



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

The Department of State (State), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and other U.S. government departments and agencies involved in the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program are committed to helping Afghans who have taken significant risks to support our military and civilian personnel. Congress, under section 602(b) of the *Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009*, as amended, requires this quarterly report to review statistical data on nationals of Afghanistan who have applied for status as special immigrants.

**How many Afghan SIVs have been issued in the First Quarter of Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 (October 1, 2021, to December 31, 2021)?**

Afghan Principal Applicants Issued	Afghan Derivative Applicants Issued	Total Afghan SIVs Issued in FY 2022 (through December 31, 2021)	Total Afghan Numbers Used <sup>1</sup>	Remaining SIVs for Afghan Principal Applicants
117	307	424	17,895	16,515

**What efficiency improvements have been made to Afghan SIV processing?**

Chief of Mission (COM) staff collaborated with the Bureau of Consular Affairs Office of Consular Systems and Technology (CA/CST) to develop several technological tools to improve the efficiency and workflow of the COM-approval process, mainly through batch processing to create cases, update cases, upload documents to cases, and automating the process of emailing COM decision letters.

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<sup>1</sup> Number of visas issued since permanent numbers became available on November 25, 2015.

COM staff collaborated with the Department of Defense on “Project Rabbit” to more expeditiously verify the employment details of SIV applicants. COM staff collaborated with other government agencies on Project Rabbit-like efforts to more expeditiously verify the employment details of SIV applicants.

During this reporting period, the Department of State’s National Visa Center (NVC)<sup>2</sup> continued to maintain its increased staffing levels in SIV processing in order to manage the significant increase in demand in the lead up to and weeks following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. NVC also worked with CA/CST, Microsoft, and the Department’s Information and Resource Management Bureau to develop technological solutions to better manage the heavy volume of incoming email inquiries during this period. The Department updated policy requirements for the Letter of Recommendation and HR Letter to streamline those requirements as much as possible while still meeting statutory obligations. These streamlining measures reduce the burden on applicants and allow NVC to documentarily complete more cases, leading to faster processing time for applicants.

**What is the average U.S. government processing time for Afghan SIVs and how many cases are processed in that time?**

All steps in the Afghan 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 when the applicant first expresses interest in the program to State’s 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. However, within each step included below, there may be time – and often significant time – spent waiting on applicant or third-party action that is not attributable to the U.S. government entities involved.

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<sup>2</sup> The Department of State’s National Visa Center (NVC) should not be confused with the National Vetting Center, also known as NVC, established under the National Security Presidential Memorandum 9.

<b>Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Processing Steps<sup>3</sup></b>				
<b>Stage</b>	<b>Step</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Average processing time in calendar days</b>	<b>Number of Cases Processed</b>
Chief of Mission (COM) application process	1	Applicant submits COM application package to State's NVC. <sup>4</sup>	Applicant-controlled	N/A
	2	NVC reviews documents for completeness.	88	93,346 <sup>5</sup>
	3	NVC sends completed application package to the ACOM <sup>6</sup> .	1	1,402
	4	COM staff reviews the application and the ACOM makes an approval decision.	312	6,307
	5	The ACOM advises NVC if the 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 not approved	5	1,910 <sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Processing steps are for SIVs authorized under section 602(b) of the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009, as amended. Afghan nationals processed under 602(b) are given the SQ SIV classification.

<sup>4</sup> At this stage, the applicant has reached out to NVC in order to express interest in the program and provide the documents necessary to begin processing.

<sup>5</sup> This number reflects the number of case reviews conducted by the NVC within the quarter. The NVC counts a review each time an SIV applicant submits additional documents to complete their case. This number may be larger than the total number of cases pending at the NVC because an individual case might be reviewed multiple times in a single quarter.

<sup>6</sup> COM approval may be provided by the “appropriate Chief of Mission, or the designee of the appropriate Chief of Mission” (See Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009 (Public Law 111-8), Section 602(b)(2)(D)). The Assistant Chief of Mission (“ACOM”) is the COM’s designee. Since the COM dissolved the COM Committee on August 19, COM staff sends COM approval agendas directly to the ACOM for a decision.

<sup>7</sup> This number reflects the number of COM decision notifications performed manually by NVC in the current quarter. However, during this quarter the Department of State upgraded its systems to allow for applicants to be notified automatically by e-mail once COM makes a decision. Therefore, this number does not include all notifications performed in the current quarter. Future reports will no longer include this step as the time spent on this activity will be negligible..

		and NVC sends a non-approval letter to applicant.)		
Form I-360 adjudication process	6	Applicant self-petitions to DHS U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) using Form I-360.	Applicant-controlled	N/A
	7	USCIS adjudicates petition and sends to NVC if approved. <sup>8</sup>	33	3,501
Visa interview process, including pre- and post-interview <sup>9</sup>	8	NVC sends instruction packet to applicant requesting standard immigrant visa documentation, including DS-260 immigrant visa application.	4	2,498
	9	Applicant submits required documentation to NVC.	Applicant-controlled	N/A
	10	NVC reviews documents for completeness, corresponding with applicant when additional documentation is needed.	78	36,801 <sup>10</sup>
	11	When the immigrant visa application is complete, NVC schedules applicant for next available interview at	35 <sup>12</sup>	45

<sup>8</sup> Form I-360 petitions filed with USCIS between October 1, 2021, and December 31, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> The majority of applicants receive special immigrant status by going through the process explained in this chart. Applicants who obtain special immigrant status in the United States apply for [adjustment of status](#) from USCIS. In the fourth quarter of FY 2022, USCIS approved 246 applications for adjustment of status under section 602(b) of the *Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009*. One application was denied.

<sup>10</sup> As in Step 2, this number reflects the number of case reviews conducted by the NVC. The NVC counts a review each time an SIV applicant submits additional documents to complete their case. This number may be larger than the total number of cases pending at the NVC because an individual case might be reviewed multiple times in a single quarter.

<sup>12</sup> NVC schedules interviews for documentarily complete applicants who are able to appear at a designated immigrant visa processing post for an interview. In some cases, a lengthy period of time may elapse before an applicant notifies NVC that they are able to travel to such a post. Although the applicant's ability to travel to a third country post is outside of the control of the Department of State, this figure nonetheless includes the time periods during which applicants are documentarily complete, but are unable to travel to a designated immigrant visa processing post for an interview. Therefore, the average processing time for Step 11 is overinclusive and reflects time during which the applicant is not waiting for Government-controlled action.

		the U.S. embassy’s consular section. <sup>11</sup>		
	12	Applicant is interviewed and biometrics are collected by consular officer on the scheduled appointment date. Administrative processing is initiated following the interview. <sup>13</sup>	N/A	218 <sup>14</sup>
	13	The applicant’s case undergoes administrative processing. <sup>15</sup>	178	210
Visa issuance to eligible applicants	14	Upon completion of administrative processing, applicant is instructed to obtain a medical exam. Once the medical exam is completed, the visa is issued if applicant is eligible. In some cases, the passport will have expired and requires renewal by the applicant.	Applicant-controlled	117
		<b>Total U.S. government processing time in calendar days<sup>16</sup></b>	<b>734</b>	<b>N/A</b>

<sup>11</sup> Since the U.S. Embassy in Kabul suspended operations on August 14, 2021, NVC has been scheduling SIV applicants for visa interviews at any immigrant visa-processing U.S. embassy or consulate anywhere in the world where the applicant is able to appear.

<sup>13</sup> Administrative processing may include a variety of security, fraud, or criminal background checks that are required before the visa may be issued.

<sup>14</sup> Line 12 reflects the number of cases SQ SIV principal applicants interviews conducted worldwide

<sup>15</sup> Line 13 totals include data for SIV applicants who completed administrative processing between October 1, 2021, and December 31, 2021. Average processing time for cases that remain pending cannot be calculated until they are completed. A high number in this field reflects older cases being completed, not older cases languishing.

<sup>16</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.

## **Why are applications pending longer than nine months in U.S. government--controlled stages of the SIV application?**

During this reporting period, NVC continued to work through a large volume of communications received in the lead up to and weeks following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 – nearly 200,000 emails between August 16 and August 31 (compared with an average of 200 emails per day in May 2021). This large and sudden increase in the volume of emails received increased average processing times for document review at both the pre-COM (Step 2) and pre-visa interview (Step 10) stages, as NVC continued to work through the backlog of emails that was created as a result of this unprecedented surge.

Certain applications may be pending longer than nine months for completion of COM review (Step 4). While processing time for Step 4 shows as slightly longer than in Q4 FY 2021, this is because COM staff completed processing for a large number of long-pending cases during this quarter. This increased the overall average processing time despite the efficiency increases that enabled COM staff to complete processing for 243 percent more cases than in Q4 FY 2021.

Additionally, the employment verification and risk assessment conducted during the COM approval process can add significant delays depending on how easy or difficult it is to locate the applicant's employer to confirm the applicant's eligibility for an SIV. Timing of employment verification for applicants who worked for the Department of Defense has improved since the Department of Defense launched Project Rabbit. Consistent with the Congressionally mandated prioritization plan, the Department prioritizes applicants at the COM approval stage based on the intrinsic threats applicants face due to the nature of their qualifying employment.<sup>17</sup> Lower priority applicants, therefore, wait longer for review and analysis relative to higher tiers.

Certain applications may be pending longer than nine months due to administrative processing (Step 13). Administrative processing often involves rigorous background checks, which are essential to the integrity of the SIV program and U.S. national security. This quarter, the average processing time for cases at Step 13 was higher than last quarter because there were a number of older cases that

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<sup>17</sup> Consistent with Section 7076 of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2019 (Public Law 116-6), enacted on February 15, 2019, applicants seeking Afghan SQ1 visas will be prioritized in the following order:

- 1) Interpreters and Translators
- 2) U.S. Government Direct Hire Employees
- 3) Contractors with U.S. Government Installation Badges
- 4) Implementing Partners
- 5) All Other Applicants

were resolved and fewer cases coming in following the suspension of operations at Embassy Kabul in August 2021. When there is a high volume of incoming administrative processing cases, the majority of those cases resolve quickly, which leads to shorter average processing times overall.

The U.S. Embassy in Kabul suspended all operations on August 31, 2021. Nevertheless, the U.S. government continues to process SIV applications at all stages. Applicants may complete Steps 12-14 at other immigrant visa processing posts outside of Afghanistan and will be prioritized for interview scheduling. However, interview wait times may vary by post, and services may be impacted by significant worldwide challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **How many SIV applications are pending as of December 31, 2021?**

- Step 1 – 29,913 principal applicants had submitted some, but not all, of the documents required to apply for COM approval.
- Step 4 – 3,871 principal applicants were pending COM approval. These applicants submitted all their documents and were being reviewed for COM approval.
- Step 7 – 3,216 principal applicants had Form I-360 petitions pending with USCIS.
- Step 11 – 598 principal applicants and 2,589 derivative family members were pending scheduling for visa interviews. Applicants outside of Afghanistan may be interviewed at any U.S. embassy or consulate that adjudicates immigrant visa applications.
- Step 13 – Applications for approximately 96 principal applicants and 36 derivative family members were undergoing administrative processing as of December 31, 2021.

### **How many SIV applicants were interviewed in the First Quarter of FY 2022?**

In the first quarter of FY 2022, 218 Afghan SIV applicants who received COM approval were interviewed at a U.S. embassy or consulate.

## **How many denials were there in the First Quarter of FY 2022?**

At the end of this quarter, the following numbers of applications were denied at one of the application stages:

- 1,337 Afghan principal applicants were deemed unqualified to receive COM approval or had the approval revoked during the first quarter of FY 2022. Applicants whose COM applications are denied or revoked can appeal the decision once within 120 days of notification, or thereafter at the discretion of the Secretary of State. In the first quarter of FY 2022, 815 Afghans submitted appeals. Of the appeals adjudicated during this quarter, 497 were approved after the applicant submitted additional information.
- 78 principal applicants had a Form I-360 petition denied by USCIS during the first quarter of FY 2022.

## **What are the reasons for a COM denial?**

Denial of a COM application generally occurs for one or more of the following reasons:

- *Failure to establish qualifying employment by or on behalf of the U.S. government, or by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) or a successor mission.* Applications are denied for this reason if the applicant fails to establish qualifying employment. For information on qualifying employment, see the Department of State website at: <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/immigrate/special-immg-visa-afghans-employed-us-gov.html>.
- *Insufficient documentation.* Applications are denied for this reason if the applicant fails to provide a required document, or if there is a deficiency in a document provided by the applicant.
- *Failure to establish at least one year 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.*



- *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.