Out of Harm's Way?
Perspectives of the Special Immigrant Visa Program for Afghanistan

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1. Introduction

The withdrawal of American troops, the decrease in international funded programs and the continued insurgent presence, which is, in many ways, stronger than ever, has left many of the Afghans who worked for the American military or other American funded projects in grave danger. The U.S. government's Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program, which aims to bring those in danger due to their service to the United States, is said to have saved many in Afghanistan who were threatened by the Taliban and other groups to the United States. It has become wildly popular among Afghans who see it as a means of escape from both the danger of insurgents and the economic hardships in Afghanistan. As of February 21, 2016, 10,575 Afghan principal applicants and their family members have pending applications at some stage of the SIV process, indicating a significant backlog of applicants.[1]

In the United States, despite initial bipartisan support, the program has faced political challenges. Support by a number of influential senators including Senator Jeanne Shaheen, John McCain, and extensive campaigning from various groups such as the "One Left Behind" campaign by the Ronin Refugee Project and Veterans for American Ideal/Human Rights First, the United States Congress extended the SIV program in June 2016, granting 4,000 additional visas to both translators and other Afghan and Iraqi civilians who worked for the U.S. government or other American funded programs.[2] Most of the debates around the future of the Special Immigrant Visas, however, do not take into account both the challenges and

[1] See US Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, US Visas, 'Immigrant Visa Statistics,' https://travel.state.gov/content/visas/en/law-and-policy/statistics/immigrant-visas.html

[2] See Masood Farivar (June 28, 2016), 'US Lawmakers Vow to Continue Immigrant Program for Afghan Interpreters,' *National Public Radio* as well as numerous other reports.

successes that the program has faced to date. Despite this temporary continuation, the program's future is still in question, making this an important moment to look at the human impact of the program and some of its both intended and unintended consequences.

In recent debates over whether or not to extend the program, most of the discussion has focused on the application numbers, the timeline for processing applications and the number of visas made available. Less analysis has been carried out on perceptions of the program, its medium and long terms socio-economic settlement implications for both those accepted by the program and on Afghanistan more generally, as well as broader lessons learned for U.S. policy makers.

With the support of the Hollings Center for International Dialogue, this study looks at the perceptions of the SIV program by drawing on over 50 interviews conducted in both Afghanistan and the United States. In hopes of getting a wide range of experiences of those who interacted with the program, in Afghanistan, interviews targeted those in the middle of the application process, those rejected by the program, as well as government officials, civil society leaders and members of the business community. In the US, interviews were done with those accepted by the program, those who had come to the US on other visa programs and several activists who work with SIV recipients. Interviews were conducted in Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, the Washington, DC area, as well as by phone in several other cities. In Afghanistan, the interviewees were mainly based in Kabul city.

This report takes a primarily ethnographic approach focusing on how applicants, recipients and activists view the SIV program and its potential longer term effects. In particular, interviews suggested that:

- Despite the good intentions of the program and attempts at managing public relations, transparency issues have generated some negative perceptions among those currently going through the process and questions of fairness for those who have completed the process.
- The program has contributed to negative views about the future stability of the country among the general population, as many respondents saw it as evidence of the deteriorating security situation and the decreasing interest of the international community in general, and America in particular, in Afghanistan.
- For those who receive visas and settle in the US, there is a lack of easily accessible and understandable information before departure and limited support upon arrival. This has meant that recipients are often struggling when arriving in the US, unprepared for the challenges (e.g. employment opportunities, cultural differences, etc) that await them.
- While the long term repercussions of the program are not clear, the movement of so many educated and skilled Afghans who have experience working with the international community is perceived to have an immediate potential impact on the Afghan economy and society contributing to the brain drain and shrinking liberal voices in the country.

The challenges that the program faces largely stem from the failure of both the Afghan government and the international community supporting it, to provide security for those who worked for the American effort. Thus, the report argues that while the SIV program fulfills an important American commitment to Afghans who have worked for the American efforts in Afghanistan, there is a need for the US to take into consideration some of the longer term consequences of the program for the country and the recipients. A more integrated and better managed approach, with improved transparency and effective public relations for future programs, would help protect those who aided the US and also improve perception of such programs.

2. The SIV Program: A Background

> *"I am so grateful for the SIV program. Afghans have few opportunities to save themselves and it gave me a chance to start a new life in America...It has been very hard trying to figure out how to live here."*

The SIV program began by granting visas to Iraqis who had worked for American forces as interpreters, who were then targeted by insurgents as a result of their employment. It was extended to Afghanistan in January 2006. Eventually the program was expanded to include all those who were employed by, or on behalf of, the U.S. government including the U.S. Armed Forces in Iraq and Afghanistan granting them status as U.S. Lawful Permanent Residents. This enabled Afghans working for the US embassy in Kabul and for U.S.-funded contractors to apply, and as they did, the demographics of applicants changed significantly with more and more urban, educated, upper and middle class Afghans applying. The cap was set up initially for fifty visas per year, but was quickly expanded. The program has continued to evolve and, in part in response to the overwhelming number of applicants, the length of required employment services was extended from one year of employment on U.S.-sponsored projects to two years in 2016.

While some of those interviewed applied for visas in the initial years of the program, as the program was later renewed and expanded, the number of Afghan applicants significantly increased, particularly in 2014 as the U.S. planned military withdrawal continued. As a result particularly of pressure from veterans groups, on December 19, 2014, President Obama signed the National Defense Authorization Act for 2015 which provides 4,000 additional SIVs for Afghan principal applicants.[3] An additional 3,000 SIVs for principal applicants was approved by President Obama on 25 November 2015 with the authority to issue the visas expiring on March 31, 2017. According to the Joint Department of State and Homeland Security Report on the State of the Afghan Special Immigrant visa program, as of December 7, 2015, the State Department has issued 3,029 of these 7,000 SIVs to Afghan principal applicants. And as of September 2015, around 11,300 Afghan principal applicants were denied or pending point in

[3] Joint Department of State/Department of Homeland Security Report: Status of the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program, January 2016.

the SIV process.[4] This brings the total number of SIV visas for both Iraqis and Afghans working for the US to over 15,000, with an additional 25,000 issued to their dependents.[5]

> *"While my application was being considered, my mother, who lived in Ghazni, died. I wondered if I should go to the funeral, since I knew there were many Taliban operating around my home district. In the end, it was good that I did not, because the Taliban stopped the taxis that were driving to the funeral and asked, "Where is her son, the one who worked for the Americans?"*

The SIV program is a category of permanent employment –based admissions under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA). To apply for the SIV program, a prospective applicant must go through the following three major steps: (1) applying for Chief of Mission (COM) approval which requires a letter from the applicant's employer, recommendation letter from direct, U.S. citizen supervisor, and evidence of threat to the applicant (this typically comes in the form of a so-called 'threat letter' from the Taliban or another group); (2) filing a petition to the Department of Homeland Security's U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services; and (3) attending a visa interview to prove eligibility for visa which involves a polygraph test.

If successful in the application process, recipients are granted Lawful Permanent Residents status in the United States and are entitled to the same resettlement assistance and federal public benefits as refugees. SIV recipients are then eligible to have their travel arranged by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), though this can further delay the immigration process. While the application process is explained in depth on the State Department website,[6] when applicants were asked to describe the process and their experience of it, it became clearer that for most, the application process was far murkier than its official description.

3. Perceptions of the Application Process

3.1 Perception in Afghanistan

> *"The application forms were confusing and complicated. I had heard from friends that their application was delayed for months because they had got a date wrong or hadn't submitted the right document. One of my colleagues got the date format wrong; instead of using the American format he had used the British. His application was delayed for seven*

[4] Ibid
[5] https://travel.state.gov/content/dam/visas/Statistics/Immigrant-Statistics/SIV/SQNumbers0316.pdf
[6] See: https://travel.state.gov/content/visas/en/immigrate/afghans-work-for-us.html

months. I decided to pay 200 USD to the travel agency in Kabul to help me out with my application."[7]

The SIV application process seems straightforward with clear application guidelines and instructions on how to fill in forms and submit documents in both English and local languages. Many applicants interviewed, however, especially those from more rural areas and those with no access to internet, faced serious challenges filling out the forms correctly. Even better educated applicants and those with internet access tended to worry that they were not filling out the form correctly or that there were other 'hidden' instructions that they did not understand. As a result of this, beyond the initial information pages on the U.S. Department of State website, applicants rely on friends, former colleagues, and even Facebook pages for help and information.[8] The two existing public Facebook pages, set up by SIV applicants themselves, function as the most important platforms for information-sharing and advice-seeking on the application and settlement processes as well as providing community support for those that do receive visas. Those who were most confident in the application process were the applicants who had friends or family members who had already successfully received American visas.

There is little communication between the State Department and the applicant during the various stages of the process. The U.S. government has made efforts to improve wait times and a recent joint report by the Department of Homeland Security and the State Department says that the average wait time is now down to 293 days.[9] What confuses many applicants, however, is the large discrepancy in report wait times, with some as low as a few months and others taking years. As one applicant typically complained, "I submitted my application in 2013. I had my interview in July 2014. I am still waiting to get my visa. Colleagues of mine who had applied with me are already in the US."

In addition to the length of the application process, the anonymous nature of the security screening process means that applicants who are not successful are often not aware why they failed. This has led to widespread rumors and misinformation about the intentions and outcomes of the process. Many of those interviewed believed that the program favors certain groups or ethnicities over others, a sentiment that is reinforced by the fact that the U.S. government at various points following the U.S.-led invasion tended to favor certain ethnic groups in their hiring practices.[10] While many of the current rumors are based on

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[7] Names in this report, as well as some identifying features, have been change to protect the identity of those interviews. All quotations, unless otherwise indicated, come from the authors' interviews conducted in Afghanistan and the United States in May and June of 2016. In a few cases quotes have been altered to protect the privacy of the speaker or paraphrased to preserve meaning.

[8] See for example: Afghan Special Immigrants (SIV) https://www.facebook.com/groups/241752662647022/?fref=nf
Afghan SIVs in USA, https://www.facebook.com/SIVUSA/?fref=nf

[9] 'Status of the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program,' Joint Department of State/Department of Homeland Security Report, https://travel.state.gov/content/dam/visas/SIVs/Afghan%20SIV%20public%20report_Jan%202016.pdf.

[10] Much of this was circumstantial such as the initial US reliance on those associated with the Northern Alliance, who were largely non-Pashtun, and the later hiring of Afghans who had been refugees and were often better educated than those that remained in the country.

misinformation, the lack of public information about the program has allowed them to continue to spread and undermines perceptions of the program more generally.

> *"I am sad about the number of the blacklisted linguists and interpreters because they failed their polygraph. These interpreters are honest people and had served America in difficult circumstances. But because interpreters failed their polygraphs they cannot get their visa. This is not acceptable. But cleaners and drivers whose life is not really in danger get their visa, so no offenses, but priority should be given to combat interpreters, otherwise they will die here. I think at least 80 percent of combat interpreters are rejected because of failing to pass their polygraph tests." (SIV Facebook Page comment)*

One group that has taken advantage of the lack of clear information are a series of brokers and 'travel agents' that now specialize in providing support for the applicants. Interviews at several of these travel agencies and with applicants suggest that on average, an estimated one third of the applicants have used these agencies to assist with their application process. For example, one visa assistance services in Kabul city has been providing the SIV visa services since early 2013. They charge a separate fee for each step of the process. To assist in the completion of the application they charge between 50 to 80 USD. This fee also includes drafting their statements as evidence of 'ongoing threats'. For the entire application process including interview preparations and how to pass polygraph tests, the travel agency charges between 500 to 800 USD for a family of three to four people. At the time of the field work visit in May 2016, they had around 200 clients whose applications were pending.

Several respondents also suggested that the program disadvantages those in the less secure provinces and those who are less educated. These groups often times don't have internet access and getting to Kabul to submit their applications can be difficult. Increasingly, as the program opened up to Afghans who worked on American-funded projects, not simply interpreters, there are complaints those educated Afghans working in Kabul who are more equipped to handle the application process are the ones who are really benefiting most. Indeed, many of the Afghans employed by the U.S. embassy applied for their visas together, and later advised each other as the successful ones moved to the US. In contrast, for lower level interpreters, especially those living in rural areas, the process can seem impossibly complex. In the meantime, these are the applicants who are most likely to be under direct threat from the Taliban and other groups.

Beyond making the application process appear inequitable and discouraging applicants, the rumors and negative perceptions of the program have had a wider impact on US efforts in Afghanistan. Among the wider population, there is a growing resentment towards SIV applicants. There is a perception that many of those who took high paying international jobs and then used these to secure visas to leave the country have betrayed their fellow citizens, while claiming they were working on programs meant to help the country. President Ashraf Ghani's recent comment about "breaking the social contract" between the citizen and Afghan

government suggested that SIV applicants and other immigrants were doing a disservice to their country.[11] As one informant summarized it, "the SIV has reinforced uncertainty…a mixed feeling that the country is not moving in the right direction, that the country is not safe and that the US is taking its people, the best and brightest. It has created a general feeling of "let's go". It has created otherness and detachment from Afghanistan." In some of the more extreme cases, it is believed that the SIV is deliberately designed by America to take the brightest and best out of the country for their own market.

3.2 In the United States

> *Abdul is incredibly grateful to the US for giving him and his family visas. While their settlement process has not always been smooth, he now has a job and four of his children are in school. The problem that keeps him up at night is his eldest son, who was 18 when Abdul's application was accepted. Because he was no longer a minor he was not granted a visa with the rest of his family. Now the son is leaving alone in Afghanistan, thinking about trying to get to the States in other ways. Crossing into Iran and trying to get smuggled into Europe is dangerous, Abdul says, but they are not sure how else they can be reunited with him.*

For those that make it to the United States, unsurprisingly, views of the visa application process were more positive. There were still complaints about the timing of the review and the lack of transparency, but for those who were granted visas, there were more concerns about the rigid structures of the program. So, for example, the fact that only dependents under eighteen years of age were eligible for accompanying visas, split up families like Abdul's, described above. This led family members to consider more dangerous and less legal paths in order to reunite their families. There were similar concerns raised over the fate of parents and other members of extended families who were not eligible for visas, but were also being threatened by the Taliban who knew that their relative had "worked for the Americans."[12]

The program also did little to factor in whether the applicants were in immediate danger or whether the recipient had more time to get their travel plans into order. SIV recipients can either have IOM arrange their travel to the US or they can arrange the travel themselves. This decision, however, created a good deal of angst for recipients. Several, for example, felt that they had been pressured to accept IOM settlement in specific cities, despite the fact that they had connections in other areas. Turning down IOM meant forfeiting Department of State resettlement benefits; however, IOM can be slow in setting up travel, which is problematic for those who are most in danger.

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[11] http://theconversation.com/president-slams-fleeing-afghans-but-offers-little-incentive-to-stay-57134
http://www.khaama.com/ghani-says-he-has-no-sympathy-for-citizens-fleeing-the-country-0498

[12] In an odd quirk of the Afghan SIV program only immediate families were eligible for resettlement while for Iraqi recipients, members of the applicants extended families could also apply. Afghans SIV holders complain that is no explanation for the current difference.

In one case, a former translator showed us a string of emails that he had received from IOM. IOM had sent an initial email and he responded by accepting IOM assistance for himself and his family. Two months later, however, IOM had not responded or answered any of his three follow up emails, so he felt as if he had to set the travel himself. He sent IOM an email telling them that he had purchased tickets to the US on his own. In this instance, there was no delay and IOM quickly emailed back to tell him that he had now lost his benefits, without acknowledging any of the numerous emails he had sent in the meantime.

Finally, the way in which the SIV program is currently set up, once the Department of State delivers the visa, Afghans are classified as refugees and get little support beyond what refugees from other countries receive.[13] Many Afghans felt that the program hasn't provided enough support towards their settlement in the US or at least altered them to the likely economic and social hardships they would face in the US. In one case, a recipient told IOM that he wanted to move to Seattle, but IOM said that this was not a good option for him, pushing him to settle in California instead. He assumed that this was because there would be more support in California, but when he arrived, this was not the case and he was far from his friends who had moved before him to Seattle. The feeling of not getting enough support is partly because of the lack of information about the resettlement in the US and partly because of the high expectations of Afghans about the ease and prosperity of life in the West. The immediate cultural shock that many faced along with a general feeling of lack of support has raised problems for SIV recipients as they attempted to make America their new home.

4. Settling in the US

> *"I left everything in Afghanistan, my education, my property, my family, my parents, my honor….so that my children could have a better life in the US, only to realize that this is not actually achievable."*

Once in the States, there were many factors that shaped the experience of these new immigrants. Some SIV recipients ended up in areas with established Afghan communities, such as in northern Virginia, where they were often helped by friends and family who had arrived before them.[14] Others, however, ended up in cities like Seattle, which did not have a history of Afghan immigration, leaving them more reliant on resettlement agencies and other newly arrived Afghans. Also almost every single person interviewed in the United States felt that they were underprepared for all the challenges of coping with living in America.

Once in the US, those who accept government assistance are assigned to a resettlement agency depending upon which city they arrived in. According to interviewees, the effectiveness of these resettlement agencies varied widely, though within each city research was conducted in,

[13] There is a small additional payment that SIV recipients receive through their resettlement agency, but that is all.

[14] Despite this assistance, there was also several reports of hostility between Afghans who had immigrated to the US in the 1980s and 1990s, and those in the more recent waves of migration.

opinions about agencies were generally uniform. Some agencies were considered immensely helpful, particularly dealing with the bureaucracy of everything from getting a social security number to enrolling children in schools. In other instances, however, agencies were said to be run essentially as businesses. There were reports of withheld payments and respondents felt some agencies only took on Afghan cases as a way of securing funds for themselves. Several lawyers in the SIV community have taken an active role in making sure that the new arrivals are actually received the funds the agencies received from the U.S. government, but in several cases, it was reported that it was only the threat of legal action that motivated agencies.

In the meantime there were widespread rumors about other practices that either the agency or their employees used to exploit the new arrivals. In one more extreme instance, we heard of agencies that paid for the rent of recent arrivals for an initial three months, only for the arrivals to find out later that they had been locked into year-long leases in rundown buildings, whose landlords had paid the agency employees to steer them towards.

Part of the challenge for some of these resettlement agencies is that the current refugee assistance programs often appear to be aimed at the very poorest and least experienced immigrants. For the most part, Afghans that come through the SIV do not fit into this category and ending up in low income housing and relying on food stamps was a shock for many, particularly those that had worked at the U.S. embassy. One man described waking up in a hotel surrounded by crumbling concrete and loose wires near LAX and having his companion turn to him and ask, "Did they really bring us to America?"

> *"One of my friends who used to work at the U.S. embassy was required to attend a class at his agency or else they would not give him any assistance. In the class he and some Somali refugees were taught how to use the toilet. Can you believe how humiliating?"*

Economic issues are made much more acute by difficulties securing employment. Many SIV recipients were not translators, but lawyers and administration officers who worked at the U.S. embassy or on U.S. contracting programs that had received U.S. funds. Resettlement agencies are supposed to provide job placement assistance, but this is the service that most immigrants were the most critical of. One, for example, said that an agent from the resettlement service dropped him off alone at a job fair and that was what they considered their job placement assistance.

More commonly, agencies would assist in getting men work in construction or landscaping, but did little to help them find positions that actually fit their previous work experience in Afghanistan. Some tried to have diplomas and other qualifications translated, but had met with little success and in general, former employers were not helpful in explaining in references the skills that these workers had. For those living in the DC area, this was particularly disappointing, since many had worked for contractors who were actually headquartered nearby, but nothing was done to encourage these companies to rehire recent arrivals into similar positions. In one case, a major U.S. Rule of Law implementer was said to have announced that they were going

to hire SIV recipients, and many of their former employees quickly got their resumes in order, but apparently nothing came of this and the hire was never made.

> *One interviewee living in San Diego described how his friend who had been a guard at the U.S. embassy had called him to ask advice since he had just been granted a visa. The guard was planning on heading to San Diego since he knew some people there, but the interviewee was concerned. The man had 8 children and did not know how to drive. In Afghanistan, one working man could support such a family, but how was he going to do this in America? Especially in San Diego, you needed a car to get anywhere. He didn't want the man to think he was unwilling to help him, but he thought he should perhaps tell him to consider settling elsewhere.*

The difficulty of securing good jobs left many of those recent arrivals unemployed, living in low income housing relying on food stamps, a particularly difficult fate for Afghan men, who culturally are expected to provide for the family. Some were so discouraged by their experience that they were considering moving back to Afghanistan and everyone interviewed knew of at least one case where an SIV recipient had returned to Afghanistan. As one respondent described it, "They were not able to find their way." Some of those that returned were for cultural issues, with more conservative Afghans alarmed at some of the more liberal aspects of American culture and particularly their treatment of women. By far, however, most of those returning to Afghanistan were those that had trouble finding employment or feeling useful to their families in the US.

5. Perception on the Socio-economic Implications of SIV in Afghanistan

> *"NGOs like us are experiencing quicker staff turnover at the senior level. As more and more SIV applicants leave the country, organizations struggle to fill in vacancies and train skilled managers and professionals quick enough to replace them. This subsequently impacts our ability to deliver services." (NGO Country Director in Afghanistan)*

The SIV applicants who resettle in the US leave behind not only their extended families and the community they have been engaged with; they also leave behind the organization they worked for and their personal assets and businesses. Such collective migration of skilled and educated laborers can negatively impact a country's economy and political life and many in Kabul already perceive the SIV program as having just such a negative impact on Afghanistan.

Many of the businessmen and women and civil society leaders interviewed for this study believe that the SIV program is affecting Afghanistan's economy in terms of brain drain and staff turnover. Ironically, this is making the development of a vibrant civil society in Afghanistan, one of the US's stated goals, increasingly difficult. Afghanistan Institute of Civil

Society (AICS) is one such organization that has been affected by the SIV program.[15] Four months after it was established, three of the Institute's senior staff left, two for the US through the SIV program and the other for a better paid job at USAID contractor. The Country Director of another NGO complained that, "For months I struggled to find a Legal Expert after a long recruitment process. Unfortunately upon finishing his probation period, the Legal Expert informed me about his decision to leave the country. He hadn't disclosed his [pending] SIV application upon hiring."

Several Afghan government officials interviewed for this study complained that some of the best qualified civil servants preferred to work for the U.S. agencies or contractors. Initially this was driven by the higher salaries that these organizations offer, but increasingly, the ability to apply for an SIV after two years of work appears to be the driving motive.

Causing further confusion is the fact that Afghans working for organizations that have cooperative agreements with the U.S. government are not eligible for the SIV program.[16] This makes it harder for these organizations to compete with direct U.S. contractors despite the common perception that those working for organizations with cooperative agreements are in just as much danger as contractors. As one interviewee described: "This is a major discrimination. We do the same job as a U.S. contractual staff. We face the same level of threat as them. The Taliban cannot distinguish between cooperative and contract. For them we are all the same."

Beyond these organizational struggles, a growing perception among many civil society leaders is that the SIV has contributed to the shrinking of the educated middle class. These individuals are considered some of the most effective advocates of democracy and human rights in Afghanistan. Those interviewed raised concerns about the loss of liberal voices, which has subsequently made them more vulnerable to traditional and radical religious forces. The weakening of organizations engaged in civic education and the shaping of public discourse is unhelpful at the time when the Taliban and other radical forces such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir and Jamiat Islah are perceived to be gaining ground in the country.

The above perception, arguably, produces two dilemmas for the international state building, in particular, for the US. The first dilemma is how to strengthen Afghanistan's economy to guarantee a successful military exit when some of Afghanistan's most educated and skilled laborers are leaving the country, while the SIV program undermines this process. The second dilemma is how to strengthen Afghanistan's civil society and empower democratic voices when some of the most ardent advocates of liberal values are relocating in the US. Overcoming these dilemmas must be a key policy discussion for any future programing.

[15] AICS was established in 2015 with the mandate to build the enabling environment for civil society organizations in Afghanistan and raise their credibility through accreditation.

[16] A Cooperative Agreement is a type of award by the US government used when it wants to retain substantial involvement in a project, but not sponsor it directly. Substantial intervention involves approving project plan, approving key project staff, monitoring performance, and reviewing reports. Contracts are used when US government wants to hire a contractor to compete, award, and manage an award with little involvement.

Relationship of the program to other U.S. foreign policy issues

> *"Good day friends!!! One question. As you know Donald Trump has said that when he becomes president he will deport all Muslims from the US and prevent others from coming to the country…. What do you think when he becomes the President, he would do what he had said? Will he cancel the SIV program?" -- From a Facebook post on one of the SIV pages*

Viewed as an isolated intervention, it is easy to claim that the SIV program has had moderate success creating opportunities for translators and other Afghans who worked for the U.S. government over the past fifteen years. The program, however, does not exist in isolation like this and it is useful to consider some of the wider implications of the policy.

On the positive side, the SIV program is certainly empowering a certain group of mostly middle and upper-middle class Afghans who have moved to the US and are now educating their children there. If this diasporic population remains engaged with Afghan politics and some of the skills that left the country return, this could have a positive impact.[17] SIV recipients, of course, are also not the only Afghan immigrants currently arriving in the West. In particular, Hazaras, members of Afghanistan's Shia minority, have been leaving Afghanistan in a disproportionate number. Many of these trek overland, hoping to make it to Europe, while others take boats, generally from Iran, hoping to make it to Australia or elsewhere in the Pacific. As a result, there are a large number of Hazara asylum seekers applying from far off places, such as refugee camps in Turkey and Indonesia. While only a small percentage of these refugees make it to the US, it does mean that there is a growing Hazara community in various cities around the country. Hazara SIV recipients tend to head to these cities as well, intermingling with Hazaras who have secured visas through other means, making it likely that the growing Hazara community may find an increasing voice among the more dominant Afghan ethnic groups in the US.

While the SIV program empowers this growing community in the United States, it is not as clear that such a program is ultimately having a positive effect on Afghanistan politically or economically. One of the issues with the current SIV programs for Iraqis and Afghans is that the language used by supporters to justify the program often centers around what the U.S. government 'owes' these individuals who helped America during their ongoing interventions. While the sentiment here is noble, the program does not necessarily in the eyes of recipients or other Afghans appear to really be fulfilling this debt. Part of the issue revolves around the complaint that the program favors elites and does not necessarily assist those in the most danger. Beyond this, however, it raises some important questions about what the US does when it pulls out militarily from an unstable country. Certainly translators and other U.S.

[17] It is worth noting, for example, that President Ashraf Ghani was a long time member of the Afghan diaspora in the US.

employees are in danger, but so too is any prominent Afghan who supported the US or the US-backed government. Even if only those working directly receiving U.S. funds are considered, the numbers are so extensive that the US will never be able to assist the majority of those that worked for American projects. In December 2009, for example, there were 97,000 Afghans working on Department of Defense contracts alone.[18] Clearly the US is unwilling to give all of these Afghans visas.

Furthermore, the visa program has perpetuated the perception that Afghanistan is politically and economically unviable. With Afghan refugees already the second highest country of origin in the ongoing European refugee crisis, both those stuck in camps and other transit points suffer.[19] At the same time, however, with younger, more liberal Afghans composing the majority of those attempting to leave the country, the demographics of the country will continue to shift, making the country older, more conservative and with less economic potential. As several of those interviewed pointed out, clearly the American government is responsible for much of the ongoing hardships in Afghanistan. However, going forward, it is worth questioning whether saving a handful of Afghans through a clunky visa program is worth the potential long term damage that it may be causing. A more transparent program supporting only those in genuine need of assistance that provides robust support for the new immigrants upon arrival, could both save many of those Afghans in real danger, while doing less harm to the Afghans who remain behind.

[18] Heidi Peters, Moshe Schwartz and Lawrence Kapp, 'Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Iraq and Afghanistan: 2007-2015' (Congressional Research Service, Washington DC: 2015).
[19] *The Economist*, 'Afghan Refugees: Living in Limbo,' April 2, 2016.