
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- [The Hill](#)
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