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Office of Inspector General  
United States Department of State

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AUD-MERO-23-23

Office of Audits

August 2023

# **Evaluation of Adjustments to the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program From 2018 Through 2022**

MIDDLE EAST REGION OPERATIONS

UNCLASSIFIED



# HIGHLIGHTS

Office of Inspector General  
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AUD-MERO-23-23

## What OIG Reviewed

Following the Department of State (Department) evacuation and suspension of operations of U.S. Embassy Kabul, Afghanistan, in August 2021, multiple congressional committees requested that the Office of Inspector General (OIG) review the processing of Afghan special immigrant visas (SIV), a program established in 2009 to resettle Afghans who had worked on behalf of the United States in Afghanistan and had experienced an ongoing and serious threat as a result. OIG is issuing a series of reports in response to the requests.

OIG conducted this evaluation, which responds to eight congressional questions, within the following areas: Department efforts to streamline the Afghan SIV process from 2018 through 2022, the impact of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) on the Afghan SIV applicant process, and the future of the Afghan SIV program.

## What OIG Recommends

OIG made two recommendations in a prior report (AUD-MERO-23-01, October 2022) involving the Afghan SIV program that are relevant to the findings discussed in this report. Both recommendations are presently open pending further action, and OIG encourages the Department to fully implement these recommendations. In addition, OIG made one new recommendation in this report to further improve the Afghan SIV program. Based on the Department's response to a draft of this report, OIG considers the new recommendation offered resolved, pending further action. A synopsis of the Department's comments and OIG's reply follow the recommendation in the Results section of this report. The Department's response to the draft report is reprinted in its entirety in Appendix E.

**August 2023**

**OFFICE OF AUDITS**

MIDDLE EAST REGION OPERATIONS

## Evaluation of Adjustments to the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program From 2018 Through 2022

### What OIG Found

OIG found that the Department took actions beginning in February 2021 to streamline Afghan SIV applicant processing and mitigate some processing issues; however, as of December 2022, these actions had not eliminated the significant and growing Afghan SIV applicant backlog. Specifically, the Department increased staffing to process emails and determine applicant eligibility; coordinated with the Department of Defense to verify employment; incorporated new software to help process emails; eliminated a portion of the application process; leveraged posts worldwide for SIV interviews; and established remote consular operations in Doha, Qatar. However, because of an increased interest in the program after August 2021, the Department experienced an influx of applications causing a backlog for which the Department had inadequate staffing to process. Without additional dedicated resources to address the situation, the backlog in SIV applications will remain a significant challenge.

OIG also found that the COVID-19 pandemic stalled the Afghan SIV application process, which in-turn increased the number of SIV applicants awaiting in-person interviews. Specifically, Embassy Kabul suspended visa interviews twice: from March 2020 to February 2021 and from June to July 2021 because of COVID-19 outbreaks. However, telework allowed the Department to continue some phases of SIV applicant processing.

Lastly, OIG found that the Department's Afghan SIV program continues to face challenges. The Department relies on Taliban cooperation for SIV applicant relocation from the country because of a lack of a ground presence in Afghanistan. In addition, the Department has not developed and implemented a strategic performance management approach to resolving the Afghan SIV applicant backlog, and the Department's Afghan SIV Senior Coordinating Official position has had periods of vacancy and frequent turnover since 2017. Developing and implementing a strategic performance management approach would benefit the Afghan SIV program and help address the SIV applicant backlog.

## CONTENTS

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OBJECTIVE .....	1
BACKGROUND.....	2
The Special Immigrant Visa Process .....	3
The 2021 Evacuation From Kabul .....	6
RESULTS .....	7
Finding A: The Department Made Efforts To Streamline Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Processing Beginning in February 2021, but Challenges Remain.....	7
Finding B: COVID-19 Caused Delays to Afghan SIV Processing and Increased the Backlog of Applicants.....	16
Finding C: The Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program Faces Challenges and Would Benefit From a Strategic Performance Management Approach .....	19
RECOMMENDATIONS.....	27
APPENDIX A: PURPOSE, SCOPE, AND METHODOLOGY.....	28
Data Reliability .....	29
Work Related to Internal Control .....	29
Prior Office of Inspector General Reports .....	31
APPENDIX B: CONGRESSIONAL REQUEST LETTERS.....	33
APPENDIX C: AFGHAN SPECIAL IMMIGRANT VISA APPLICATION PROCESS .....	40
APPENDIX D: KEY EVENTS RELATING TO AFGHAN SPECIAL IMMIGRANT VISA PROCESSING FROM 2018 THROUGH 2022.....	41
APPENDIX E: DEPUTY SECRETARY OF STATE FOR MANAGEMENT AND RESOURCES’ RESPONSE	45
ABBREVIATIONS .....	47
OIG AUDIT TEAM MEMBERS .....	48

## OBJECTIVE

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The Department of State (Department), Office of Inspector General (OIG), conducted this evaluation to respond to eight specific congressional questions involving the Afghan special immigrant visa (SIV) process that fell within the following areas: the Department’s efforts to streamline Afghan SIV processing from 2018 through 2022, the impact of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) on the Afghan SIV applicant process, and the future of the Afghan SIV program.

Table 1 presents the congressional questions addressed in this report, which members in the House and the Senate requested that OIG address following the evacuation and suspension of operations of U.S. Embassy Kabul, Afghanistan, in August 2021.<sup>1</sup> The congressional letters are reprinted in Appendix B.

**Table 1: Congressional Questions Addressed in This Report**

Topic	Senate Foreign Relations Committee	House Foreign Affairs Committee
Department Efforts To Adjust and Streamline the Afghan SIV Processing From 2018 through 2022		What changes, if any, the Department of State made in vetting SIV applicants since the establishment of Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation in 2018.
	The extent to which each participating department or agency of the U.S. government, including the Department and the Department of Homeland Security, adjusted SIV processing practices and procedures to vet applicants and expand processing capacity since the February 29, 2020, Doha Agreement between the United States and the Taliban.	The extent to which the Department adjusted practices and procedures to vet applicants at any point following the February 2020 Doha Agreement with the Taliban.
	A list of the specific steps, if any, taken between January 20, 2021, and August 31, 2021, to streamline Afghan SIV applicant processing and address long-standing bureaucratic hurdles while improving security protocols.	

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Rep. Ami Bera, M.D., Chairman, House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, Central Asia, and Nonproliferation, September 30, 2021; Letter from James E. Risch, Ranking Member, Senate Foreign Relations Committee; James M. Inhofe, Ranking Member, Senate Armed Services Committee; and Rob Portman, Ranking Member, Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, October 21, 2021.

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Senate Foreign Relations Committee</b>	<b>House Foreign Affairs Committee</b>
	Recommendations to strengthen and streamline the SIV process going forward in light of the Taliban takeover, particularly with respect to the timeline for granting Chief of Mission approval.	Recommendations to strengthen and streamline the SIV process.
	Factors under consideration with respect to efforts to relocate processing capabilities away from Kabul, including obstacles, barriers, and limitations to doing so.	
	An assessment of the extent to which challenges in verifying applicants' employment with the Department of Defense contributed to delays in the SIV process, and an accounting of the specific steps taken since February 29, 2020, to address issues surrounding employment verification.	
Impact of COVID-19		The impact of COVID-19 on the Afghan SIV process, if any, and adjustments the Department of State made to account for COVID-19 impacts.
The future of the Afghan SIV program	An assessment of the continuing viability of the current SIV process in light of the recent Taliban takeover.	

**Source:** Generated by OIG from letters from members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the Senate Foreign Relations, Armed Services, and Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committees.

## **BACKGROUND**

In 2009, Congress established an SIV program to resettle Afghans who had worked on behalf of the United States through the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009.<sup>2</sup> Since enacted, Congress has authorized extensions of the program on 12 occasions and has adjusted eligibility requirements. To qualify for the Afghan SIV program, an Afghan national, as of June 2022, must have been employed by or on behalf of the U.S. government in Afghanistan between October 7, 2001, and December 31, 2024, for at least 1 year and provided faithful and valuable service in this capacity, as documented in a letter of recommendation from the applicant's

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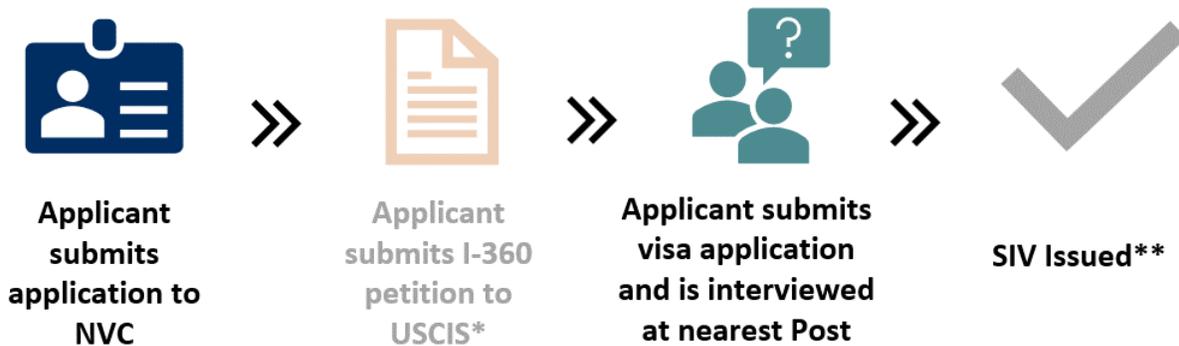
<sup>2</sup> The Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009, Public Law 111-8, March 11, 2009, codified at 8 United States Code (U.S.C.) § 1101 note, "Afghan Allies Protection."

supervisor.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the Afghan national must be experiencing or have experienced a serious ongoing threat as a consequence of the employment. Afghan nationals who were employed with the International Security Assistance Force may also qualify for the SIV program if this service required work for U.S. military personnel. For more information, see Appendix D, “Key Events Relating to Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Processing From 2018 through 2022.”

## The Special Immigrant Visa Process

Afghan SIV applicants’ data move across the different phases of the Afghan SIV process: the pre-Chief of Mission (COM) Approval Phase, in which an applicant submits an application to the National Visa Center (NVC) for pre-processing, where documents required for a COM determination by the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Unit (ASIV Unit) are collected. ASIV verifies an applicant’s employment with the U.S. government or contractor prior to making a recommendation for the COM designee’s final approval or non-approval decision; and the Visa Application Phase, in which the principal applicant submits a visa application and is interviewed by consular staff at the Afghan Affairs Unit (AAU) in Qatar or another U.S. embassy. Based on the applicant’s application and interview, the consular staff will issue the visa. Alternatively, the applicant may have an application denied at any stage if he or she fails to meet the eligibility criteria or is deemed ineligible for a visa to the United States. The phases of the Afghan SIV application process are depicted in Figure 1 and further explained in the paragraphs that follow the figure. A flow chart of the entire Afghan SIV process by phase is in Appendix C.

**Figure 1: Phases of the Afghan SIV Application Process**



\* The Department and the Department of Homeland Security agreed to remove the required Form I-360 from the SIV application process on July 20, 2022.

\*\* The applicant may be denied at any point in the Afghan SIV process.

**Source:** OIG generated from information obtained from congressional legislation, including the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009, as amended; interviews with Department and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services officials; and Department flow charts that depicted the SIV review process.

<sup>3</sup> The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, extended the Afghan SIV program through December 31, 2024. Public Law 117-328, December 29, 2022, § 7034(d)(9). The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2016 increased the service requirement from 1 to 2 years for those individuals applying after September 30, 2015 (Public Law 114-92, November 25, 2015, § 1216(a)(1)). However, the July 30, 2021, Emergency Security Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2021, reduced the service requirement back to 1 year (Public Law 117-31, § 401(a)). See 8 U.S.C. § 1101 note, “Afghan Allies Protection,” § 602(b)(2)(A) for supervisory letter requirement.

### **Chief of Mission Approval Phase**



The COM for Afghanistan, or a designee, must conduct an independent review of each SIV application and approve or deny that application as appropriate.<sup>4</sup> To receive COM approval, an applicant must submit a package of documents demonstrating the applicant's eligibility for the SIV program to NVC.<sup>5</sup> The Afghan SIV process begins with an applicant submitting an email to a dedicated email address at NVC requesting consideration for an SIV. Once the applicant provides NVC with all required information, the COM approval application is considered "documentarily complete,"<sup>6</sup> and NVC forwards it to the ASIV Unit, ending the NVC administered "pre-COM Approval phase" (as referred to in the preceding paragraphs and later in this report).

The ASIV Unit<sup>7</sup> is responsible for analyzing an applicant's eligibility for the program by verifying, among other items, the history and length of an applicant's employment and a letter of recommendation from the applicant's supervisor. Based on its analysis, the ASIV Unit determines whether an applicant qualifies for COM approval and makes a recommendation to the COM's designated approving official. As of July 12, 2022, the designated approving official was the Director or the Assistant Director of the ASIV Unit.<sup>8</sup> If the COM or the COM's designee denies the application, NVC notifies the applicant and provides the reasons for the COM's decision. An applicant may appeal this denial once within 120 days of notification and provide additional information on the application. According to ASIV Unit officials, an applicant may also reapply an unlimited number of times. If the COM's designated approving official approves the application, NVC notifies the applicant, who may then initiate the visa application phase.

### **I-360 Petition Phase (Prior to July 2022)**



Prior to July 2022, if the application was approved by the COM, the applicant submitted Form I-360, petition for special immigrant status, for processing. In this phase, the applicant also submitted documentation for a derivative spouse

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<sup>4</sup> 8 U.S.C. 1101 note, "Afghan Allies Protection," § 602(b)(2)(D).

<sup>5</sup> The National Visa Center, located in Portsmouth, NH, is within the Bureau of Consular Affairs, Visa Office, Domestic Operations. The National Visa Center acts as the primary public-facing organization within the Department during the SIV process.

<sup>6</sup> To be documentarily complete, the applicant must provide the following information: (1) evidence of Afghan nationality such as passport or *tazkera*, which is the Afghan national identity card; (2) verification of employment on behalf of the United States in Afghanistan; (3) an employee badge; (4) a letter of recommendation from a direct U.S. citizen supervisor; and (5) an updated Form DS-157, Petition for Special Immigrant Classification for Afghan SIV Applicants. As of August 25, 2021, Afghan SIV applicants, as part of their COM application, did not need to submit a statement that demonstrated that they had experienced an ongoing serious threat.

<sup>7</sup> The ASIV Unit, located in Washington, DC, is within the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs and the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs Joint Executive Office.

<sup>8</sup> The ASIV Unit eliminated review of such recommendations by Embassy Kabul's COM Committee in August 2021, which, along with the COM's designation of the ASIV Unit's Director and Deputy Director, helped streamline the COM approval process.

or child, if any.<sup>9</sup> A U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services officer would review the petition and send the approved petition to NVC, which notified the applicant of the approval. Applicants receiving COM approval on or after July 20, 2022, no longer needed to file Form I-360 with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. Instead, Form DS-157, previously submitted as part of the COM approval application package, had been repurposed and designated to serve as the petition for special immigrant status, allowing the Department to approve the special immigrant petition with the COM approval decision without requiring any additional action on the part of the applicant.

### ***Visa Application and Petition Phase***



Once the application is documentarily complete and the applicant informs NVC at which processing post the applicants will appear for their interview, NVC schedules a visa interview at the U.S. embassy or consulate processing the immigrant visa. A U.S. Consular Officer reviews the visa application and interviews the applicant and any derivative family members in person. Prior to the suspension of operations in August 2021, SIV interviews typically took place at Embassy Kabul. Since the suspension, applicants must arrange their own travel to another immigrant visa processing post in a third country and request that NVC schedule an interview there. The Department has been able to assist some Afghan SIV applicants with this process.<sup>10</sup> Alternatively, applicants may choose to arrange their own travel and request that NVC schedule an interview at an immigrant visa processing U.S. embassy or consulate in a third country.

Based on the applicants' interview, the documents they provided, and a required security screening, the interviewing Consular Officer determines whether to issue the visa. If the Consular Officer determines that a visa should be issued, the applicant and any derivative family members undergo a medical examination<sup>11</sup> and then travel to the United States.<sup>12</sup> If the

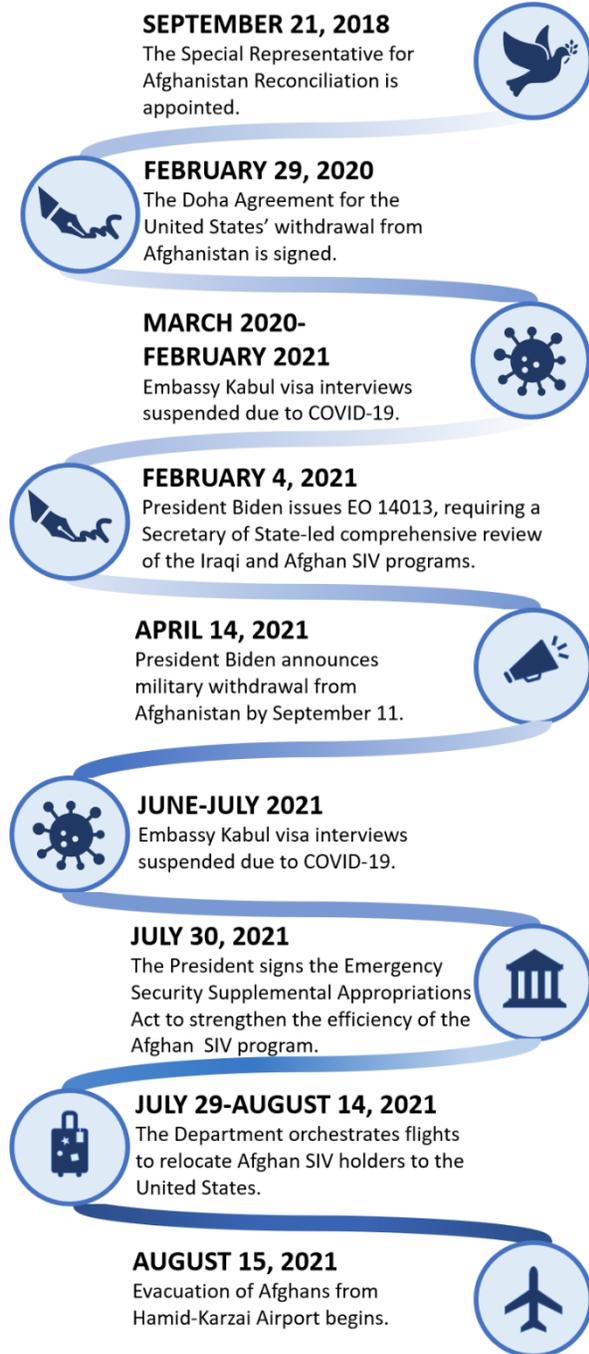
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<sup>9</sup> 9 Foreign Affairs Manual 502.1-1(C)(2), "Derivative Applicants/Beneficiaries," states that a derivative is, among others, a spouse or child acquired prior to the principal applicant's admission to the United States or adjustment of status to that of a Lawful Permanent Resident.

<sup>10</sup> Within the Department, the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts facilitates the departure of some individuals from Afghanistan to third countries in the Middle East and elsewhere for continued SIV processing.

<sup>11</sup> At Embassy Kabul, SIV applicants underwent a medical examination after the visa interview because circumstances were such that this order was more efficient. However, typically, visa applicants undergo a medical examination ahead of the visa interview so that the interviewing officer is aware of any medical issues.

<sup>12</sup> Afghan nationals who receive SIVs may be accompanied by a spouse and unmarried children under the age of 21, referred to as "derivative applicants." The individual who meets the program qualifications is the principal applicant. All data presented in this report represent principal applicants only and do not include derivative applicants unless otherwise specified.

**Figure 2: Key Events Before Evacuation**

Consular Officer denies the visa application, the applicant is ineligible to travel to the United States.

### The 2021 Evacuation From Kabul

On April 14, 2021, President Biden announced plans to complete the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021. As the Taliban entered Kabul on August 15, 2021, the Afghan President fled the country, and Afghanistan's security forces collapsed. In response, the Department and the Department of Defense (DoD) evacuated U.S. citizens, lawful permanent residents, and allies, including Afghan SIV applicants, from Afghanistan.

A brief timeline of events preceding the August 2021 evacuation is provided in Figure 2. For a more detailed timeline, see Appendix D, "Key Events Relating to Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Processing From 2018 through 2022."

After the evacuation, the Department suspended operations at Embassy Kabul on August 31, 2021, and moved some of its operations to Doha, Qatar, in September 2021. Throughout 2021, especially between August and December, the Department experienced a surge of interest in the Afghan SIV program. By December 2022, there was a backlog of 154,899 principal Afghan SIV applicants in process.<sup>13</sup>

**Source:** Generated by OIG based on Embassy Kabul evacuation information provided by the Department.

<sup>13</sup> 9 Foreign Affairs Manual 502.1-1(C)(1), "Principal Applicants/Beneficiaries," states that a principal applicant, or beneficiary, is the applicant on whose behalf a petition can be filed directly. Principals are applicants who qualify for the program on their own merits. The derivatives qualify based on their relationship to the principal. 9 Foreign Affairs Manual 502.1-1(C)(2), "Derivative Applicants/Beneficiaries." For SIV principal applicants, eligible derivatives include a spouse and children under 21. 8 U.S.C. § 1101 note, "Afghan Allies Protection," § 602(b)(2)(B).

## RESULTS

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### **Finding A: The Department Made Efforts To Streamline Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Processing Beginning in February 2021, but Challenges Remain**

OIG found that beginning in February 2021, the Department implemented changes to streamline the Afghan SIV applicant process and mitigate some processing issues; however, these actions had not been successful in reducing the Afghan SIV applicant backlog as of December 2022.

Specifically, between February 2021 and December 2022, the Department acted to expedite the review of Afghan SIV applicant emails and facilitate COM approval. For example, the Department increased staffing; coordinated with DoD to verify employment; incorporated new software to help process emails; eliminated U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Form I-360 from the SIV application process for qualifying applicants;<sup>14</sup> leveraged posts worldwide for SIV interviews and issuances; and established remote consular operations in Doha, Qatar. These actions collectively addressed more than 300,000 Afghan SIV applicant emails that were awaiting attention. However, the Department experienced an influx of applications following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 and had inadequate staffing to process those applications. Specifically, the number of Afghan SIV principal applicants awaiting COM approval increased by 1,416 percent from October 2021 through December 2022, from 4,029 to 61,114, respectively.<sup>15</sup> Without additional dedicated resources to address the situation, the growing backlog in Afghan SIV applications will remain a significant challenge.

#### **Afghan SIV Adjustments From 2018 Through 2020**

OIG determined that the Afghan SIV applicant process remained the same between 2018 and 2019. In 2020, the Department took some actions to improve the Afghan SIV program, in part, to respond to OIG findings and recommendations. For example, in March 2020, in response to a recommendation in the report *Review of the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program* (AUD-MERO-20-35, June 2020), the Department appointed an Afghan Senior Coordinating Official to oversee the Afghan SIV program, ending a 3-year vacancy in the position. Beginning in March 2020, the Department arranged for personnel on authorized departure because of COVID-19 to assist the ASIV Unit with COM Approval Phase processing. The Department also conducted staffing assessments for those offices involved in Afghan SIV processing in response to another recommendation in AUD-MERO-20-35, completing those assessments in February 2021. In addition, in response to recommendations in the report *Management Assistance Report: Quarterly Reporting on Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program Needs Improvement* (AUD-MERO-20-34, June 2020), the Department made changes to improve its Afghan SIV quarterly reporting.

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<sup>14</sup> The Department and the Department of Homeland Security consolidated the SIV petition forms allowing qualified applicants to submit only Form DS-157 in substitution of Form I-360.

<sup>15</sup> In technical comments provided in response to a draft of this report, the Department noted that “At COM” workload remained under 6,000 cases from October 2021 until early August 2022. Although OIG recognizes that “At COM” cases increased exponentially in August 2022, OIG found that “At COM” referrals from NVC were rising prior to August 2022.

### ***Interest in the Afghan SIV Program Surged in 2021, Resulting in an SIV Applicant Email Backlog***



Between July 2021 and December 2021, the Department experienced a surge of Afghan SIV applicants, which resulted in a backlog of applicant emails at NVC. According to NVC officials, non-government organizations that partner with NVC warned them about a potential increase in SIV applications shortly after the White House announced the U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan in April 2021.<sup>16</sup> Prior to June 2021, the Department received an average of 200 emails per day. This average increased to 1,500 emails per day in July 2021. During the first 2 weeks of August 2021, NVC received an average of 2,474 emails per day. However, during the third and fourth week of August 2021, NVC received an average of 12,822 emails per day. This increase in applicant emails continued through the following months, and by December 30, 2021, NVC had received a total of 390,651 emails since August 2, 2021, but had processed only 145,535 emails. Each month, the email backlog exceeded the number of emails NVC could process. NVC's Afghan SIV processing staff was expected to process approximately 1,500 emails per day, but these processing capabilities were outpaced by the number of emails received in August 2021 and subsequent months. The number of emails processed by month from August through March 2022 and the remaining email backlog at the end of each month are shown in Table 2. In addition, for more information, see Appendix D: "Key Events Relating to Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Processing From 2018 Through 2022."

**Table 2: Emails Processed and Monthly Backlog From August 2021 to March 2022**

<b>Month</b>	<b>Number of Emails</b>	
	<b>Processed</b>	<b>Ending Backlog</b>
August 2021	22,895	203,408
September 2021	30,047	264,464
October 2021	28,819	276,507
November 2021	33,347	309,282
December 2021	30,427	321,760
January 2022	36,677	320,986
February 2022	33,892	319,545
March 2022	46,626	350,056

**Source:** Generated by OIG from SIV applicant email data provided by NVC.

#### ***Actions Taken To Address the Afghan SIV Applicant Email Backlog***

To address the large increase in applicant emails, OIG found that NVC had implemented several changes prior to or during the email surge, including shifting personnel to support the SIV

<sup>16</sup> On April 14, 2021, the White House announced that U.S. troops would withdraw from Afghanistan starting on May 1, 2021, and conclude by September 11, 2021.

program and leveraging technology.<sup>17</sup> First, NVC officials told us that they reassigned personnel who provided other visa services to process Afghan SIV applications. Thus, the number of personnel dedicated to processing Afghan SIV applicant emails increased from 9 in May 2021 to 63 by July 2021. In addition to reassigning staff, the Bureau of Consular Affairs enlisted the support of Mission Brazil<sup>18</sup> to assist with the surge in emails and devoted temporary duty Visa Office staff to managing Afghan SIV inquiries. Specifically, from August 19, 2021, through October 27, 2021, Mission Brazil consular staff assisted NVC in reviewing and responding to emails that did not advance an existing application or create a new application.

Despite staffing increases and assistance from Mission Brazil, the email backlog continued to grow, reaching its highest point at 370,959 on March 8, 2022. In March 2022, NVC also incorporated a new case management system using a software program to facilitate review. Specifically, the Department implemented software to group emails by contact person, which the legacy email program could not accomplish. Thus, an NVC processor could review all emails from a specific contact, which facilitated the review of an application.

In addition to the new case management system, NVC added additional staff from the Kentucky Consular Center in Williamsburg, Kentucky, and from the Center's contractor's headquarters in Herndon, Virginia, to assist with reviewing applicant emails. As a result, NVC was able to triple its staff from 75 in April 2022 to 214 in September 2022.

By October 2022, NVC had reduced the email backlog such that it was able to review incoming emails within 10 business days. Figure 3 shows how the backlog of applicant emails at NVC increased from August 2021, peaked in March 2022, and was eliminated in October 2022.

### **The Special Representative for Afghanistan**

The House of Representatives requested that OIG determine what changes, if any, the Department had made in vetting Afghan SIV applicants since the establishment of the Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation in 2018. After interviewing the Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation's successor, the Special Representative for Afghanistan, OIG found that neither he nor his predecessor had a role in the Afghan SIV process, nor did the establishment of the Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation cause changes in the vetting process or prompt increase focus on it. The Special Representative for Afghanistan's mission is to advance U.S. interests related to Afghanistan by engaging with the Taliban and the international community on counterterrorism, as well as to provide the safe passage for U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents, and Afghan allies and their eligible family members.

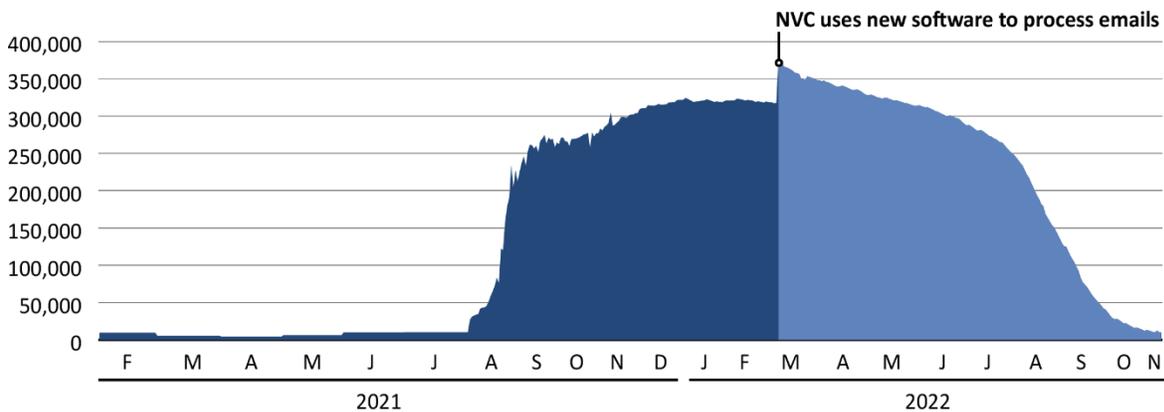
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<sup>17</sup> After Executive Order 14013, which mandated that the SIV program be administered "without undue delay," was signed on February 4, 2021, NVC communicated with Consular Systems Technology, which frequently supports, develops, and maintains Department technology used to process visas, to make processing more efficient. Executive Order 14013, Rebuilding and Enhancing Programs to Resettle Refugees and Planning for the Impact of Climate Change on Migration, February 4, 2021, at § 1(j).

<sup>18</sup> The Bureau of Consular Affairs' Visa Office determined that Mission Brazil could assist NVC in responding to emails because of its ability to process emails remotely and lack of available work attributable to the shutdown of Mission Brazil's visa operations during COVID-19.

Although NVC resolved the applicant email backlog, as of December 2022, applicants faced delays at the next stage of SIV processing: COM approval.<sup>19</sup>

**Figure 3: Afghan SIV Applicant Email Backlog at NVC: February 2021 – November 2022**



Source: OIG generated from SIV applicant email data provided by NVC.

### ***The Department Took Actions To Adjust and Streamline COM Approval, but a Backlog of Applicants Remained***



The ASIV Unit took several actions to streamline the COM approval process, including eliminating unnecessary steps and levels of approval and increasing the efficiency of employment verification. Specifically, the ASIV Unit increased its staff; coordinated with DoD to verify employment of Afghans through Project Rabbit;<sup>20</sup> eliminated the COM review committee,<sup>21</sup> which allowed applications to go directly to the Assistant COM for approval; and changed approval designation from the Assistant COM to the Director and the Assistant Director of the ASIV Unit, which removed another step from the COM approval process. Although the ASIV Unit took these actions, as of December 2022, 61,114 applicants were awaiting COM approval.

### ***The Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Unit Increased Staff but Could Not Fully Mitigate the Backlog of Applicants Awaiting COM Approval***

Through June 2020, the ASIV Unit relied on a group of eight direct hires and contractors, as well as temporary employees.<sup>22</sup> Between February and September 2021, the ASIV Unit increased its

<sup>19</sup> Finding C of this report discusses the transfer of the email backlog to COM approval backlog in greater detail, and Figure 9 illustrates the growth of the COM approval backlog between March 2022 and November 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Project Rabbit allows DoD officials to match SIV applicants to human resource and employment data provided by DoD contractors.

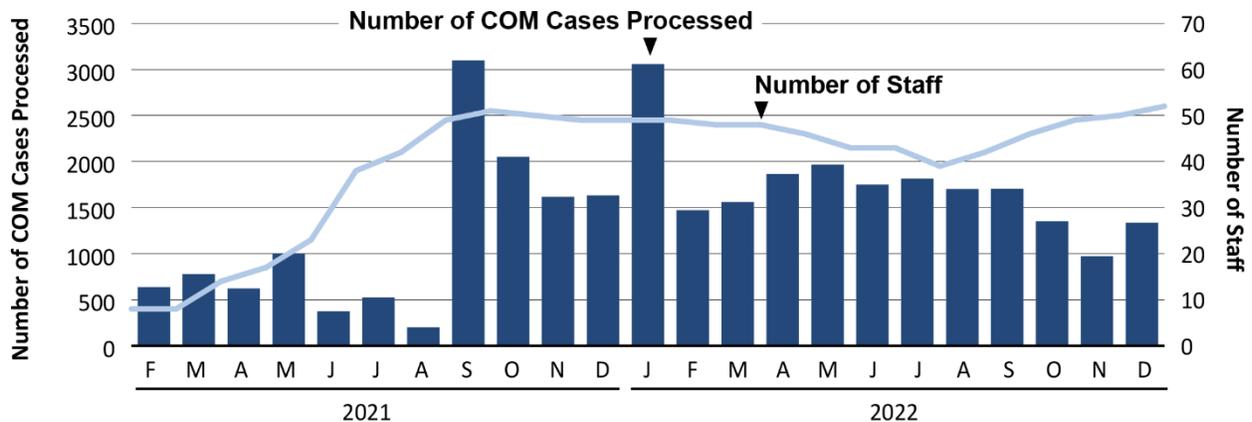
<sup>21</sup> The COM review committee reviewed the ASIV Unit's agenda of recommendations for applicants' approval or non-approval and provided their clearances for those agendas. Once the COM committee members cleared the agenda, it was forwarded to the COM designee for the final COM approval or non-approval decision. The review committee was eliminated in August 2021 to improve the efficiency of the SIV process.

<sup>22</sup> OIG, *Review of the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program*, page 15 (AUD-MERO-20-35, June 2020).

staffing level from 8 to 51<sup>23</sup> to decrease COM approval processing time. Although OIG could not conclude that the staff increase resulted in decreasing the processing time, the staff increase allowed the ASIV Unit to process more COM applications, going from processing 776 cases in February 2021 to 2,052 cases in September 2021. An ASIV Unit official stated that ASIV’s goal was to process 400 COM cases a week at the increased staffing level.

However, this staffing increase could not tackle the significant influx of COM approval phase applicants that resulted after NVC reduced the SIV applicant email backlog. Even though the ASIV Unit increased its staffing level during the first 6 months of 2021, it did not increase its staffing level following the significant increase in applicant emails in August 2021. Specifically, the ASIV Unit maintained essentially the same staffing level for more than 15 months between August 2021 and November 2022, despite the significant increase in applications awaiting COM approval. Figure 4 presents the ASIV Unit’s staffing level and the number of COM cases processed (i.e., receiving COM approval or denial) from February 2021 to December 2022. For more information, see Appendix D: “Key Events Relating to Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Processing From 2018 Through 2022.”

**Figure 4: ASIV Unit’s Staffing Levels and COM Cases Processed From February 2021 Through December 2022**



**Source:** OIG generated based on information provided by ASIV Unit officials regarding ASIV Unit’s staffing levels and COM cases processed from February 2021 through December 2022.

When OIG met with ASIV Unit officials, they stated that they knew there would be an increase in applications for COM approval after NVC implemented technological improvements to email processing; however, they stated that they did not expect the magnitude of applications they received. Specifically, NVC’s efforts to reduce the email backlog contributed to an influx of new applications becoming documentarily complete in a short period of time and subsequently being transferred to the ASIV Unit for COM approval.

<sup>23</sup> Staffing levels at the ASIV Unit became an administration focus after Executive Order 14013, which mandated that the Afghan SIV program be administered “without undue delay,” was signed on February 4, 2021.

As of January 2023, an ASIV Unit official stated that to increase processing of COM approval applications the ASIV Unit was attempting to hire 30 temporary duty Foreign Service Officers on Y-tours,<sup>24</sup> 20 eligible family members, and about 55 contractors to increase staff performing employment verifications. The ASIV Unit official added that without the additional staff, processing all current applicants at the COM approval phase would take 3 to 5 years. Furthermore, as of December 2022, 78,525 applicants were at the pre-COM phase with the increased overall interest in the Afghan SIV program. Once these cases become documentarily complete, the backlog of applications waiting for COM approval will grow, potentially increasing processing times and prolonging the completion of the Afghan SIV program. As presented in Figure 4, additional staff allowed the ASIV Unit to process more cases through COM approval; however, without adequate staff levels to review COM applications, the backlog will remain a challenge and likely get worse.

### Related Open Recommendation

In a previous report, OIG recommended that “the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Senior Coordinating Official (SCO)<sup>25</sup> develop and implement an updated staffing plan to adjust resources for all Department offices involved with the Afghan SIV program to reduce the current Afghan SIV application backlog.”<sup>26,27</sup> This recommendation remains open. Therefore, OIG is not making another recommendation on this matter in this report. The Department did not concur with the prior recommendation, stating that it was unclear how updating the staffing plan would mitigate delays to the SIV process, especially in light of circumstances outside the Department’s control, such as the suspension of operations at Embassy Kabul.<sup>28</sup> Notwithstanding the inability to control external developments, such as the suspension of operations in Kabul, an updated staffing plan will help improve the Department’s ability to process applicants and to address the growing backlog of SIV applicants.

### *The Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Unit Coordinated With the Department of Defense in August 2021 To Improve the Applicant Vetting Process*

To improve efficiency of the COM approval process, DoD developed Project Rabbit in August 2021, which allowed DoD officials to match SIV applicants to human resource and employment

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<sup>24</sup> Y-tours, or short tours, are domestic assignments for Foreign Service Officers and Foreign Service Specialists for periods of 4 to 12 months.

<sup>25</sup> The Department is required to designate an SCO to oversee the Afghan SIV program. The Senior Coordinating Official, a position currently held by the Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources, is required to develop proposals to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the Afghan SIV program, coordinate and monitor implementation of those improvements, and include these improvements in their reports to Congress. A new SCO was appointed in April 2023.

<sup>26</sup> OIG, *Compliance Follow-up Review of the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program*, Recommendation 6, page 26 (AUD-MERO-23-01, October 2022).

<sup>27</sup> In 2020, OIG made a similar recommendation to the Department to assess staffing levels at each phase of the SIV process. OIG closed this recommendation in April 2021. OIG, *Review of Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program*, Recommendation 2, page 17, (AUD-MERO-20-35, June 2020).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, page 55.

data provided by DoD contractors. DoD has created an online portal to use as part of the Project Rabbit matching process, to which the Department has access. According to ASIV Unit officials, Project Rabbit has increased the percentage of applicants receiving COM approval.<sup>29</sup> From August 2021 to December 2022, 2,064 cases were approved using Project Rabbit information.

Though Project Rabbit has increased the number of employment verifications used to process SIV applications, the management of the portal moving forward—be it under DoD or the Department—remains unclear. Although Project Rabbit is currently administrated by DoD’s Directorate of Digital Services, DoD officials stated that they intended to transition management of Project Rabbit to the Department. However, OIG found that DoD and the ASIV Unit’s parent entity, the Joint Executive Office for the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs and Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, had not established an official agreement regarding the path forward for Project Rabbit. Further, as reported in OIG’s compliance follow-up review,<sup>30</sup> Department officials expressed concern to OIG that DoD would withdraw resources from Project Rabbit, which is not a formally established DoD responsibility. OIG’s previous report also found that the Department and DoD’s differing outlooks on the future of Project Rabbit demonstrated the need for further coordination between the SIV SCO and DoD leadership.<sup>31</sup> Failure to coordinate and formalize an interagency agreement creates uncertainty surrounding the official roles and responsibilities related to employment verification, ultimately hindering future resource planning and potentially preventing improvements to the Afghan SIV process.

### Related Open Recommendation

In a previous report, OIG recommended that “the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Senior Coordinating Official (SCO), in collaboration with the Department of Defense (DoD) SCO, establish a memorandum of understanding between the Department of State (Department) SCO and the DoD SCO defining the roles and responsibilities of the Department and DoD for efficiently and accurately collecting employment documentation of Afghan SIV applicants who worked for DoD contractors. The Department and DoD SCOs should also meet regularly to address efficient employment verification until the Department resolves the backlog of Afghan SIV applications.”<sup>32</sup> This recommendation remains open. Therefore, OIG is not making another related recommendation in this report. The Department did not concur with OIG’s prior recommendation, stating that the initiation of Project Rabbit involved coordination between the Department and DoD and that Department officials met with DoD officials at least once a month to discuss employment verification issues. However, establishing an agreement or memorandum of understanding would formalize reliable collaboration between the Department and DoD.

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<sup>29</sup> Department officials told OIG that prior to establishing Project Rabbit in August 2021, between 40 and 60 percent of Afghan SIV applicants did not receive COM approval because of a lack of qualifying documents.

<sup>30</sup> AUD-MERO-23-01, October 2022, page 29.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., page 21.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., Recommendation 8, page 30.

### *The Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Unit Streamlined the Approval of Applications*

The ASIV Unit made efforts to streamline the Afghan SIV approval process by eliminating layers of review and approval. Specifically, prior to August 2021, once an application was verified, the ASIV Unit officer would recommend the applicant for COM approval by sending the approved applications to a COM committee, which would gather and approve the applications. On August 19, 2021, the Chargé d’Affaires approved a change to the process that eliminated the COM committee and re-delegated the COM’s authority to AAU’s Deputy Chief of Mission to streamline SIV approvals. According to AAU’s Deputy Chief of Mission, COM committee officials were too busy to review recommendations and eliminating the committee also allowed for a single person to authorize COM review. In addition, in July 2022, ASIV Unit leadership received approval from the Deputy Chief of Mission to delegate authority for COM approval to the Director or the Deputy Director of the ASIV Unit, thereby eliminating another level of review and streamlining COM approval.

### ***The Department and the Department of Homeland Security Eliminated Form I-360, Petition for Qualifying Applicants***



Prior to July 2022, SIV applicants were required to file Form I-360 after an Afghan SIV applicant obtained COM approval.<sup>33</sup> Form I-360 is a petition document through which an applicant requests to be classified as a special immigrant. This petition was processed by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, and generally processed between 19 and 36 days. On July 20, 2022, the Department and the Department of Homeland Security revised the Afghan SIV applicant process by eliminating the I-360 petition phase, aiming to reduce SIV processing time and making the application less burdensome. Therefore, after July 20, 2022, Afghan SIV applicants received petition approval along with their COM approval, as the Department repurposed Form DS-157<sup>34</sup> previously submitted by the applicant as part of the COM approval application, which potentially reduces the application processing time.

### ***The Department Established Remote Operations and Extended Visa Processing Protocols Worldwide***



The Department made key adjustments after the closure of U.S. Embassy Kabul in August 2021 that enabled continual processing of Afghan SIVs by establishing remote diplomatic and consular operations in Doha, Qatar, and allowing applicants to schedule interviews at U.S. consular posts worldwide. Prior to August 2021, visa processing for Afghan SIV applicants was conducted primarily at Embassy Kabul. Following the suspension of operations of Embassy Kabul in August 2021, consular functions were relocated to the AAU at Doha, Qatar.

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<sup>33</sup> Form I-360, Petition for Amerasian, Widow(er), or Special Immigrant, is a form issued by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

<sup>34</sup> Form DS-157, Petition for Special Immigrant Classification for Afghan SIV Applicants.

In February 2022, the Department officially established the AAU as a remote diplomatic mission focused on Afghanistan issues. AAU consular staff have operated remotely from U.S. Army Base, Camp As Sayliyah (CAS), to process Afghan SIV applications, including conducting interviews and issuing visas to applicants who successfully completed all steps of the Afghan SIV process. The creation of the AAU's consular section demonstrated an innovative approach to addressing the unique challenge of processing Afghan SIV applicants, as it is the only consular section worldwide that physically resides outside a diplomatic post.<sup>35</sup> OIG previously reported on the limited staffing of the AAU consular section.<sup>36</sup> However, as of November 2022, the AAU's staffing increased from 2 to 3 full-time staff members and had been supplemented by up to 5 staff members on temporary assignment, as well as by two locally employed visa assistants.

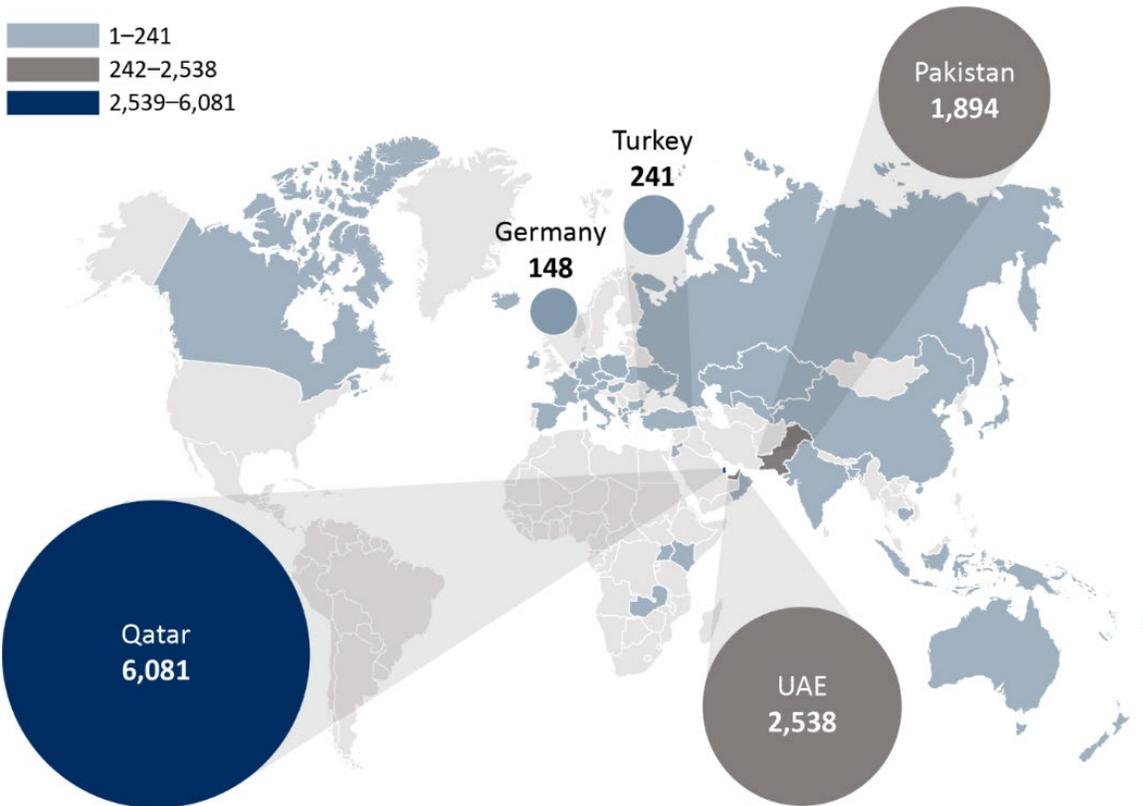
In addition to establishing remote consular operations in Doha, the Department also allowed Afghan SIV applicants to schedule their visa interviews at diplomatic and consular posts worldwide. From October 2021 through November 2022, a total of 11,461 Afghan SIVs were issued from Department missions worldwide. Among many countries from which visas were issued, the vast majority—10,902 visas—were issued from Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, Turkey, and Germany. The remaining 559 visas were issued at 16 other missions worldwide. Figure 5 shows the countries whose posts issued the greatest number of Afghan SIVs from October 2021 through November 2022 and the number of Afghan SIVs issued from those countries.

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<sup>35</sup> The AAU consular staff operate out of U.S. Army Base, CAS, in Doha, Qatar, where SIV applicants arrive from Afghanistan and reside in temporary housing before in-person interviewing, final SIV issuance, and travel to the United States.

<sup>36</sup> AUD-MERO-23-01, page 25.

**Figure 5: Countries With the Most Afghan SIV Issuances From October 2021 Through November 2022**



**Note:** The total Afghan SIV issuances include those issued to principal applicants and family derivatives.

**Source:** Generated by OIG from Afghan SIV issuance data provided by the National Visa Center.

### **Finding B: COVID-19 Caused Delays to Afghan SIV Processing and Increased the Backlog of Applicants**

OIG found that although the COVID-19 pandemic allowed the Department to temporarily increase staffing at the COM approval phase using remote work, COVID-19 stalled the in-person visa application phase of the Afghan SIV process from March 2020<sup>37</sup> to February 2021 and June to July 2021, which created a large backlog of applicants. The pandemic also placed restrictions on Afghan SIV holders attempting to leave Afghanistan before August 15, 2021. Specifically, in January 2021, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) began requiring a negative pre-departure COVID-19 test for all passengers traveling to the United States. To expedite the evacuation from Afghanistan, the Department obtained an exemption from the CDC for Afghan SIV holders, and DoD facilitated the administration and procurement of COVID-19 tests and vaccinations at safe havens such as CAS in Doha during and following the exemption period. After relocating to Doha, AAU staff faced another COVID-19 outbreak in January 2022; however, consular staff divided into two teams, one physically on site for visa processing and the other working remotely, to ensure that staff could be replaced in case they became infected. The CDC

<sup>37</sup> On March 13, 2020, the President declared that the COVID-19 pandemic was a national emergency.

continues to monitor COVID-19 developments at CAS and other safe havens and issues guidance accordingly. For more information, see Appendix D: “Key Events Relating to Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Processing From 2018 Through 2022.”

### ***Impact of COVID-19 on the Afghan SIV Process – March 2020 to Mid-August 2021***

#### *COM Approval Processing Expanded Using Telework*

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department used telework capabilities to increase the number of staff members processing SIV applications at the COM approval phase. To protect its employees, the Department permitted employees at high risk for COVID-19 authorized departure from their overseas posts from March through December 2020. The Department placed 41 of these employees in telework-ready positions, responsible for data entry for SIV applicants, at the ASIV Unit from March 2020 to July 2021.<sup>38</sup> Although these additional staff aided COM approval phase processing, the return of 19 staff to their original posts in August and September 2020 left much of their data entry incomplete. The creation of telework-ready positions between March and July 2021 increased ASIV’s capacity for telework and enabled it to increase staff in 2021, from 8 employees in January 2021 to 49 employees in December 2021. The ASIV Unit currently continues to use telework to maximize staffing and the number of reviews at the COM approval phase.

#### *Suspensions of SIV Applicant Interviews at U.S. Embassy Kabul*

Embassy Kabul suspended all visa services from March 2020 to February 2021 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. For more than a year, the consular section could not interview applicants or issue SIVs, which created a large backlog of Afghan SIV applicants. Embassy Kabul stopped visa services again from June 13 to July 11, 2021, because of a large outbreak of COVID-19 cases within Embassy Kabul, again halting visa interviews and issuance during this period. According to Department data, at the end of June 2021, more than 2,000 Afghan SIV applicants were awaiting visa interviews and issuance.<sup>39</sup>

To reduce the backlog of SIV applicants, which was exacerbated by COVID-19, Embassy Kabul leveraged external and internal resources to interview and issue Afghan SIVs for the short term. Between June and July 2021, while operations were halted, temporary duty consular officers arrived at Embassy Kabul to support future visa processing. The consular section also acquired assistance from Foreign Service Officers with active consular commissions already posted at Embassy Kabul. On July 13, 2021, the visa services restarted with an expanded presence of consular officers. At that time, the embassy followed CDC COVID-19 guidance, including 6-foot social distancing and limited waiting room capacity, which restricted the number of visa interviews the section could complete. According to consular officials at Embassy Kabul during

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<sup>38</sup> Although the Department permitted authorized departures only from March to December 2020, a small number of employees remained teleworking at the ASIV Unit until July 2021.

<sup>39</sup> *Joint Department of State/Department of Homeland Security Report: Status of the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program*, June 2021, page 1, <https://travel.state.gov/content/dam/visas/SIVs/Afghan-Public-Quarterly-Report-Q3-July-2021.pdf>.

this time, the section worked extended hours, up to 18 hours a day, to process as many Afghan SIV applicants as possible. In August 2021, the consular section relaxed the enforcement of certain CDC COVID-19 guidelines to increase interview capacity, including reducing 6-foot social distancing.

***Temporary Exemptions to COVID-19 Test Requirements – Mid-August to September 2021***

OIG also found that the COVID-19 pandemic placed restrictions on Afghan SIV holders attempting to leave Afghanistan before August 15, 2021. Specifically, in January 2021, the CDC began requiring a negative pre-departure COVID-19 test for all passengers traveling to the United States. On August 15, 2021, the Department’s Executive Secretary requested an exemption to the negative pre-departure COVID-19 test requirement for those individuals relocating from Afghanistan to expedite the evacuation. The CDC granted the exemption from August 15, 2021, to September 20, 2021,<sup>40</sup> allowing DoD to procure and facilitate COVID-19 tests and vaccinations at safe havens such as CAS in Doha, Qatar. After the exemption expired, the Department resumed requiring negative pre-departure COVID-19 test results,<sup>41</sup> while DoD administered COVID-19 vaccinations as a part of Afghan SIV medical screenings.

***Impacts of COVID-19 Minimized in Doha – October 2021 to December 2022***

From October 2021 to December 2022, COVID-19’s effect on the SIV process was minimal. In January 2022, the Department mitigated the impact of outbreak of the Omicron variant of COVID-19 on the Doha consular section’s ability to process Afghan SIVs. Specifically, the consular staff was divided into two teams that alternated between working at CAS and a local hotel; thus, if a staff member on one team became infected, the member would have a replacement. In addition, because this outbreak occurred after regular flights stopped arriving from Kabul, COVID-19 did not cause a significant bottleneck in interviews, according to consular officials.

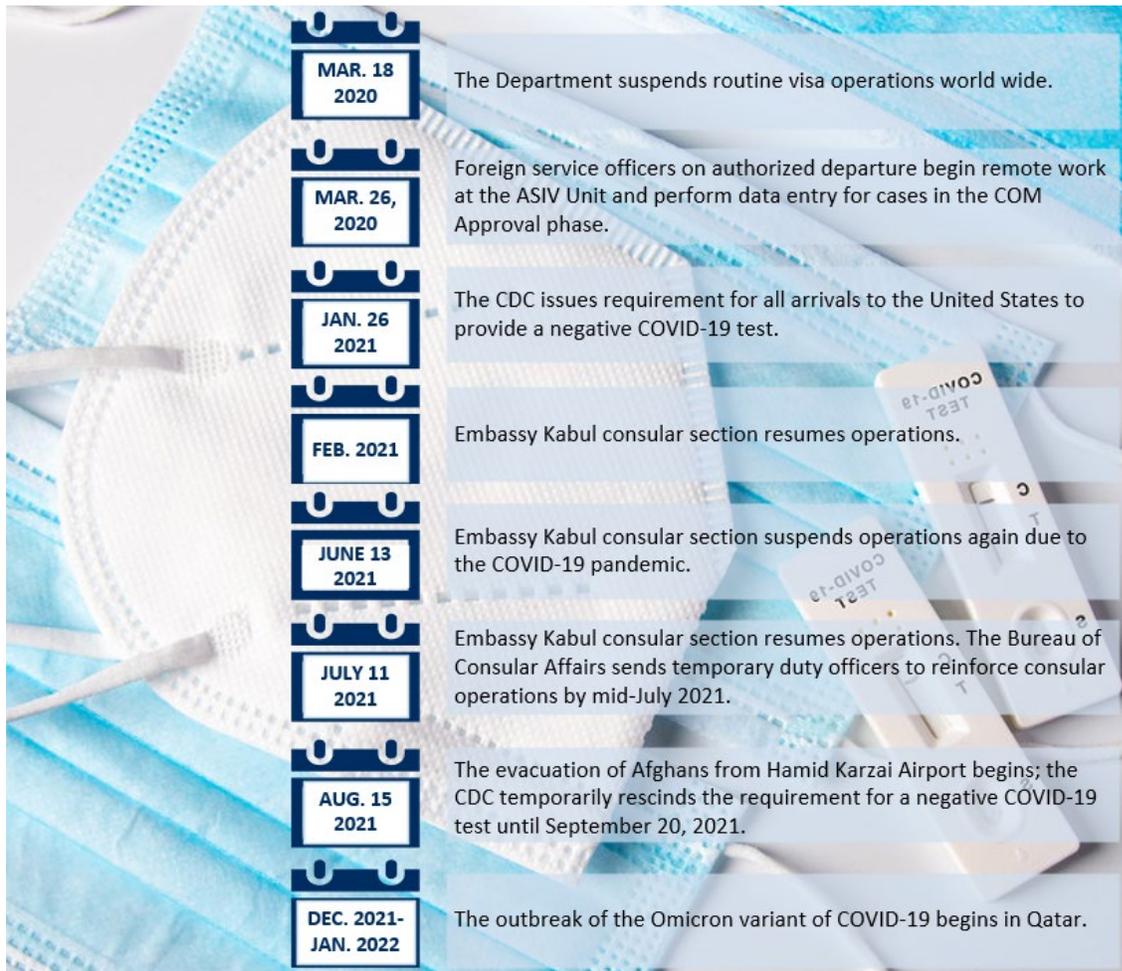
CDC officials monitored COVID-19 and other public health developments at CAS by attending a biweekly interagency call with representatives from the Department, DoD, and the International Organization for Migration. Additionally, the CDC assisted Department representatives with technical inquiries concerning Afghans’ medical examinations at CAS and other locations. The CDC also provided training to physicians administering medical panels. Figure 6 provides an overview of major events that took place in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic and Afghan SIV processing.

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<sup>40</sup> Federal Register, Vol. 86, No. 185, “Rescission of Humanitarian Exemption for All Afghan Evacuees Subject to CDC’s Global Testing Order,” September 28, 2021.

<sup>41</sup> The CDC stopped requiring negative pre-departure COVID-19 tests on June 12, 2022. However, Afghans are still required to test negative before arriving at CAS; they are tested again upon their arrival.

**Figure 6: Timeline of Major COVID-19 Events Impacting Afghan SIV Processing**



**Source:** Generated by OIG based on COVID-19 event information provided by the Department and CDC.

### **Finding C: The Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program Faces Challenges and Would Benefit From a Strategic Performance Management Approach**

OIG found that the Department’s Afghan SIV program faces challenges. First, the Department relies on Taliban cooperation for SIV applicant relocation from the country because of a lack of embassy ground presence in Afghanistan. In addition, the Department has not developed and implemented a strategic performance management approach to resolving the Afghan SIV applicant backlog or to developing methods to further improve the Afghan SIV program. OIG identified an absence of strategic goals regarding the Afghan SIV program, specifically those to mitigate or reduce the growing backlog of SIV applicants. OIG found that a lack of strategic performance management approach exists, in part, because the Department has considered the SIV program a series of individual steps without an overall strategy and because the SCO position, which is intended to oversee and direct the Afghan SIV program, has had periods of vacancy and frequent turnover since 2017. As a result, the Department’s piecemeal approach to mitigate the applicant backlog in one phase of the Afghan SIV program shifted the applicant backlog to a later phase instead of resolving the backlog in its entirety. OIG concluded that

developing and implementing a strategic performance management approach would benefit the Afghan SIV program, help address the SIV applicant backlog, and establish a program infrastructure, should a similar time-sensitive program be needed in the future.

***Reliance on Taliban Cooperation Because of the Lack of Ground Presence Poses Challenges***

The reliance on Taliban cooperation because of the lack of U.S. diplomatic ground presence in Afghanistan impacts the ability for Afghan SIV applicants to exit Afghanistan and arrive at a U.S. diplomatic post for visa processing. Department officials told OIG that one of the biggest challenges to SIV applicants departing Afghanistan is the lack of freedom of movement out of Afghanistan, which is dependent on Taliban cooperation. Freedom of movement refers to Afghans' right to leave Afghanistan and move across its borders. Department Officials told OIG that the Taliban's willingness to approve flights, to allow women to depart Afghanistan alone, to determine the number of aircraft Kabul International Airport can accommodate, and other factors impacted freedom of movement for Afghans. Since the evacuation in August 2021, the Department has encouraged the Taliban, through the Special Representative for Afghanistan, to support the freedom of movement of Afghans, specifically Afghan SIV applicants.

In October 2021, the Department established the Office of the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts (CARE), within the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, to facilitate relocating Afghans, including Afghan SIV applicants.<sup>42</sup> From October 2021 to February 2023, CARE facilitated the relocation of 8,950 SIV applicants from Afghanistan for continued Afghan SIV processing. CARE officials told OIG that as of April 2023, flights with SIV applicants have generally been able to leave Afghanistan; however, all flights are subject to Taliban approval. In addition, according to officials, CARE has taken steps to protect the anonymity of SIV applicants prior to relocation. Nevertheless, the Department estimates that as of April 2023, more than 840,000 principal and derivative SIV applicants remained in Afghanistan.

Although CARE has assisted some SIV applicants, Afghan SIV applicants can independently schedule visa interviews and travel to U.S. embassies outside Afghanistan. However, Afghan SIV applicants making their own travel arrangements are also dependent on Taliban cooperation and freedom of movement to leave Afghanistan. Thus, SIV applicants' eligibility to receive an SIV is based on imminent threat. Applicants seeking to exit the country by their own means are at heightened risk of Taliban retaliation.

***The Department Needs a Strategic Performance Management Approach to Managing the Afghan SIV Program***

A strategic performance management approach to a program or a systematic series of actions or steps to achieve a particular end, such as the Afghan SIV program, includes developing program goals and performance measures to evaluate progress against those targets. The

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<sup>42</sup> Within the Department, CARE facilitates the departure of individuals from Afghanistan to third countries in the Middle East and elsewhere for continued SIV processing. According to officials, CARE utilizes multiple contractors on-the-ground in Afghanistan to process SIV applicants with pre-travel vetting. The contractors also facilitate the applicants' arrival to the airport and air operations.

Department's Program Design and Performance Management Toolkit provides guidance for applying a strategic performance management approach to planning and monitoring programs. This guide states:<sup>43</sup>

Program design details how we plan to achieve the strategic goals for a sector, region or country, and *performance management* enables us to assess the extent to which our efforts are working and why. Steps and tools provided in the Program Design and Performance Management (PD/PM) Toolkit can be applied to new and ongoing State Department programs, projects, and processes across diplomatic engagement, administration, and foreign assistance.

In addition, the guide states that it "will help bureaus, offices, and posts design their activities in a way that effectively advances broader strategic goals, utilizes useful monitoring and evaluation, and enables learning to occur that can inform future decisions."<sup>44</sup> The Department Toolkit states that a program is "[a] set of activities, projects, or processes aimed at achieving a goal or objective that are typically implemented by several parties over a specified period of time."<sup>45</sup> The toolkit also defines a "process" as being a "series of actions or steps taken to achieve a particular end."<sup>46</sup> While these definitions may be similar, OIG maintains that the Afghan SIV program includes the component of having multiple "activities, projects, or processes aimed at achieving a goal or objective that is typically implemented by several parties over a specified period of time." Similarly, the Government Accountability Office *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* state that management should define objectives clearly to enable the identification of risks and define risk tolerances.<sup>47</sup> Defining objectives in specific and measurable terms enables the assessment of performance toward achieving those objectives.

However, the Department has not established a strategic performance management approach to managing the Afghan SIV program or the associated challenges. OIG reviewed documentation that the Department provided in response to reporting requirements in Executive Order 14013<sup>48</sup> in February 2021, which required a "review of the Iraqi and Afghan Special Immigrant (SIV) programs." However, the Department's response did not include program-wide strategic goals and specific measures of success to evaluate progress against those goals. OIG also reviewed documentation showing that the Department is monitoring some SIV process metrics through information memoranda and meetings regarding some aspects of the Afghan SIV program. However, in February 2023, when OIG requested "any documents that convey any types of performance management goals, metrics, or any other strategic planning or monitoring," the Department did not provide evidence that it had

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<sup>43</sup> Department, Program Design and Performance Management Toolkit, page 3.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., page vii.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

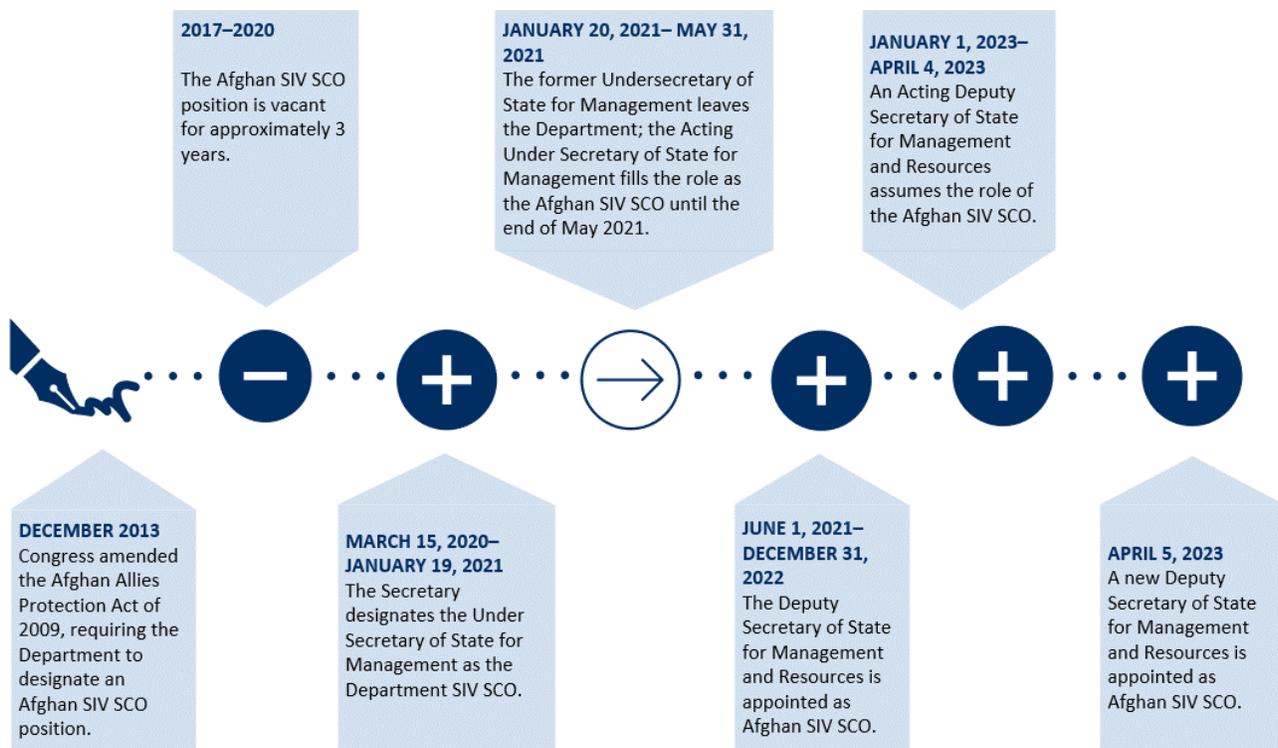
<sup>47</sup> GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, Principle 6, page 35 (GAO-14-704G, September 2014).

<sup>48</sup> Executive Order 14013, *Rebuilding and Enhancing Programs to Resettle Refugees and Planning for the Impact of Climate Change on Migration*, February 4, 2021, at § 3(a).

developed any program-wide goals or specific measures of success to evaluate progress against those goals. For example, the Department does not have specific goals on the number of SIV applications that are issued in any given timeframe or the reduction in the applicant backlog.

OIG found that a lack of a strategic performance management approach exists, in part, because the Department has considered the SIV program to be a series of individual steps rather than a wholistic process and because the SCO position, which is intended to oversee and direct the Afghan SIV program, has had periods of vacancy and frequent turnover since 2017. Figure 7 illustrates the vacancy and turnover of the Afghan SIV SCO from 2017 through April 2023.<sup>49</sup> The Department “considers SIV processing to be a process, not a program” and that the Department controls only “individual parts of the application process.” As a result, the Department’s management of resources and strategic planning for the Afghan SIV program has been decentralized and lacks the strategic performance management approach needed to continuously evaluate it and seek programmatic improvements.

**Figure 7: Timeline of the Position of the Afghan SIV Senior Coordinating Official**



**Source:** Generated by OIG from a Department memorandum designating the position of the SCO and from internal notifications from the Department about leadership changes within the Department.

<sup>49</sup> OIG, *Review of the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program*, page 16 (AUD-MERO-20-35, June 2020). In 2014, Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources was designated the role of SIV Coordinator by name, but the position was vacated in January 2017 and remained vacant until March 15, 2020. OIG asked Department officials why the SIV Coordinator position was vacant during this period, but those officials could not provide an explanation.

A strategic performance management approach is important for the Afghan SIV program because it involves multiple bureaus, units, and embassies operating worldwide, and it requires significant interagency coordination and support.<sup>50</sup> The ASIV Unit and CARE are within the Joint Executive Office for the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs and the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs. The ASIV Unit is responsible for processing applicants through the COM phase, and CARE facilitates applicant relocation in the visa issuance phase. NVC and visa issuance are under the authority of the Bureau of Consular Affairs. In addition, Afghan SIV applicants at the visa issuance stage may choose to obtain their visas from consular sections at embassies worldwide.<sup>51</sup> The interdependency of the bureaus to execute the Afghan SIV program and the need for interagency coordination and support further affirm the need for a strategic performance management approach, including developing program-wide goals and measures, such as reducing the total backlog of Afghan SIV applicants.

### ***Goal Setting To Reduce the Applicant Backlog Will Benefit the Afghan SIV Program***

The importance of setting specific program-wide goals both for reducing the backlog and completing Afghan SIV applicant processing (by issuing or denying the visa, as appropriate)<sup>52</sup> is demonstrated by the fact that the Department faces a significant and growing applicant backlog. According to the Department, as of December 2022, there were 154,899 principal applications in process and an estimated 650,576 additional eligible family members of those principal applicants, for a total of about 805,475 estimated Afghan SIV applicants.<sup>53</sup> The principal applicant backlog has been increasing consistently since at least October 2021, despite the steps the Department has taken to date to mitigate the backlog, including increasing staffing and streamlining the process. The increase in the Department's reported backlog of Afghan SIV applications from October 2021 through December 2022 is shown in Figure 8. In addition, for more information, see Appendix D: "Key Events Relating to Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Processing From 2018 Through 2022."

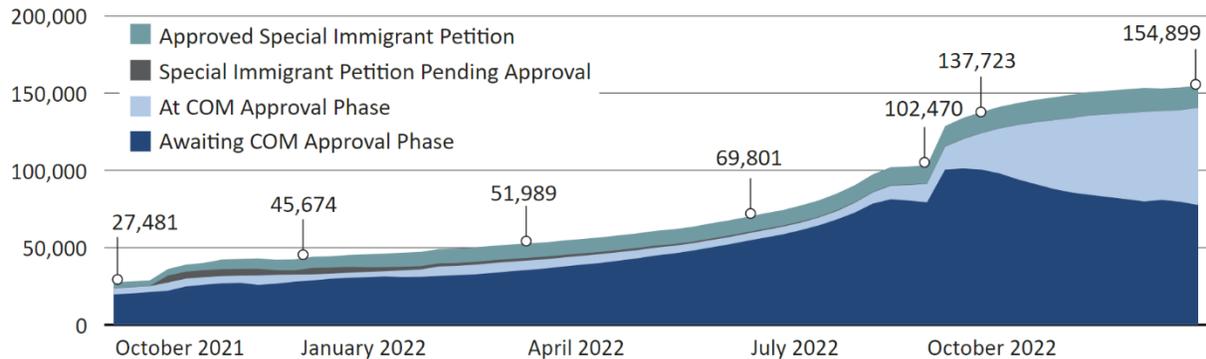
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<sup>50</sup> As discussed previously, the Department regularly coordinates with DoD to verify employment eligibility of Afghan SIV applicants.

<sup>51</sup> See Figure 5: "Countries With the Most Afghan SIV Issuances From October 2021 Through November 2022."

<sup>52</sup> In technical comments to a draft of this report, the Department stated, "[t]he Department's authority to issue SIVs continues until all visa numbers allocated under section 602(b)(3) of the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009, as amended, are used. . . . Per the April 2023 Congressional Quarterly report there are 15,377 Afghan SIV numbers remaining for principal applicants, although this number is reviewed annually by Congress."

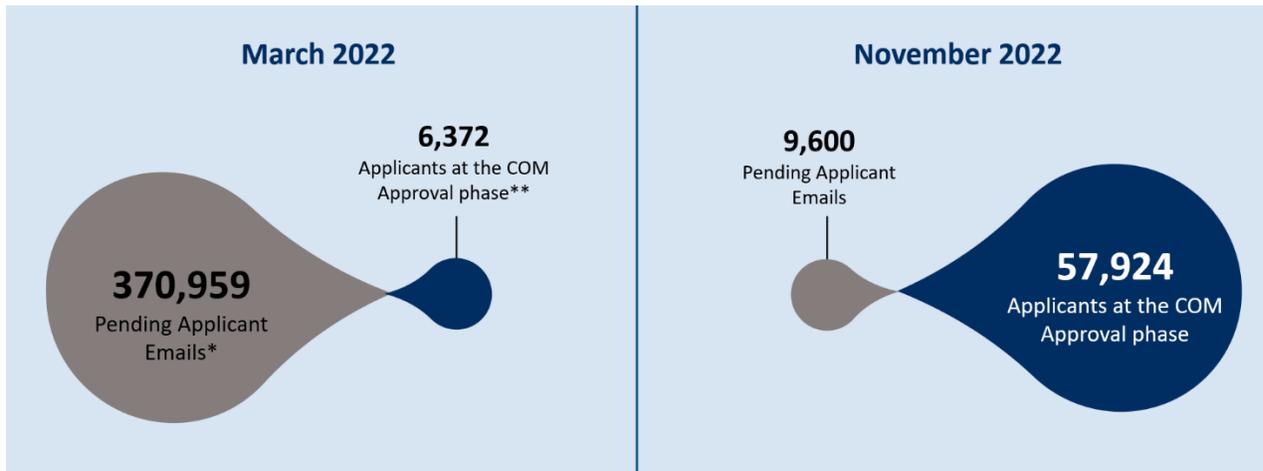
<sup>53</sup> For SIV principal applicants, eligible derivatives include a spouse and children under 21. 8 U.S.C. § 1101 note, "Afghan Allies Protection," § 602(b)(2)(B). Department officials stated that there is an estimated average of 4.2 derivative eligible family members per principal applicant. This is an average of all principal applicants, including single principal applicant individuals and those individuals who apply with multiple derivative applicants (e.g., spouse and children).

**Figure 8: Backlog of Afghan SIV Principal Applications**

**Source:** Generated by OIG from the Department’s Office of Management Strategy and Solutions’ Afghan SIV applicant data provided from October 2021 through December 2022.

OIG acknowledges it was important to expeditiously eliminate the applicant email backlog; however, the Department’s piecemeal approach to mitigating the Afghan SIV applicant backlog in each individual phase of the process only shifted the backlog to a later phase, thus preventing an overall reduction in the applicant backlog. As Figure 8 shows, the overall applicant backlog continued to increase despite some adjustments the Department made to the applicant email backlog. Specifically, as NVC took measures to significantly reduce the email backlog, it resulted in an increase in the number of applicants at the next phase, the COM Approval Phase.<sup>54</sup> Between March 2022 and November 2022, the Department’s efforts reduced the application backlog in one phase; however, in the following phase the ASIV Unit’s backlog increased from 6,372 to 57,924. The swell of 57,924 applicants at the COM Approval Phase in November 2022 was due, in some part, to a continual increase in applicants at large. However, OIG concluded that the swell in the COM Approval Phase was mostly due to the piecemeal success of the Department’s efforts to reduce the email backlog. The reduction of the applicant email backlog and the increase in the COM Approval phase applicant backlog between March and November 2022 are shown in Figure 9.

<sup>54</sup> See Figure 3: “Afghan SIV Applicant Email Backlog at NVC: February 2021 – November 2022.” The peak of the email backlog was over 370,000 in March 2022 and was significantly reduced to 9,600 emails by November 2022.

**Figure 9: Remediation of Afghan SIV Email Backlog Resulted in COM Backlog**

\* NVC processes applicant emails.

\*\* The ASIV Unit processes applicants at the COM approval phase.

**Source:** Generated by OIG from the Department's Office of Management Strategy and Solutions' Afghan SIV applicant data provided from March 2022 through November 2022.

OIG concluded that developing and implementing a strategic performance management approach would improve the Afghan SIV program, help address the SIV applicant backlog, and establish a program infrastructure should a similar time-sensitive consular program be needed in the future. In addition, without program-wide performance measures and targets for the Afghan SIV program, shortcomings of the Afghan SIV program and its associated processes might go undetected without an established method to appropriately assess progress. Without a strategic performance management approach, the Afghan SIV program is at risk of not fulfilling the intent of the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009, which authorized SIVs for Afghans who were "employed by or on behalf of the [U.S.] Government in Afghanistan; . . . provided faithful and valuable service to the [U.S.] Government; . . . [and] experienced or [are] experiencing an ongoing serious threat as a consequence of [their] employment by the [U.S.] Government."<sup>55</sup> Therefore, OIG is offering the following recommendation.

**Recommendation 1:** OIG recommends that the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Senior Coordinating Official, in coordination with the Bureau of Consular Affairs and the Joint Executive Office for the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs and the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, develop and implement a strategic performance management approach to improve the outcomes of the Afghan SIV program, including establishing goals and measures of success to evaluate progress against those established goals.

**Management Response:** The Department concurred with the intent of the recommendation and requested that OIG revise the recommendation to read "the [Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Senior] Coordinating Official, in coordination with the Bureau of

<sup>55</sup> Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009, Public Law 111-8, March 11, 2009, § 602(b)(2)(A), codified at 8 U.S.C. § 1101 note, "Afghan Allies Protection," § 602(b)(2)(A).

Consular Affairs and the Joint Executive Office for the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs and the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, continue to implement procedural changes and allocate resources in service of meeting the Department's Afghan SIV processing goals. The Department should use the efficiency improvements, Chief of Mission (COM) decisions, and visa interview sections included in the quarterly Congressional reports on SIV processing to track progress, referencing the Program Design and Performance Management Toolkit as needed.”

Additionally, Department comments noted that “after reviewing the Program Design and Performance Management Toolkit [mentioned in the finding] ..., the Department maintains that Afghan SIV ... adjudication is a process, not a program. However, the Department is aware of the value in this toolkit and will utilize it as a reference, as needed, while we continue to assess existing [Afghan SIV] processing goals.”

**OIG Reply:** On the basis of the Department’s concurrence with the intent of the recommendation, OIG considers the recommendation resolved, pending further action. OIG considered the Department’s request to revise the recommendation language and made a minor change—removing the reference to “program goals” and replacing it with “goals.” As stated in the finding, OIG concluded that developing and implementing a strategic performance management approach would improve the Afghan SIV program, help address the Afghan SIV applicant backlog, and establish a program infrastructure should a similar time-sensitive consular program or process be needed in the future. Without program-wide performance measures and targets, shortcomings of the Afghan SIV program and its associated processes may go undetected without an established method to appropriately assess progress.

As the Department cited in its response, OIG agrees that the Department’s Program Design and Performance Management Toolkit is valuable guidance for developing and implementing a strategic performance management approach. This recommendation will be closed when OIG receives documentation demonstrating that the Department has taken actions to develop and implement a strategic performance management approach to improve the outcomes of the Afghan SIV program, including establishing process goals and measures of success to evaluate progress against those established goals.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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**Recommendation 1:** OIG recommends that the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Senior Coordinating Official, in coordination with the Bureau of Consular Affairs and the Joint Executive Office for the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs and the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, develop and implement a strategic performance management approach to improve the outcomes of the Afghan SIV program, including establishing goals and measures of success to evaluate progress against those established goals.

## APPENDIX A: PURPOSE, SCOPE, AND METHODOLOGY

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The Department of State (Department), Office of Inspector General (OIG), conducted this evaluation in response to specific congressional questions that fall within the following areas: the Department's efforts to streamline Afghan special immigrant visa (SIV) processing from 2018 through 2022, the impact of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) on the Afghan SIV applicant process, and the future of the Afghan SIV program.

In September and October 2021, several congressional committees requested a comprehensive review of the SIV process in Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> The requests included an examination of several distinct issues related to the Afghan SIV process, such as statistics on application numbers and average processing times, applicant vetting, impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, status and resolution of prior OIG recommendations,<sup>2</sup> and resettlement outcomes. OIG is responding to these requests in a series of reports. This evaluation focused on the Department's attempts to streamline the SIV process, the impact of COVID-19 on the SIV process, and the future of the SIV program. OIG also coordinated its work with Offices of Inspectors General for other agencies conducting reviews involving various aspects of U.S. government activities following the evacuation and suspension of operations at U.S. Embassy Kabul, Afghanistan, through participation in the OIG Afghanistan Project Coordination Group.<sup>3</sup>

OIG conducted this evaluation from November 2022 to July 2023 in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area; Portsmouth, NH; and Doha, Qatar. To assess the Department's attempts to streamline the SIV process, the impact of COVID-19 on the SIV process, and the future of the SIV program, OIG conducted interviews with Department and Department of Defense officials and reviewed documentation provided by the Department and the Centers for Disease Control.

To assess whether attempts to streamline the Afghan SIV process met Department criteria, OIG reviewed relevant legislation, including the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009<sup>4</sup> and the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2014.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, OIG reviewed key elements of the Department's response to COVID-19 that were applicable to this evaluation. Specifically, OIG reviewed and considered the significant events that occurred during the summer of 2021 to ensure that any recommendations offered remained relevant to the Afghan

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix B for the request by the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs and the request by the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

<sup>2</sup> OIG, *Management Assistance Report: Quarterly Reporting on Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program Needs Improvement* (AUD-MERO-20-34, June 2020) and *Review of the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program* (AUD-MERO-20-35, June 2020).

<sup>3</sup> The Department of Defense (DoD) OIG, the Department of Homeland Security OIG, the U.S. Agency for International Development OIG, and the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction were also addressed in the Congressional requests for a comprehensive joint review of the SIV process in Afghanistan.

<sup>4</sup> Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009, Public Law 111-8, March 11, 2009, codified at 8 United States Code (U.S.C.) § 1101 note, "Afghan Allies Protection."

<sup>5</sup> National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2014, Public Law 113-66, December 26, 2013, § 1218 and § 1219.

SIV program following the suspension of operations of Embassy Kabul and the resulting surge in Afghan SIV applications.

OIG conducted interviews with and reviewed documentation and correspondence from the Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources, officials from the Bureau of Consular Affairs, the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Unit, the National Visa Center, the Coordinator for Afghanistan Relocation Efforts, the Afghan Affairs Unit, and U.S. Embassy Doha, Qatar. In addition, OIG interviewed Department of Defense officials and collected documentation from the Centers for Disease Control. OIG also visited U.S. Army Base, Camp As Sayliyah, in Doha, Qatar, where OIG personnel conducted interviews with AAU consular staff.

This report relates to Overseas Contingency Operations Enduring Freedom and Enduring Sentinel and was completed in accordance with OIG's oversight responsibilities described in the Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended.<sup>6,7</sup> OIG conducted this evaluation in accordance with the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency's *Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation*, December 2020. These standards require that OIG plan and perform the evaluation to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for the findings and conclusions based on the evaluation objective. OIG believes that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for the findings and conclusions presented in this report.

## **Data Reliability**

OIG verified and corroborated information through interviews, email correspondence, and data gathering. For example, as part of this review, OIG met with Department officials more than 28 times to discuss information related to Afghan SIV processing. In addition, OIG made data requests to various entities, including the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Unit, the National Visa Center, the Coordinator for Afghanistan Relocation Efforts, and the office of the Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources. OIG found that the data provided by the Department were reliable for the purposes of this report.

## **Work Related to Internal Control**

During this evaluation, OIG considered a number of factors, including the subject matter of the project, to determine whether internal control was significant to the objective. Based on this consideration, OIG determined that internal control was significant for this review. OIG then

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<sup>6</sup> 5 U.S.C. § 419, "Special provisions concerning overseas contingency operations."

<sup>7</sup> On October 1, 2021, DoD terminated the Operation Freedom Sentinel mission and initiated Operation Enduring Sentinel, a new mission to protect U.S. national interests by disrupting violent extremist organizations and their external operations that threaten the U.S. homeland, partners, and allies from Afghanistan. The Operation Freedom Sentinel mission began in January 2015, when the United States joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization-led Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan to develop the capacity of Afghan security ministries and to train, advise, and assist the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces. This evaluation is about the Department's implementation of the Afghan SIV program, a long-standing effort to support Afghan nationals who have assisted the U.S. government in the fight against terrorism since 2001.

considered the components of internal control and the underlying principles included in the *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*<sup>8</sup> to identify internal controls that were significant to the evaluation’s objective. Considering internal control in the context of a comprehensive internal control framework can help determine whether underlying internal control deficiencies exist.

For this evaluation, OIG concluded that one of five internal control components from the *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, Risk Assessment, was significant to the evaluation’s objective. The Risk Assessment component includes clearly defining objectives and developing risk responses. OIG also concluded that one of the principles related to the selected component was significant to the evaluation’s objective, as described in Table A.1.

**Table A.1: Internal Control Components and Principles Identified as Significant**

Components	Principles
Risk Assessment	Principle 6: Management should define objectives clearly to enable the identification of risks and define risk tolerances

**Source:** Generated by OIG from an analysis of internal control components and principles from the Government Accountability Office, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* (GAO-14-704G, September 2014).

OIG then reviewed documents and conducted interviews to obtain an understanding of the internal controls related to the components and principles identified as significant for this evaluation. OIG performed procedures to assess the operating effectiveness of key internal controls. Specifically, OIG did the following:

- Reviewed Afghan SIV pipeline reports and quarterly reports to understand changes and improvements to the SIV process over time.
- Reviewed documentation and correspondence provided by the Department to determine what steps were taken to improve the Afghan SIV process and to determine whether the Department was in compliance with federal and Department requirements.
- Interviewed Department officials concerning the objectives of the Afghan SIV program and relevant benchmarks.
- Interviewed Department officials to understand whether and how they established a strategy to accomplish the goals of the Afghan SIV program.
- Interviewed the Senior Coordinating Official of the Afghan SIV process to understand the extent to which leadership defined objectives for the SIV program.

Internal control deficiencies identified during the evaluation that are significant within the context of the evaluation’s objective are presented in the Results section of this report.

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<sup>8</sup> Government Accountability Office, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* (GAO-14-704G, September 2014).

## **Prior Office of Inspector General Reports**

In its report *Relocation and Resettlement Outcomes of Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Holders* (AUD-MERO-23-21, June 2023), OIG reported refugee resettlement outcomes for Afghan SIVs. This information report addressed specific congressional questions involving the resettlement of Afghan SIV holders under the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, including (1) the efforts to develop contingency plans for the safe evacuation of SIV holders from Afghanistan prior to August 31, 2021; (2) the number of SIV holders remaining in Afghanistan after August 31, 2021; (3) the resettlement outcomes for SIV holders compared with the outcomes for other participants in the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program; and (4) the number of SIV holders becoming naturalized U.S. citizens.

In its report *Compliance Follow-up Review of Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program* (AUD-MERO-23-01, October 2022), OIG reported on Department compliance activities related to findings and recommendations from previous reviews of the Afghan SIV program. Specifically, in June 2020, OIG reported that the Bureau of Consular Affairs' method for collecting, verifying, and reporting Afghan SIV application processing times was inconsistent and potentially flawed. In addition, OIG reported that the Department lacked a centralized database to document the identity of Afghan SIV applicants and relied on multiple interoperable IT systems. OIG offered nine new recommendations to the Department aimed at further improving the Afghan SIV program and processes. As of June 2023, one recommendation had been implemented and closed, while eight recommendations remained open and were considered resolved, pending further action.

In its report *Information Report: Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program Metrics* (AUD-MERO-22-38, September 2022), OIG provided a detailed description of the Afghan SIV application process. In addition, OIG reported that from 2009 through 2021, the Department received 59,977 Afghan SIV applications, from which it subsequently issued 22,085 SIVs and denied 28,821. At that time, the Department was reviewing up to 9,071 applications. From President Biden's announcement of the U.S. troop withdrawal through the eventual evacuation and suspension of operations at Embassy Kabul (i.e., from April 2021 through August 2021), the Department issued 1,754 SIVs. In addition, as of May 31, 2022, 15,678 Afghan SIV applications were in process: 4,975 were in the COM approval phase, 1,095 were in the I-360 petition phase,<sup>9</sup> and 9,608 were in the visa application phase. OIG was unable to determine the overall average processing time of the 22,085 issued SIVs because a key data element necessary to calculate processing time for the COM approval phase was not sufficiently reliable. However, from 2017 through 2020, the visa application processing time exceeded 9 months and declined to 5.5 months in 2021. OIG did not offer recommendations in the information report.

In its report *Management Assistance Report: Quarterly Reporting on Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program Needs Improvement* (AUD-MERO-20-34, June 2020), OIG reported that the Department's method for collecting, verifying, and reporting the average processing times for

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<sup>9</sup> Starting on July 20, 2022, new applicants no longer needed to file Form I-360 with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

SIV applications was inconsistent and potentially flawed. The entities responsible for calculating and reporting these processing times used different methodologies, which sometimes failed to capture all application processing times. Without accurate processing time reporting, the quarterly reports did not reflect the state of the SIV program and limited both the Department's and Congress' ability to make informed decisions about the program. OIG offered the Bureau of Consular Affairs three recommendations that sought to improve the accuracy of quarterly reporting, all of which had been implemented and closed as of April 2021.

In its report *Review of the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program* (AUD-MERO-20-35, June 2020), OIG reported on factors that negatively impacted the Department's ability to implement the Afghan SIV program in response to a request from Congress to review the program. Specifically, staffing levels across program offices were not sufficient to reduce the applicant backlog, and the lack of interoperability between technological systems caused delays in processing applicants. Applicants experienced long processing times in receiving COM approval and in post-visa interview administrative processing. OIG attributed delays in SIV processing, in part, to the absence of an appointed SIV Senior Coordinating Official, who is authorized to direct the management of the SIV program and respond to deficiencies in SIV processing. OIG offered six recommendations to the Department aimed at improving the Department's processing of SIV applications, all of which had been implemented and closed as of October 2022.

## APPENDIX B: CONGRESSIONAL REQUEST LETTERS

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**AMI BERA, M.D.**  
7<sup>TH</sup> DISTRICT, CALIFORNIA

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS:  
SUBCOMMITTEES:  
CHAIRMAN, ASIA, THE PACIFIC, CENTRAL ASIA,  
AND NONPROLIFERATION

AFRICA, GLOBAL HEALTH, AND GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS

COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, SPACE, AND  
TECHNOLOGY:  
SUBCOMMITTEES:  
SPACE  
INVESTIGATIONS AND OVERSIGHT



Congress of the United States  
House of Representatives

September 30, 2021

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[HTTPS://BERA.HOUSE.GOV](https://bera.house.gov)  
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Diana Shaw  
Acting Inspector General  
U.S. Department of State  
Office of Inspector General  
SA-39, 1700 North Moore Street  
Arlington, VA 22209

Sean O'Donnell  
Acting Inspector General  
U.S. Department of Defense  
Office of Inspector General  
4800 Mark Center Drive  
Alexandria, VA 22350

Thomas J. Ullom  
Acting Inspector General  
U.S. Agency for International Development  
Office of Inspector General  
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20523

John F. Sopko  
Special Inspector General  
Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction  
2530 Crystal Drive  
Arlington, VA 22202

Dear Acting Inspector General Shaw, Acting Inspector General O'Donnell, Acting Inspector General Ullom, and Special Inspector General Sopko,

I request the U.S. Department of State Office of Inspector General (State OIG), U.S. Department of Defense Office of Inspector General (DOD OIG), U.S. Agency for International Development Office of Inspector General (USAID OIG), and Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) conduct a comprehensive joint audit of the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) process in Afghanistan.

The Afghan SIV program was enacted through the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009 to provide a lifesaving path to resettlement for Afghan nationals who have assisted U.S. military and government officials. Although the law requires SIV applications to be processed within nine months, the program has been plagued by backlogs leading to processing times that can last over three years. These delays put our Afghan allies at an increased risk of facing violent retribution by the Taliban.

As Congress conducts oversight on U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, it is critical that we examine the execution of the SIV program, and ways in which the program can be streamlined. Therefore, I am interested in the IG community's past and future oversight of the SIV program to identify where the United States succeeded, fell short, and must improve to protect our allies.

The IG community should thoroughly examine individual department and interagency processes and practices pertaining to the Afghan SIV process. I request all responses be provided in an unclassified form, to the extent possible, with a classified annex where necessary. At a minimum, the review should include:

- 1) the numbers of SIV applications received, approved, and denied, by year, since enactment of The Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009;
- 2) the average time taken to process an application from the date of submission until final disposition;
- 3) the degree to which the Department of State implemented recommendations made by the Department of State Office of Inspector General in its June 2020 reports on Review of the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program (AUD-MERO-20-35) and Management Assistance Report: Quarterly Reporting on Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program Needs Improvement (AUD-MERO-20-34);
  - a) the success implementation of report recommendations had in addressing barriers in the SIV program;
- 4) what changes, if any, the Department of State made in vetting SIV applicants since the establishment of Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation (SRAR) in 2018;
- 5) the extent to which the Department of State adjusted practices and procedures to vet applicants at any point following the February 2020 Doha Agreement with the Taliban;
- 6) the impact of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) on the Afghan SIV process, if any, and adjustments the Department of State made to account for COVID-19 impacts;
- 7) to the extent practicable, the current location and status of all SIV applicants; where not possible, a description of the approximate number of applicants;
- 8) the resettlement outcomes for SIV recipients as compared to U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP);
  - a) factors to be examined should include location of resettlement, school enrollment, employment status, and housing placement during the Reception and Placement (R&P) program, as well as the number of recipients who become naturalized U.S. citizens;
- 9) recommendations to strengthen and streamline the SIV process;

- 10) the lessons learned on best practices for SIV programs in countries with ongoing U.S. military involvement; and
- 11) any additional points of interest deemed necessary by the IG community.

I request that all agencies utilize existing audits while compiling the report to avoid duplicative efforts. Thank you for your attention to this important matter and consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ami Bera". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Ami" and last name "Bera" clearly distinguishable.

Ami Bera, M.D.  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific,  
Central Asia, and Nonproliferation

**United States Senate**  
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 21, 2021

The Honorable Diana Shaw  
Acting Inspector General  
U.S. Department of State  
Office of Inspector General  
SA-39, 1700 North Moore Street Arlington, VA 22209

The Honorable Sean O'Donnell  
Acting Inspector General  
U.S. Department of Defense  
Office of Inspector General  
4800 Mark Center Drive Alexandria, VA 22350

The Honorable Joseph Cuffari  
Inspector General  
U.S. Department of Homeland Security  
Office of Inspector General  
3801 Nebraska Ave N.W., Washington, DC 20016

The Honorable Thomas Ullom  
Acting Inspector General  
U.S. Agency for International Development  
Office of Inspector General  
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue N.W. Washington, DC 20523

Dear Ms. Shaw, Mr. O'Donnell, Mr. Cuffari, and Mr. Ullom:

We write to request the U.S. Department of State Office of Inspector General, U.S. Department of Defense Office of Inspector General, U.S. Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General, and the U.S. Agency for International Development Office of Inspector General launch a comprehensive joint review and audit of the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program. While we appreciate the U.S. Department of State Office of Inspector General's commitment to carry out a review of the SIV program, we feel any audit must be comprehensive in scope and consider the role of other key agencies, notably the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Defense.

For the past 20 years, the U.S. mission in Afghanistan has relied heavily on brave Afghans who put their lives on the line and knowingly risked Taliban retribution to serve our soldiers and diplomats. Without their support, our mission would not have been possible. Now, in the aftermath of the chaotic and haphazard U.S. withdrawal, in which thousands of SIV applicants were

The Honorable Diana Shaw  
The Honorable Sean O'Donnell  
The Honorable Joseph Cuffari  
The Honorable Thomas Ullom  
October 21, 2021  
Page 2

shamefully left behind, these same Afghans are at grave risk, vulnerable to retaliation from the Taliban due to their association with the United States.

Under the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009, the SIV program was expanded to grant Afghan interpreters, translators, and others access to U.S. visas in cases of imminent risk. In an effort to safeguard the security of our partners on the ground, the law mandates a maximum nine-month processing window for each principal applicant. However, the Afghan SIV program, much like its Iraqi counterpart, has long been plagued by lengthy processing delays. It is estimated that the resource intensive 14-step, inter-agency, process takes an average three and half years to complete, resulting in a backlog of well over 20,000 principle applicants before the U.S. military withdrawal on August 31, 2021. Since then, the number of credible threats against our partners and their families in Afghanistan continues to increase by the day, as the Taliban continues to solidify its violent grip over the country.

The United States pledged to support those who served our mission in Afghanistan. This is vital if we are to uphold our commitment to those who helped defend core U.S. national security interests. Failing to do so would lead allies and adversaries alike to call into question our reliability and credibility as a partner in future conflicts.

This investigation should thoroughly review each individual executive department that holds responsibilities in the SIV process, as well as their respective bureaus, offices, and missions, and the interagency processes in place to help facilitate communication and coordination between them. We request all responses be provided in an unclassified form, to the extent possible, with a classified annex where necessary. At a minimum, the review should include:

- 1) A detailed step-by-step description of the SIV process together with the number of days allotted by the U.S. government for the completion of each step;
- 2) The numbers of SIV applications received, approved, and denied, by year, since enactment of the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009;
- 3) The specific number of applications approved between April 2021 and August 2021;
- 4) An assessment of the average length of time required to process an SIV application from the date of submission to final disposition;
- 5) An accounting of how many SIV applicants remain in the pipeline;

The Honorable Diana Shaw  
The Honorable Sean O'Donnell  
The Honorable Joseph Cuffari  
The Honorable Thomas Ullom  
October 21, 2021  
Page 3

6) The extent to each participating department or agency of the U.S. government, including the Department of State and the Department of Homeland Security, adjusted SIV processing practices and procedures to vet applicants and expand processing capacity since the February 29, 2020, Doha Agreement between the United States and the Taliban;

7) A list of the specific steps, if any, taken between January 20, 2021 and August 31, 2021, to streamline Afghan SIV applicant processing and address longstanding bureaucratic hurdles, while improving security protocols;

8) An assessment of the continuing viability of the current SIV process in light of the recent Taliban takeover;

9) Recommendations to strengthen and streamline the SIV process going forward, in light of the Taliban takeover, particularly with respect to the timeline for granting Chief of Mission approval;

10) Factors under consideration with respect to efforts to relocate processing capabilities away from Kabul, including obstacles, barriers, and limitations to doing so;

11) The degree to which the Department of State implemented recommendations made by the Department of State Office of Inspector General in its June 2020 reports on Review of the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program (AUD-MERO-20-35) and Management Assistance Report: Quarterly Reporting on Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program Needs Improvement (AUD-MERO-20-34);

12) An assessment of the extent to which challenges in verifying applicants' employment with the Department of Defense contributed to delays in the SIV process, and an accounting of the specific steps taken since February 29, 2020 to address issues surrounding employment verification;

13) An assessment of efforts to develop contingency plans for the safe evacuation of SIV holders from Afghanistan to the United States before August 31, 2021, and an accounting of the number of SIV holders remaining in Afghanistan after August 31, 2021;

14) The resettlement outcomes for SIV recipients as compared to like outcomes for participants in the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. Among the outcomes to be assessed are: location of resettlement, school enrollment, employment status, and housing placement during the Reception and Placement phases of each program, as well as the number of participants who became naturalized U.S. citizens;

The Honorable Diana Shaw  
The Honorable Sean O'Donnell  
The Honorable Joseph Cuffari  
The Honorable Thomas Ullom

October 21, 2021

Page 4

15) The lessons learned from the Afghan SIV program that could be applied to enhance SIV programs in other countries with ongoing U.S. military involvement; and

16) Any additional matters deemed appropriate by the participating Inspectors General.

As you carry out your investigation, we request that you draw on past audits, investigations, assessments, and other relevant oversight documents from across the inter-agency to inform the direction of your work. I request that the completed report of your review and audit be provided to the Ranking Members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senate Armed Services Committee, and Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee in an unclassified form, to the extent possible, with a classified annex as necessary.

Sincerely,



JAMES E. RISCH  
Ranking Member  
Senate Foreign Relations Committee



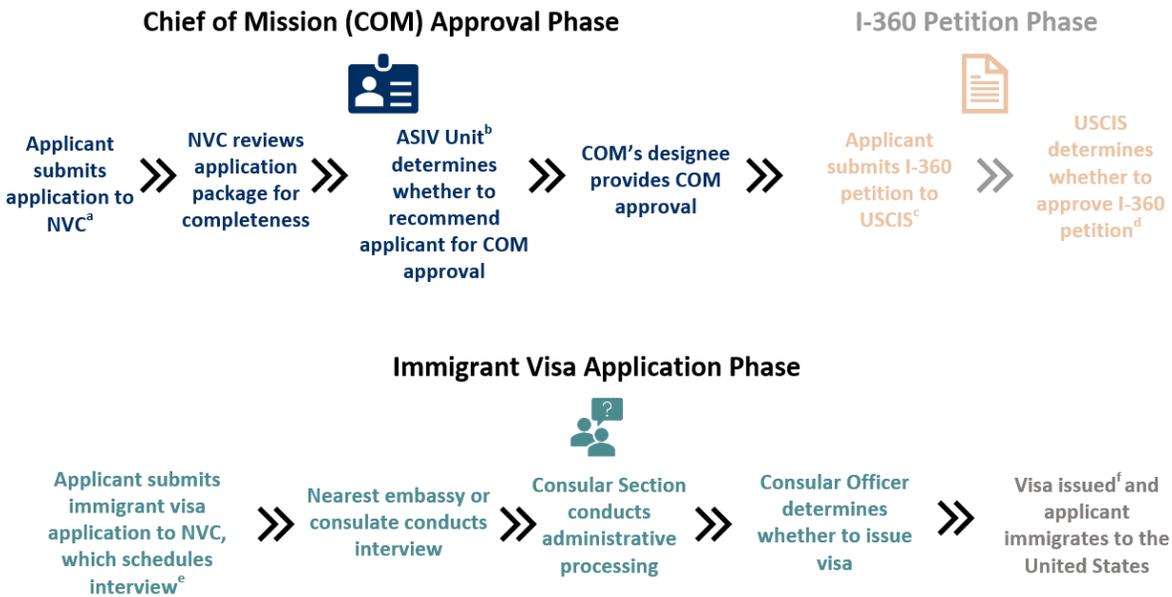
JAMES M. INHOFE  
Ranking Member  
Senate Armed Services Committee



ROB PORTMAN  
Ranking Member  
Senate Homeland Security and  
Governmental Affairs Committee

## APPENDIX C: AFGHAN SPECIAL IMMIGRANT VISA APPLICATION PROCESS

Figure C.1: Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Application Process



<sup>a</sup> National Visa Center (NVC)

<sup>b</sup> Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program (ASIV Unit)

<sup>c</sup> Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)

<sup>d</sup> The Department and the Department of Homeland Security agreed to remove the required Form I-360 from the SIV application process on July 20, 2022, which eliminated this step for most applicants. Instead, the Department will process Form DS-157 both for COM approval and as a special immigrant petition.

<sup>e</sup> Since the suspension of operations at Embassy Kabul in August 2021, NVC does not automatically proceed with scheduling the interview until the applicant informs NVC to which processing post the applicant is able to travel and appear for an interview.

<sup>f</sup> An SIV application can be denied at any point in the SIV process.

**Source:** Generated by the Office of Inspector General based on information obtained from congressional legislation, including the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009, as amended, authorizing the Afghan SIV program, and from information obtained from interviews with Department of State (Department) and USCIS officials and information on the Department flow charts depicting the SIV review process.

## APPENDIX D: KEY EVENTS RELATING TO AFGHAN SPECIAL IMMIGRANT VISA PROCESSING FROM 2018 THROUGH 2022

KEY	
	Changes in the position of the Afghan Senior Coordinating Official
	New or amended legislation or executive orders
	Events related to COVID-19 pandemic
	OIG report published

### 2018

 **SEPTEMBER 21** - The Department of State (Department) appoints the Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation to advance U.S. interests related to Afghanistan.

### 2019

**OCTOBER** - As previously reported in Office of Inspector General (OIG) report *Review of the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program* (AUD-MERO-20-35), 12 of 37 positions (approximately 30 percent) of Embassy Kabul’s Consular Section were vacant, and during a 2019 staff reduction, the number of Consular Officers was reduced from 5 to 3.

**OCTOBER–NOVEMBER** - As previously reported in AUD-MERO-20-35, the Department took steps to reduce the number of required forms for Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) from five to three. Form DS-237, Statement of Marriageable Age Applicant, was discontinued in October 2019, and Form DS-1810, Notice of Duty to Register with U.S. Selective Service System, was discontinued in November 2019.

 **DECEMBER 20** - Congress passed the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020 (NDAA) directing the OIG to issue a report that evaluates and offers improvements to eight obstacles to effective protection of Afghan and Iraqi allies through the SIV program and provides suggestions for improvements in future programs. In addition, the NDAA removed a requirement for SIV applicants “to perform sensitive and trusted activities for the United States Government in Afghanistan.”

### 2020

 **FEBRUARY 29** - The United States and the Taliban sign the Doha Agreement for the United

States’ withdrawal from Afghanistan.

 **MARCH** - The Undersecretary for Management is appointed as Afghan SIV Senior Coordinating Official.

 **MARCH 13** - President Trump declares the coronavirus-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic a national emergency.

 **MARCH 18** - U.S. Embassy Kabul suspends consular operations and visa interviews because of COVID-19.

 **MARCH 26** - Foreign Service Officers worldwide begin assisting the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (ASIV) Unit in Chief of Mission (COM) processing after the Undersecretary for Management grants them authorized departure due to COVID-19.

 **JUNE** - OIG issues the report *Management Assistance Report: Quarterly Reporting on Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program Needs Improvement* (AUD-MERO-20-34), which reported that the Department’s method for collecting, verifying, and

reporting the average processing times for SIV applications was inconsistent and potentially flawed. OIG offered the Bureau of Consular Affairs three recommendations that sought to improve the accuracy of quarterly reporting, all of which had been implemented and closed as of April 2021.

 **JUNE** - OIG issues report AUD-MERO-20-35, which reported on factors that negatively impacted the Department’s ability to implement the Afghan SIV program. OIG offered six recommendations to the Department aimed at improving the Department’s processing of SIV applications, all of which had been implemented and closed as of October 2022.

## 2021

**FEBRUARY** - U.S. Embassy Kabul resumes consular operations after an 11-month suspension of operations that was due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**FEBRUARY** - The ASIV Unit increases its staff members from 8 to 51 between February and September 2021 to support the expected increase in SIV applications.



**FEBRUARY 4** - President Biden issues Executive Order 14013, Rebuilding and Enhancing Programs to Resettle Refugees and Planning for the Impact of Climate Change on Migration, which stated that the federal government must execute the Afghan SIV program “without undue delay” and directed a Secretarial-level review and report to the President on the SIV program within 180 days.

**APRIL 14** - President Biden announces withdrawal of all U.S. military from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021.



**JUNE 1** - The Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources is appointed as Afghan SIV Senior Coordinating Official.

**JUNE 13** - U.S. Embassy Kabul suspends consular operations that again was due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**APRIL 1–JUNE 30** - Embassy Kabul Consular Section increases staff and capacity for Afghan SIV interviews.

### JULY-AUGUST 2021

EVENTS IMMEDIATELY PRIOR TO AND DURING THE EVACUATION FROM HAMID KARZI AIRPORT

**JULY** – The National Visa Center (NVC) increases staff processing Afghan SIV applications from 9 to 63 to

address the increase in applicant emails.

**JULY 8** - President Biden announces that the U.S. military mission to Afghanistan will end on August 31, 2021.



**JULY 11** - Embassy Kabul consular section resumes operations after COVID-19 closure. The Bureau of Consular Affairs sends temporary duty officers to reinforce consular operations by mid-July 2021.

**JULY 15** - The Acting Under Secretary of State for Management and Executive Secretary jointly established a task force to work in tandem with the Afghanistan Coordination Task Force and facilitate the movement of Afghan SIV holders in Afghanistan, along with their family members, via charter flights from Kabul to the United States.

**JULY 21** - Embassy Kabul established the Kabul Relocation Task Force to work in coordination with the Afghanistan Coordination Task Force and facilitate the movement of Afghan SIV holders in Afghanistan, along with their family members, via charter flights from Kabul to the United States.



**JULY 30** - The Emergency Security Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2021, Public Law 117-31, amended the eligibility requirements for the Afghan SIV program by reducing the minimum service requirement for applicants from 2 years to 1 year between October 7, 2001, and December 31, 2023.

**AUGUST** - The Department coordinates with the Department of Defense to implement Project Rabbit to facilitate employee verification within the COM approval phase.

**AUGUST 6** - The Taliban capture their first provincial capital.

**AUGUST 15** - The Taliban enter Kabul. Embassy Kabul transfers operations to Hamid-Karzai Airport; evacuation of Afghans from Hamid-Karzai Airport begins.

**AUGUST 19** - The ASIV Unit received approval to eliminate the COM Committee to streamline COM approvals.

**AUGUST 19–OCTOBER 27** - Mission Brazil is enlisted to assist NVC with reviewing applicant emails.

**AUGUST 30** - The final U.S. evacuation flight leaves Hamid-Karzai Airport. The U.S. military and international partners evacuated more than 124,000 U.S., allied, and Afghan personnel, although some U.S. citizens and most eligible Afghans are left behind.

**AUGUST 31** - Embassy Kabul announces it has suspended operations in-country and will support remaining U.S. citizens in Afghanistan remotely from Doha, Qatar.

**+** **OCTOBER 12** - The Afghanistan Coordination Task Force becomes the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts.

**+** **OCTOBER 20** - The Special Representative to Afghanistan is appointed to advance U.S. interests related to Afghanistan, including safe passage for U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents, and Afghan allies and their eligible family members for humanitarian groups.

## 2022

 **DECEMBER 2021–JANUARY 2022** - An outbreak of COVID-19 in Doha, Qatar, caused consular staff to divide into two teams with

minimal impact on Afghan SIV processing.

**FEBRUARY 26** - The Department established the Afghan Affairs Unit as a remote mission to Afghanistan in Doha, Qatar.

**MARCH 8** - The backlog of Afghan SIV applicant emails peaks at 370,959.

**MARCH 9** - NVC deploys a new case management system that allows processors to review all emails from a specific contact, facilitating the review of an Afghan SIV application.

**JULY** - The ASIV Unit Director and the Assistant Director are delegated the authority to make COM approvals and denials.

**JULY 20** - The Department and the Department of Homeland Security eliminate Form I-360 for most applicants.

**AUGUST 23** - The Afghan SIV pipeline of principal applicants (which does not include family derivatives) exceeds 100,000 applicants.

**SEPTEMBER** - The NVC increases staff processing Afghan SIV applications to 214 using staff from the Kentucky Consular Center and its contractor's headquarters in Herndon, Virginia.

 **SEPTEMBER** - OIG issues the report *Information Report: Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program Metrics* (AUD-MERO-22-38), which assesses Afghan SIV metrics. The report does not offer recommendations.

 **OCTOBER** - OIG issues the report *Compliance Follow-Up Review of the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program* (AUD-MERO-23-01), which reported that the Department made minor improvements to the Afghan SIV quarterly reporting process, that the SIV program faced a significant applicant backlog, and that the Senior Coordinating Official was not sufficiently monitoring improvements to the Afghan SIV program. OIG offered nine recommendations to improve the Afghan SIV program, one of which had been closed and implemented.

**OCTOBER** - NVC reduced the email backlog and was able to review incoming emails within 10 business days.

**DECEMBER 23** - Congress passes James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2023, which requires the Inspector General of the Department of Homeland Security, jointly with the Inspector General of the Department and in coordination with the Inspector

General of the Department of Defense and any appropriate Inspector General, to conduct a thorough review of the efforts to support and process Afghan evacuees resettling in the United States and the Afghanistan SIV program.

 **DECEMBER 31** - The Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources retires.

## APPENDIX E: DEPUTY SECRETARY OF STATE FOR MANAGEMENT AND RESOURCES' RESPONSE

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United States Department of State

Washington, DC 20520

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August 4, 2023

### Memorandum

TO:            OIG Director – Diana Shaw

FROM:         D-MR – Richard R. Verma

SUBJECT:      Response to Evaluation of Adjustments to the Afghan Special  
Immigrant Visa Program From 2018 Through 2022

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Office of the Inspector General's (OIG) Evaluation of Adjustments to the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program From 2018 Through 2022.

After thoughtful consideration of the OIG's recommendation, we have the following response:

**Recommendation:** OIG recommends that the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Senior Coordinating Official, in coordination with the Bureau of Consular Affairs and the Joint Executive Office for the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs and Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, develop and implement a strategic performance management approach to improve the outcomes of the Afghan SIV program, including establishing program goals and measures of success to evaluate progress against those established goals.

**Management Response (July 29, 2023):** The Department concurs with the intent of the OIG's recommendation, but requests it be revised to read:

"OIG recommends that the SIV Coordinating Official, in coordination with the Bureau of Consular Affairs and the Joint Executive Office for the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs and Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs,

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-2-

continue to implement procedural changes and allocate resources in service of meeting the Department's Afghan SIV processing goals. The Department should use the efficiency improvements, chief of mission (COM) decisions, and visa interview sections included in the quarterly Congressional reports on SIV processing to track progress, referencing the Program Design and Performance Management Toolkit as needed."

Additionally, after reviewing the Program Design and Performance Management Toolkit, specifically page seven ("Am I conducting a program, project, or process"), the Department maintains that Afghan SIV (ASIV) adjudication is a process, not a program. However, the Department is aware of the value in this toolkit and will utilize it as a reference, as needed, while we continue to assess existing ASIV process goals.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

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AAU	Afghan Affairs Unit
ASIV	Afghan special immigrant visa
CAS	Camp As Sayliyah
CDC	Centers for Disease Control
COM	Chief of Mission
CARE	Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
DoD	Department of Defense
NVC	National Visa Center
OIG	Office of Inspector General
SIV	Special immigrant visa
SCO	Senior Coordinating Official
U.S.C.	United States Code

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