

Joint Department of State/Department of Homeland Security Report: Status of the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program

Introduction

The Department of State (State), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and all other U.S. government departments and agencies involved in the U.S. Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program have the highest respect for the men and women who take enormous risks to support our military and civilian personnel. We are committed to helping those who have helped us. The U.S. government has devoted substantial resources to reducing the amount of time required to complete the SIV process authorized under section 602(b) of the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009, as amended, and these efforts have resulted in a record number of visa issuances. We issued 12,086 SIVs to Afghans in FY 2016, including 3,626 principal applicants – more than any other year in the program’s history. As we continue to strive for process improvements, we also continue to ensure thorough screening for national security concerns. SIV issuance numbers through the fourth quarter of FY 2016 are available on travel.state.gov.

On December 19, 2014, President Obama signed the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for FY 2015 (Pub. L. No. 113-291), which provides 4,000 additional SIVs for Afghan principal applicants. On November 25, 2015, President Obama signed the NDAA for FY 2016 (Pub. L. No. 114-92), which, in addition to other changes, provides an additional 3,000 SIVs, for a total of 7,000 SIV numbers allocated since December 19, 2014. Overall, as of September 30, 2016, State issued 5,350 out of the 7,000 SIVs to Afghan principal applicants who were employed by, or on behalf of, the U.S. government in Afghanistan, or by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) or a successor mission to ISAF.

Average Wait Times for Each Step of the SIV Application Process

All steps in the SIV application process are outlined below and include the current average processing time for all involved U.S. government entities. This statistic captures total U.S. government processing time in calendar days, beginning with the applicant’s initial submission of documents to State’s National Visa Center (NVC) and ending with the date of visa issuance at a U.S. Embassy or Consulate. It does not capture those steps in the SIV process that depend solely on the applicant’s initiative and are outside the control of the U.S. government. SIV applications move through 14 steps, in the following four stages: the Chief of Mission (COM) application process; Form I-360 petition adjudication by the

Department of Homeland Security; visa interview and security screening; and final visa adjudication (issuance or denial).

Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Processing Steps¹			
Stage	Step	Description	Average processing times in calendar days
Chief of Mission (COM) application process	1	Applicant submits COM application package to State's NVC.	Applicant-controlled
	2	NVC reviews documents for completeness.	4
	3	NVC sends completed COM package to U.S. Embassy Kabul.	1
	4	U.S. Embassy Kabul reviews COM application and makes a decision to approve or deny.	53(if all required documents are present)
	5	Embassy Kabul advises NVC if COM application is approved. If approved, NVC immediately sends approval letter to applicant. (If any documents reveal that applicant does not qualify for the program, the COM application is denied.)	5
Form I-360 adjudication process	6	Applicant self-petitions to DHS U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) using form I-360.	Applicant-controlled
	7	USCIS adjudicates petition and sends to NVC if approved. ²	63
Visa interview process, including pre- and post-interview ³	8	NVC sends instruction packet to applicant requesting standard immigrant visa documentation.	12
	9	Applicant submits required documentation to NVC.	Applicant-controlled
	10	NVC reviews documents for completeness.	23
	11	NVC schedules applicant for next available interview at U.S. Embassy Kabul.	60

	12	Applicant is interviewed by consular officer on the scheduled appointment date. Administrative processing is initiated following the interview.	5
	13	The applicant's case undergoes administrative processing. ⁴	184
Visa issuance to eligible applicants	14	Upon completion of administrative processing, applicant is instructed to obtain a medical exam. The visa is issued if applicant is eligible. In some cases, the passport will have expired and the applicant is required to renew the passport.	Applicant-controlled
		Total U.S. government processing time in calendar days⁵	410
¹ Processing steps are for SIVs authorized under section 602(b) of the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009, as amended. This applies to Afghan nationals in the SQ classification.			
² For I-360 petitions filed with USCIS between July 1 and September 30, 2016.			
³ The majority of applicants receive SIV status by going through the process explained in this chart. Applicants who obtain SIV status in the United States apply for adjustment of status from USCIS.			
⁴ Line 13 totals include data for SIV applicants who completed administrative processing from October 1, 2015, through September 30, 2016. Average processing time for cases that remain pending cannot be calculated until they are completed.			
⁵ The statistics in this chart were formerly reported in business days in reports published April 2014 – April 2016. U.S. government processing times do not factor in applicant-controlled steps. Overall processing times are greater than U.S. government processing times.			

Applications Pending Longer Than Nine Months

Even if an applicant has acted promptly in each of the applicant-controlled steps that precede step 13 of the SIV application process, applications may be pending longer than nine months for completion of administrative processing (step 13 of the SIV application process). Although step 13 is lengthy it is essential to the integrity of the SIV program, and process enhancements have resulted in improved efficiency.

Applications Pending at Each Stage of the SIV Application Process

As of September 30, 2016, the following numbers of Afghan applicants were pending in one of the application stages:

- Step 1 – 3,768 principal applicants had COM applications pending at NVC, where the applicant had taken action within the past 120 days. These applicants had submitted some, but not all, of the documents required to apply for COM approval.
- Step 7 – 196 principal applicants had Form I-360 petitions pending with USCIS.
- Step 11 – 724 principal applicants and 1,707 family members were scheduled for visa interviews. Interviews are scheduled approximately 30-60 days in advance. Applicants use this time to gather any remaining documents required for their interviews and prepare for travel to the U.S. embassy or consulate. There were 1,844 principal applicants and 7,299 family members waiting to be scheduled for visa interviews as of September 30, 2016. Most Afghan applicants will be interviewed at Embassy Kabul, as they reside in Afghanistan. Applicants who reside outside of Afghanistan will be interviewed at the U.S. embassy or consulate that adjudicates immigrant visa applications for their country of residence.
- Step 13 – Applications for 2,045 principal applicants and 342 family members were undergoing administrative processing.

Number of SIV Applicants in Fourth Quarter of FY 2016

The following chart shows the number of Afghan applicants who applied for SIVs in the fourth quarter of FY 2016 under section 602(b) of the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009, subsequent to receiving COM approval:

Month	Principal Applicants	Family Members	Total
July	314	800	1,114
August	534	1,470	1,951
September	569	1,672	2,241
Total	1,417	3,889	5,306

Applications Denied or Pending at Each Stage of the SIV Application Process

At the end of the fourth quarter of FY 2016 on September 30, 2016, the following numbers of applications were denied or pending at one of the application stages:

- 793 Afghan principal applicants were deemed unqualified to receive COM approval or had the approval revoked during the fourth quarter of FY 2016. Applicants whose COM applications are denied or revoked are able to appeal the decision. 397 Afghans submitted appeals during the fourth quarter of FY 2016. Of those appeals adjudicated as of December 14, 2016, 42 percent were approved after the applicant submitted additional information.
- One Form I-360 petition filed by an Afghan principal applicant between July 1 and September 30, 2016 was denied by USCIS.
- As of September 30, 2016, 724 principal applicants and 1,707 family members had scheduled visa interviews. 1,844 principal applicants and 7,299 family members were waiting to be scheduled for visa interviews.
- As of September 30, 2016, applications for 2,045 principal applicants and 342 family members were undergoing administrative processing.

Reasons for COM Denial

As reflected in denial letters sent by the COM at Embassy Kabul, denial of a COM application generally occurs for one or more of the following four reasons:

- *Failure to establish employment by or on behalf of the U.S. government, or failure to establish qualifying employment by ISAF or a successor mission.* For Afghans employed by or on behalf of the U.S. government, State considers the employment requirement satisfied for an alien hired under a direct-hire appointment, or through an agency's personal services agreement (PSA) or personal services contract (PSC) authority. State also has considered Afghan nationals hired by and paid through a U.S. government contractor, subcontractor, or Employee Association to meet the broader criteria for employment "by or on behalf of" the U.S. government. State has

not considered the requirement under 602(b) to be “employed by or on behalf of the United States government” satisfied in other situations, such as individuals employed by an entity funded by a grant or cooperative agreement with the U.S. government, or self-employed businesspersons who operate under a license with the U.S. government. Afghans employed by ISAF, or a successor mission, must have served in a capacity that required service as an interpreter or translator for U.S. military personnel while traveling off-base with U.S. military personnel stationed at ISAF, or a successor mission, or the performance of sensitive and trusted activities for U.S. military personnel stationed at ISAF, or a successor mission.

- *Failure to establish the required length of employment by or on behalf of the U.S. government, or by ISAF or a successor mission, during the period specified in section 602(b) of the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009, as amended.* Applicants who submitted applications for COM approval on or before September 30, 2015, must demonstrate one year of qualifying service. Applicants who submitted or submit applications for COM approval on or after October 1, 2015, must demonstrate two years of qualifying service.
- *Failure to establish providing faithful and valuable service to the U.S. government.* Applications denied for this reason generally have involved cases lacking the requisite positive recommendation or evaluation. In some instances where faithful and valuable service was not confirmed, employment by or on behalf of the U.S. government had been terminated for cause.
- *Derogatory information associated with the applicant that is incompatible with the requirements of the SIV program.* This reason for denial generally relates to information that the applicant engaged in an unlawful, unethical, criminal, or terrorism-related activity.