

Fact Sheet: Evacuating our Allies from Afghanistan

As the United States prepares to withdraw from Afghanistan no later than [September 2021](#), our Afghan allies living in-country who have aided the United States face increasing danger. Threats and violence inflicted upon U.S. allies in Afghanistan is already well-documented. At least [300 interpreters have been killed](#) since 2016, and the list of casualties will only grow longer if our allies who are eligible for SIVs are left unprotected once U.S. military support is gone. With a shortage of available visas and lengthy backlog processing delays, they cannot be left behind as potential targets of Taliban violence and reprisals. In the coming months, the United States must formulate a plan to evacuate these brave allies to safety as the U.S. draws down its own troops. This factsheet will discuss prior evacuations as evidence of our capability to perform another operation of that significance at this crucial time, with a focus on Guam as a viable site for the evacuation.

What is a Special Immigrant Visa?

A Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) is available to Afghan individuals who have worked as translators, interpreters, or other professionals employed by or on behalf of the United States government in Afghanistan for at least two years. Those who are eligible for SIVs and their dependents can apply through either of two programs, the [translator/interpreter](#) program, or through the [broader Afghan](#) national program. As one of multiple special immigrant [categories](#), these programs are designed to benefit our allies in Afghanistan (and Iraq, for whom similar SIVs exist) by providing a direct pathway to a green card.

The number of available SIVs are set by congressional statute. Section 1059 of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) only allots [50 visas annually](#) for translators/interpreters. Congress regularly attaches NDAA amendments increasing the available SIVs in the broader Afghan national program by 4,000. Section 602(b) of the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009, along with the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act in 2021 caps the number of visas allocated for Afghan nationals at a [total of 26,500](#).

Why is SIV processing delayed and backlogged?

A 2019 Inspector General review found there was a backlog of almost [19,000](#) SIV applications, and a 2020 review by the State Department saw that number [hold steady](#) with the queue remaining above 18,000. Legislators worry that the list of stalled applications is [likely to keep growing](#), in spite of State Department attempts to make procedural improvements or a [bill](#) introduced to expedite the process. The long background checks required for the visa, and [chronic understaffing](#) despite a [50% increase](#) in applicants since 2016, have dramatically slowed down the processing time for SIV applications. It reportedly can take as long as [996 days](#) to process an SIV application, meaning that it would take another [four years](#) to work through the queue of

SIV applicants at the current rate. These backlogs have delayed applicants from receiving their SIVs, a concerning situation especially as the withdrawal deadline approaches.

COVID-19 has also taken its toll on the program as in-person proceedings were [suspended](#) or [restricted](#) by pandemic precautions. For applications already in process, interviews at the Embassy in Kabul (a critical step for SIV approval) have been halted as a result of COVID-19 safety measures. Given these delays, it is increasingly apparent that there is not enough time between now and September to process all qualifying individuals for SIVs.

State Department reports [confirm](#) that the federal government is lagging in the issuance of SIVs, with only 15,026 of the 26,500 available SIVs issued since December of 2014. Congress must provide for additional SIVs and the federal government must expedite processing for those who are waiting for SIV approval of currently available visas.

Are more SIVs needed?

In addition, the statutory cap on SIVs means that the number of available visas is likely not adequate to cover all Afghans who aided U.S. forces. It is [estimated](#) that there are still 18,000 pending SIV applicants, and only about 11,000 remaining SIVs available, according to the legislative allotment. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has addressed the shortage, [asking](#) Congress via the House Foreign Affairs Committee to provide for an additional 8,000 SIVs to accommodate everyone who currently could be an eligible candidate in the pipeline.

There is a larger numbers problem at issue. For those 18,000 SIV candidates, an [average](#) of 3 family members or dependents (a spouse and two children) accompany the principal applicant under the visa. SIVs are issued to the principal applicant, a spouse and unmarried children under the age of 21, [do not count](#) towards the limit. This puts the total number of Afghans who could still be served by the SIV program at approximately 70,000, likely more, who are in need of safe relocation. Given the limited amount of time before U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan and the large number of Afghans seeking to migrate through the SIV program, most will need to be moved elsewhere to be processed safely. These calculations also do not take into consideration the rather restrictive interpretation of the SIV legislation, currently being applied to the program, which unnecessarily excludes those who would otherwise qualify for the program. Hence, many [experts](#) and [lawmakers](#) have been advocating for a mass evacuation of Afghan candidates and their loved ones.

Has the United States ever evacuated allies at this scale?

An evacuation of U.S. allies is not without precedent. The United States has done this in conjunction with withdrawing forces after previous military engagements. Operation New Life and Operation Pacific Haven were two incidents of rescuing allies as part of troop removal from a state of conflict or U.S. military theater.

Evacuation from Vietnam: Operation New Life

Operation New Life was the massive transportation of close to [130,000](#) Vietnamese refugees and allies to the U.S. from May to December of 1975. In April of that year President Ford established the [Special Interagency Task Force for Indochina Refugees](#) to coordinate the work of all U.S. groups, agencies, and departments that would be involved in the evacuation. In May 1975 Congress passed legislation, [the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act](#), to finance Operation New Life. The statute appropriated \$455 million to fund the evacuation and provide necessary support for the evacuees, who were granted parole to eventually enter the U.S. by the Attorney General. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) also transferred [\\$100 million](#) to the State Department for use in the operation.

Implementation took place over three stages: 1) the evacuation of the allied refugees from Vietnam, 2) the temporary care of those evacuees before permanent relocation, and 3) resettlement in the U.S. or other countries. The first two stages were complete by December 1975. The Operation utilized Guam as the waypoint for the mass relocation, where refugees were initially [screened](#) on the island before moving on for more thorough processing at reception centers in the U.S.

As part of the evacuation and temporary care of the evacuees, numerous inter-agency projects, equipment, and personnel were lent to support Operation New Life, as well as those provided by non-government organizations. Some of the most significant contributions [included](#): tents, cots, blankets, dining packets, and disaster supplies from USAID Disaster Relief warehouses on Guam; staff from the Department of Labor to counsel refugees at U.S. reception centers on how to obtain employment; contracts through the former Department of Health, Education, and Welfare Office of Education for English classes and cultural orientation programs; health services from the American Red Cross in Guam and at reception centers, and other casework like family reunification; recreation programs and child-care operations, language classes, and counseling services from the YMCA National Council at U.S. reception centers; and vocational classes and clothing distributed by the Salvation Army in Guam.

Although living conditions for the evacuees while in Guam were less than ideal, the large number of refugees necessitated the building of a [tent city](#), the evacuees were safe and their basic necessities were met. Personnel cleared hundreds of acres of jungle, install water mains, restrooms, fencing, galleys, two hospitals, and 3,546 tents by mid-1975. Thousands of relief workers and over 8,500 tons of food, supplies, and bedding were [flown in](#) throughout Operation New Life.

Evacuation from Iraq: Operation Pacific Haven

Operation Pacific Haven accomplished a similar feat, albeit on a smaller scale, bringing [6,600](#) Kurds out of northern Iraq to Guam for asylum case review from September 1996 to April 1997.

In a situation comparable to that of the Afghans today, local Kurds who had been hired as interpreters, drivers, and other employees in the early 1990's were facing the risk of retaliation from Iraqi militant groups. To rescue these allied people from life-threatening situations, the State Department received [presidential approval](#) to conduct an evacuation. Operation Pacific Haven came in two phases. The first phase, Mission Quick Transit, would be carried out by the State Department and the U.S. Air Force to move the Kurdish refugees out of country to an intermediate site in Guam for safe screening and immigration processing. The second phase [coordinated](#) with the Department of Health and Human Services, supported and housed the refugees in Guam before they were transported to the U.S. or other countries.

The Kurds were airlifted from southeastern Turkey in three different transits, in September, October, and December of 1996. Deemed asylum seekers by U.S. law, they were granted parole when arriving in Guam. Air Force and Navy [staffed](#) the area where the evacuees stayed with specialized units for administrative, medical, engineering, and language support. Assigned volunteers helped families through screening, medical checks, customs procedures, and initial interviews. The U.S. Air Force base supplied the southern [housing](#) units with furniture, kitchen products, and linens, and a central facility was set up to provide meals. About 1,000 servicemen and civilians worked to complete the operation, and most of the evacuees reached the U.S. mainland [within seven months](#).

The island of Guam was chosen as the intermediate stage between the transit out of the Middle East to the U.S. for two reasons. The Air Force base in Guam had just vacated housing in response to post-Cold War [force reductions](#) from the [Base Realignment and Closure](#) proceedings a few years earlier; and like the previous Operation New Life, it provided a [secure](#), and remote area where the evacuees could be safely evaluated and processed. While legislative action was not needed for Operation Pacific Haven, Congress did express its [support](#) for the Kurds in March of 1996, before the evacuation commenced.

What will it take to evacuate Afghan SIV candidates and their families?

SIV Evacuation from Afghanistan

The Biden administration must take urgent executive action to begin the process of evacuations. It will take nearly [300 military aircraft flights](#), if not more, to evacuate all the Afghan allies. If those flights had started May 20, it would have taken three flights per day to hit the September withdrawal deadline. It will take 7 flights per day if the Biden administration begins the flights on July 4.

The Truman Center has [projected](#) the cost of removing the 70,000 SIV candidates and their family members from Afghanistan at almost \$700 million, about \$10,000 per evacuee .

But Congress, too, must act. While a bipartisan group of Representatives and Senators [have been vocal](#) about the need to create an evacuation plan and expedite SIV

processing, legislative advocacy and action may be required to ensure a timely evacuation occurs before September. Statutory appropriations like those passed in tandem with Operation New Life may be necessary to expedite and enable the evacuation, providing funding necessary for the airlift of Afghan allies while financially supporting them in Guam and for their transit to North America. With public opinion and political will in support of our Afghan allies, [experts believe](#) that as a matter of logistics, past operations show that an evacuation of such scale is feasible.

Evacuation to Guam

As discussed above, Guam has successfully been used in the past as a temporary station for evacuees, most notably during Operation New Life. The 130,000 Vietnamese refugees brought in 1975 especially demonstrate the island's capacity for taking in significant numbers of people, and its status as a [territory of the United States](#) with established military facilities make the island a strong candidate to be utilized in such an operation. Andersen Air Force Base and Naval Base Guam, now [combined](#) as Joint Region Marianas, is a significant military installation that can be utilized to meet the needs of U.S. allies like the Afghan candidates during evacuation.

With fully operational public works [infrastructure](#), including utilities, maintenance, construction, engineering, and management, the active Joint Region Marianas provides for [21,700](#) service members and their families. Assuming the necessary attention to expand and adapt existing facilities, the Joint Region Marianas could temporarily extend its service to the Afghan families while their immigration status is being processed.

It should be noted that some Guam residents are divided as to the issue of temporarily hosting Afghan nationals. Many are ready to [welcome](#) them, while others are more [reticent](#). But many of the expressed concerns, such as funding or housing, can be addressed by an act of Congress, and by the geography of the island. Federal legislators can ensure that Guam does not foot the bill for the evacuation. And the dense resident population centers are located on the [northeastern](#) portions of the island, distanced from the low population centers near and surrounding the Orote Peninsula where the Joint Region Marianas is located – presumably where the evacuees would stay before moving on to the United States proper. In representing his constituents, Guam delegate, Michael San Nicolas, has signed on to a letter to President Biden [expressing support](#) for hosting Afghan allies in a safe zone like Guam ahead of the military withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Given its role in previous evacuations, and the present capacity of Joint Region Marianas, Guam appears to be a viable location for all the Afghan evacuees.

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