



The Afghan and Iraqi Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Program

“We’re strong supporters of this program because of those brave Afghans who fought alongside us, served alongside us.”
-Gen. John W. Nicholson, JR., Comma der, United States Forces—Afghanistan

The History of the Special Immigrant Visa

Since 2001, the United States has been involved in Afghanistan and Iraq in a military and a nation-building capacity. In this effort, thousands of U.S. troops, diplomats and government personnel relied heavily on Iraqi and Afghan nationals to provide translation, interpretation and other services such as security, transportation and creating trust within communities. Many of these allies are credited with saving lives. They have provided faithful service and in doing so, they have put their lives and the lives of their loved ones at risk from groups such as ISIS, Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. To address this commitment, Congress created a bipartisan humanitarian program to provide Special Immigrant Visas (SIV) for nationals from Iraq and Afghanistan who provided a valuable service to the United States.¹

Afghan Allies

Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) have been available to Afghan individuals who directly worked with U.S. Armed Forces since the [introduction of legislative provisions](#) in 2006.² The Afghan program was not intended to be indefinite, as it was put in place to protect those who are helping our troops. However, as long as there are troops on the ground the program will continue. Because the program began in 2009, eight years after many

Afghan allies had been employed, there are more than 10,000 applications in process, with a total of 1,500 SIVs allocated last year.³ The majority of SIVs have recently resettled to are California, Illinois, Michigan and Texas.

Iraqi Allies

Since 2008, Iraqis who have worked with the U.S. Mission in Iraq have been eligible for SIVs.⁴ In Fiscal Year (FY) 2016, the United States Department of State issued 657 SIVs to Iraqi principal applicants . The Iraqi program is essentially dormant with no new applications being considered for eligibility, however, there are about 250 applications in the final stage of approval and a large number of applications are still in process. Besides the SIV pathway for Iraqis who served with the U.S. Mission in Iraq, they are also eligible to enter as refugees through the P-2 program, as a group of special humanitarian concern to the United States.

“I think there is nothing more important than the United States of America saying to people in Iraq and anywhere in the world, if you stand by us, we will stand by you.”

-Mike Pence, then-Congressman to Indiana

The Future of the SIV Program

Longtime bipartisan commitment in Congress has allowed the SIV program to give back to those who



provided faithful service to the United States. Supporters of the program explain its important humanitarian and strategic purposes. Failure to protect current allies could jeopardize future missions and abandoning those who have made great sacrifice may ensure a lack of those willing to do the same in the future.⁶ Their service to the U.S. military played a crucial role in creating trust between U.S. personnel and the surrounding communities. The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2017 allocates 2,500 more visas to these Afghan allies.

Hussain's story

"I came to the U.S. from Afghanistan under the Special Immigrant Visa program about 3 years ago. In my home country, I served as a linguist and cultural specialist for the U.S. Military for 10 years. I had the privilege and honor to serve alongside more than 10 different U.S. Military units who deployed to Afghanistan over the course of 10 years. When I started working for the U.S. Mission, I didn't know that one day my relationship with the U.S. military would endanger my life and my family's life. I feel proud now that I work for an agency that welcomes and serves refugees, immigrants, other vulnerable populations who need the most help."

Hussain now works in Resettlement Services at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. To see more of Hussain's story, visit our [Faces of Migration](#) page.

Next steps for advocacy

Although the addition of 2,500 visas designated for Afghan SIVs have been confirmed for fiscal year 2017, this number is insufficient as it does not address the large numbers of applicants with cases in process. The need far exceeds the number of available visas, and these allies continue to live in serious danger. Support for the program is crucial not only to increase

the number of visas in the coming years, but to maintain the amount allocated this year. The estimated need for fiscal year 2018 is at least 4,000 slots for primary applicants.

Iraqis who worked with the U.S. Mission and their families continue to need protection because of the service they provided to our troops. It is important to keep open the avenues to protection open to Iraqis, including as refugees and also as SIVs.

How to Help

- (1) [Learn more](#) about SIVs and their work
- (2) Advocate for a higher number of visas
- (3) Sign up for the [Justice for Immigrants Newsletter](#) to stay informed and receive updates and action alerts to strengthen policies and programs for these Afghans and Iraqis and other at risk refugees and migrants

Endnotes

- 1 Urban Justice Center International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP), *A Question of Honor* (2017).
- 2 National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2006 § 1059 (2006)
- 3 IRAP.
- 4 Section 1244 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008
- 5 Family members are also put at risk through their loved one's affiliation with the U.S. Through derivative status, they are admitted into the U.S. along with the principle applicant if they are a spouse or unmarried children younger than 21. 1,593 family members were granted SIVs in FY16.
- 6 IRAP.