

Fact Sheet: Overview of the Special Immigrant Visa Programs

What is a Special Immigrant Visa?

As United States military forces prepare to withdraw from Afghanistan later this year, Afghan translators and others who have aided U.S. forces are facing significant danger. With a September 2021 deadline looming, the importance of Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) to this population has become increasingly apparent.

SIVs are available to individuals who have worked as translators, interpreters, or other professionals employed by or on behalf of the United States government in Afghanistan or Iraq. Those who are eligible for these visas and their dependents can apply through one of two SIV programs. As special immigrant [categories](#), these programs are designed to benefit our allies by providing a direct pathway to a green card.

What are the two Afghanistan SIV programs?

There are two SIV programs available to those in Afghanistan. The first, [the SI visa class category](#), is meant specifically for [translators or interpreters](#) who have worked with U.S. military forces. The second, [the SQ visa class category](#), is available to any other [Afghan national who was employed](#) by or on behalf of the United States government in the region. Both of these SIV programs were created by Congress and are managed by the U.S. State Department.

The number of SIVs available to people in Afghanistan are set by congressional statute. For the SI visa category, Section 1059 of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) only allots [50 visas annually](#) for “SI” translators/interpreters. For the SQ visa category, Congress regularly makes amendments to Section 602(b) of the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009 to increase by 4,000 the number of these visas. The Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2021 increased the number of SQ visas by 4,000 bringing these available SIV visas to a [total of 26,500](#). Currently there are three different pieces of legislation, that have been introduced, to increase that total by an additional [4,000](#), [8,000](#), and [20,000](#) SIV visas.

Both of the Afghan SIV programs have similar, but not identical, requirements for eligibility and an extensive application process, which are described below.

Who is eligible for an SIV?

To be eligible for an SIV one must be a national of Afghanistan who has either:

- worked directly with the U.S. Armed Forces or under Chief of Mission (COM) authority as a translator or interpreter for a period of at least 12 months (this qualifies the individual for the SI category), or

- has been an employee of the U.S. government or International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) for at least two years between 2001 and 2021 (this qualifies the individual for the SQ category).

In addition, the candidate must obtain a favorable written recommendation from a General or Flag Officer in the chain of command of the U.S. Armed Forces unit that was supported by the individual, or from the COM at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul.

Since 2009 when these programs were created, between [16,000](#) and [18,000](#) individuals from Afghanistan have received SIVs and emigrated to the United States, along with [45,000](#) immediate family members accompanying those SIV recipients.

How long does the application process take?

A 2013 [amendment](#) to the Afghan Allies Protection Act requires that the State Department's review of an SIV application be completed within [nine months](#), from submission to final notice of approval. But reports on how long the SIV process actually takes have varied. Some indicate it takes an average of [658 days](#), while others state that it can take as long as [996 days](#) to process an SIV application. But the reported waits are only the time it takes the U.S. federal government to process an application it has received. If one accounts for the time an individual needs to put the application together – including collecting the necessary documents, filling out the application, and scheduling a visa interview – some SIV recipients have waited even longer, as much as [three-and-a-half years](#) in some instances.

What is the SIV application process?

The application process involves a lot of documentation and can be broken down into three segments: (1) gathering initial petition documents, (2) collecting additional family records, and (3) scheduling a visa interview.

For the SQ visa category there is an additional first step involving applying for Chief of Mission approval with the Department of State. Thereafter, it follows similar steps to the SI visa category outlined below.

The individual applying for an SIV submits a [packet](#) of initial petition documents¹ to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). This packet would include: [Form I-360](#); a copy of the applicant's passport; proof of his or her work as a translator or employee; proof of screening and a background check by U.S. Armed Forces or the COM; and – most importantly – a [letter of recommendation](#) giving approval from the COM or his or her designee at the embassy, or a General or Flag officer in the chain of

¹ If any of the components of the application are not in English, the applicant is required to include a certified English translation of those documents.

command of the Armed Forces unit aided by the applicant. This recommendation can often be the most difficult part of the application to procure, especially if the eligible SIV candidate is filing his or her application years after having worked with a U.S. affiliated entity or military unit.

After submitting that packet of documents to USCIS, the applicant must then [communicate](#) by email with the National Visa Center (NVC) to deliver additional family records. The records include copies of the biographical information pages from the passports of the applicant and family members who will be covered by the SIV, copies of birth certificates and marriage certificates, and additional official forms like [Form DS-260](#). The NVC will notify the applicant once USCIS has approved the initial petition and help the applicant schedule a visa interview at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul.

After turning the records into NVC, the applicant, if in Afghanistan, attends his or her scheduled [visa interview](#) at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul. Because the process is lengthy, the interview might not be until months after the applicant submitted his or her initial petition and family records. Wait times have only gotten longer since early 2020, with COVID-19 precautions stopping or delaying in-person visa proceedings.

Interviews are conducted in English, and applicants and their accompanying family members are [fingerprinted](#). The applicant needs to bring along all the family members included in the application to the interview, along with the originals of family records submitted to NVC, as well as recent photographs for identification purposes. SIV candidates also need to provide written descriptions of their qualifying positions for the U.S. government. If still employed in a qualifying position at the time of the interview, the applicant should be prepared to give a written statement of his or her intent to resign and emigrate upon visa approval.

Applicants sometimes receive the SIV the day of their interviews, but the process can take longer. Some immigrant visa cases take additional time for [administrative processing](#) after the interview. If there are any problems with the visa application, the consular officer is supposed to communicate that to the applicant. If and when the SIV is finally granted, the applicant will be given a packet to bring to the U.S. to present to Customs and Border Protection (CBP) when he or she arrives. Eventually, SIV recipients' official Green Cards are mailed to them after they are admitted to the United States.

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