

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 help 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. Since the beginning of Fiscal Year (FY) 2014, we have issued visas to 7,213 of our Afghan colleagues, and an additional 13,313 visas to their immediate family members – more than 20,000 visas in the last two and half years. 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 2016 are available on travel.state.gov. As of December 31, 2015, we have issued 1,367 SIVs to Afghan principal applicants and 2,942 SIVs to their family members in FY 2016.

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 since December 19, 2014. Overall, as of February 21, 2016, State has issued 3,200 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, 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 Embassy Kabul. It does not capture those steps in the SIV process that are solely dependent 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: Chief of Mission (COM) Application Process; Form I-360 Adjudication; Visa Interview; and Visa Issuance.

Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Processing Steps¹			
Stage	Step	Description	Current average processing times for Afghan cases applying in Kabul (business 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.	13
	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.	14 (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	15
Visa interview process, including pre- and post-interview ³	8	NVC sends instruction packet to applicant requesting standard immigrant visa documentation.	10
	9	Applicant submits required documentation to NVC.	Applicant-controlled
	10	NVC reviews documents for completeness.	17
	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	130
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 time⁵	270
¹ Processing steps are for SQ SIVs.			
² Based on NVC data.			
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 principal applicant cases issued from January 1, 2015, through December 31, 2015. Average processing time for cases that remain pending cannot be calculated until they are completed.			
⁵ 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—administrative processing—is lengthy, process enhancements have resulted in improved efficiency.

Applications Pending at Each Stage of the SIV Application Process

As of February 21, 2016, the following numbers of Afghan applicants are pending in one of the application stages:

- Step 1 – 4,264 principal applicants have COM applications pending at the NVC, where the applicant has taken action within the past 120 days. These

applicants have submitted some, but not all, of the documents required to apply for COM approval. COM applications with all required documents are sent to Embassy Kabul within one business day, and then are processed within 14 days in Kabul. COM applications must be submitted by December 31, 2016.

- Step 7 – 3,195 principal applicants have Form I-360 petitions pending with USCIS.
- Step 11 – 292 principal applicants and 677 family members are scheduled for visa interviews. Interviews are scheduled approximately 60 days in advance. Applicants utilize this time to gather any remaining documents required for their interviews and prepare for travel to the U.S. embassy or consulate. 152 principal applicants and 499 family members are waiting to be scheduled for visa interviews. 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 countries of residence.
- Step 13 – applications for 1,950 principal applicants and 874 family members are undergoing administrative processing.

Number of SIV Applicants in First Quarter of FY 2016

The following chart shows the number of Afghan applicants who applied for SIVs in the first 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
October	161	421	582
November	154	449	603
December	270	677	947
Total	585	1,547	2,132

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

At the end of the first quarter of FY 2016 on December 31, 2015, the following numbers of applications were denied or pending at one of the application stages:

- 1,092 Afghan principal applicants did not qualify to receive COM approval or had the approval revoked during the first quarter of FY 2016. Applicants whose COM applications are denied are able to appeal the decision; approximately 50 percent of these appeal cases subsequently are approved.
- Seven principal applicants had their Form I-360 petitions denied by USCIS during the first quarter of FY 2016.
- As of December 31, 2015, 170 principal applicants and 389 family members had scheduled visa interviews. 114 principal applicants and 350 family members were waiting to be scheduled for visa interviews.
- As of December 31, 2015, applications for 1,651 principal applicants and 574 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 for 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.