

## 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 first quarter of FY 2017 are available on [travel.state.gov](http://travel.state.gov).

On December 23, 2016, President Obama signed the National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2017 (Public Law 114-328), which provides an additional 1,500 SIV numbers for Afghan principal applicants, for a total of 8,500 SIV numbers allocated since December 19, 2014. As of December 31, 2016, State has issued 6,233 out of the 8,500 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 DHS; visa interview and security screening; and final visa adjudication (issuance or denial).

Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Processing Steps <sup>1</sup>			
Stage	Step	Description	Average processing times in calendar days
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. <sup>2</sup>	127
Visa interview process, including pre- and post-interview <sup>3</sup>	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. <sup>4</sup>	190
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
		<b>Total U.S. government processing time in calendar days<sup>5</sup></b>	<b>480</b>
<sup>1</sup> 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.			
<sup>2</sup> For I-360 petitions filed with USCIS between October 1 and December 31, 2016.			
<sup>3</sup> 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 <a href="#">adjustment of status</a> from USCIS.			
<sup>4</sup> Line 13 totals include data for SIV applicants who completed administrative processing between October 1 and December 31, 2016. Average processing time for cases that remain pending cannot be calculated until they are completed.			
<sup>5</sup> 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 acted promptly in each of the applicant-controlled steps that precede step 13 of the SIV application process, applications may pend 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 December 31, 2016, the following numbers of Afghan applicants were pending in one of the application stages:

- Step 1 – 4,500 principal applicants had COM applications pending at NVC, where the applicant took action within the past 120 days. These applicants submitted some, but not all, of the documents required to apply for COM approval.
- Step 7 – 91 principal applicants had Form I-360 petitions pending with USCIS.
- Step 11 – 154 principal applicants and 465 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 1,840 principal applicants and 7,479 family members waiting to be scheduled for visa interviews as of December 31, 2016. Most Afghan applicants will be interviewed at U.S. 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 2,977 principal applicants and 263 family members were undergoing administrative processing.

### **Number of SIV Applicants in First Quarter of FY 2017**

The following chart shows the number of Afghan applicants who applied for SIVs in the first quarter of FY 2017 under section 602(b) of the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009, subsequent to receiving COM approval:

Month	Principal Applicants	Family Members	Total
October	665	1,667	<b>2,332</b>
November	782	2,236	<b>3,018</b>
December	209	553	<b>762</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,656</b>	<b>4,456</b>	<b>6,112</b>

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

At the end of the first quarter of FY 2017 on December 31, 2016, the following numbers of applications were denied or pending at one of the application stages:

- 920 Afghan principal applicants were deemed unqualified to receive COM approval or had the approval revoked during the first quarter of FY 2017. Applicants whose COM applications are denied or revoked are able to appeal the decision. 430 Afghans submitted appeals during the first quarter of FY 2017. Of those appeals adjudicated as of February 17, 2017, 66 percent were approved after the applicant submitted additional information.

- 10 Form I-360 petitions filed by Afghan principal applicants between October 1 and December 31, 2016 were denied by USCIS.
- 154 principal applicants and 465 family members had scheduled visa interviews. 1,840 principal applicants and 7,479 family members were waiting to be scheduled for visa interviews.
- Applications for 2,977 principal applicants and 263 family members were undergoing administrative processing.

### **Reasons for COM Denial**

As reflected in denial letters sent by the COM at U.S. 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.