

2 VOICES OF THE DIASPORA



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Afghan evacuees wait to be processed at Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, August 2021. (Photo by DOD/Sgt. Isaiah Campbell)

VOICES OF THE DIASPORA

Since the fall of the Afghan government in 2021, SIGAR has interviewed members of the Afghan diaspora in the United States and elsewhere about the current situation in Afghanistan, their work in Afghanistan prior to the Taliban takeover, how they departed Afghanistan, and their lives in exile. These interviews were initiated in support of SIGAR’s congressionally directed evaluations of the collapse of the Afghan government and security forces, and SIGAR’s statutorily mandated audits and investigations of ongoing assistance to Afghanistan.

The interviews SIGAR conducted of the Afghan diaspora have been extremely helpful in understanding the fall of Afghanistan’s government and military, as well as current U.S., UN, and other international donor assistance programs. They have also informed SIGAR’s quarterly and lessons learned reports, and provided useful information to SIGAR’s Investigations Directorate. Collectively, the interviews offer a rare insight into Afghanistan and provide an important voice and perspective to policymakers in the absence of U.S. government personnel on the ground.

In this essay, we discuss highlights from 61 interviews SIGAR recently conducted in four U.S. metropolitan areas that have become major Afghan resettlement centers: Houston, Texas; Sacramento, California; Omaha, Nebraska; and Washington, DC. Many of those interviewed said SIGAR was the first U.S. government agency to contact them since their arrival.¹ They all asked that SIGAR not publish their names or other identifiers in this report because of the danger to their families in Afghanistan. This essay represents the views and opinions of the interviewees; SIGAR has not verified the accuracy of their statements.

Several themes emerged from the interviews. Most Afghans resettled in the United States are mourning the loss of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. They expressed a sense of betrayal, feeling abandoned personally, and feeling that their country was abandoned by Afghanistan’s leadership and their U.S. partners.

A former Afghan Army officer in Houston told SIGAR, “It’s difficult to talk about Afghanistan. It wasn’t just the city of Kabul; it was a whole nation that fell apart. It’s not the sorrow of one person, it’s the collapse of a society and a system. The loss of a system we fought [for], for 20 years. The words

‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’ are easy to say, but heavy to attain and we lost them all.”²

Most Afghans interviewed believe things in Afghanistan are getting progressively worse under the Taliban. The former Afghan Army officer listed the problems he saw—poverty, misery, lack of the rule of law, the reemergence of terrorist groups, even more corruption than under the Republic, stolen natural resources, and student indoctrination. “The more time we lose, the worse it will get,” he said, adding, “In 10 years, you will face a state that will be dangerous in an unprecedented way.”³

Afghans in the United States desperately fear the Taliban threat to their extended families and friends in Afghanistan. Many lamented that in Taliban-run Afghanistan, arbitrary arrest and detention are rampant, women are stripped of their most basic rights, and information is heavily censored. The Taliban are targeting former members of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) and government officials. Some Afghans painfully described how the Taliban had murdered their loved ones in acts of reprisal.⁴ Together, these stories paint a dark picture of life for Afghans under Taliban rule, and for those who have fled.

Nearly all the interviewees also described the new challenges they are facing in the United States. Many of the recently resettled suffer from depression, culture shock, lack of support, and poverty—stresses that are compounded for families separated from their loved ones left behind in Afghanistan.⁵

Watching the Collapse of the Islamic Republic

Afghans who fled the country following the Taliban takeover expressed shock and disbelief at the 2020 U.S.-Taliban Doha agreement that contributed to the U.S. withdrawal and the collapse of the Republic. On the day the Taliban entered Kabul, “We all just cried,” said a former Afghan Army official.⁶ One former Afghan Air Force official told SIGAR “everything changed” after the agreement. He added, “We used to work with the Americans before 2020, [but afterward] we couldn’t get help because it was against the agreement. We were running out of bombs... We don’t know what happened behind those doors, but everything changed.”⁷

A former Afghan Air Force pilot said he had just left the hospital where his son was born on August 15, 2021, when he received a call saying the Taliban had entered Kabul and he should go to the airport immediately. Along with other pilots, he flew his plane to Uzbekistan thinking he might return in a few days. Instead, he was resettled in the United States and has not seen his wife or son in person since.⁸

Beyond the battlefield, even high-ranking officials in the former government were caught off guard by the Republic’s collapse. One former government official told SIGAR her colleagues did not believe a collapse was possible until someone interrupted a ministry meeting with an urgent

warning to flee immediately. This former official evacuated in August 2021 with her young son, but was unable to bring along her other two children who remain in Afghanistan.⁹ Another interviewee who worked closely with the office of former President Ashraf Ghani said he was stunned to learn from his friends and family that the president had fled the country. After his friends warned him that the Taliban were approaching his office, the interviewee said he went to the airport and used his political passport to board one of the first planes out of Kabul.¹⁰

Feelings of Betrayal and Abandonment

Some Afghans SIGAR interviewed said that during the U.S. withdrawal and subsequent collapse of the Republic, they felt betrayed and abandoned by the United States and Afghanistan's leadership. One Afghan who served in the Air Force said that he fought alongside Americans and expected them to reach out when he arrived in the United States. He said, "The individual advisors didn't help or call or see us."¹¹

A former Afghan Air Force pilot, who was trained by the United States and fought alongside U.S. forces, said he was ordered to fly an aircraft to Uzbekistan in the wake of the Taliban takeover. Unaware that no prior arrangements had been made with Uzbek air traffic control, he said he was shocked when an Uzbek plane spotted and followed him, ultimately hitting his plane, causing both planes to crash. He said both pilots ejected. Lost in the Uzbek wilderness, the Afghan pilot said he ran for miles, bleeding, and calling for help. "I had to ask several people in the hospital to help me make a phone call to my family to tell them I was alive. I had no money, no documents, everything was left in the plane that crashed," he said.¹²

A former member of the ANDSF described in detail how it was not just the withdrawal of Coalition forces that left the country vulnerable, but also the failure of the Afghan government to reevaluate its position and take action to defend the country in accordance with its existing plans. He said the ANDSF had long established a three-zone security approach: The first (green) zone was the highest security priority. The second (operational) zone was where most ANDSF operations against the Taliban occurred. The third zone was used for "discovery, disturbance, so the enemy couldn't stay or set up bases."¹³ He said the three-zone approach worked until Coalition forces decided to leave Afghanistan. When Coalition forces began leaving, the Afghan government failed to reevaluate and redeploy our forces in zone one, he said. First, "There needed to be a national consensus and unity." Second, "We should have evaluated where we could defend and where we couldn't." Because the Afghan government failed to take these steps, the country was left defenseless. He said, "If they didn't know this issue, that is unforgivable. And if they knew and didn't do it, then that is a national betrayal."¹⁴

Life Under Taliban Rule

Those unable to flee in August 2021 recalled harrowing experiences living under Taliban rule. One defense attorney and human rights activist said she was arrested at a safe house where she had hidden with fellow anti-Taliban protestors. She said that during her 18-day detention she was interrogated five times, forced to make false confessions, and more than anything, feared being raped.¹⁵

Another human rights activist said the Taliban murdered her brother in reprisal for her work with the previous government helping detain child rapists, drug dealers, and murderers. When the Taliban seized power in August 2021, this activist said they went house to house looking for her, and in their search, found and killed another of her brothers and his wife. She knew that she had only hours to escape. Her son said he hid his mother in a borrowed burqa and joined her on an evacuation flight, leaving his wife and three young children behind. Her son wept as he described how his wife and children had been forced to move again and again to evade Taliban searches. His mother told SIGAR that the Taliban vowed to “eliminate her blood from the face of the earth.” Like other Afghans, her son said he would not be able to bring his wife and children to the United States until his own immigration status was approved—a process that could take years.¹⁶

A former teacher said the Taliban went to her cousin’s home to locate a military vehicle he used as part of his job with the U.S. military. While at his home, the Taliban threatened to force his 14-year-old daughter to marry a Taliban member. The cousin has since relocated to the United States, but the 14-year-old daughter and the rest of the family remain in Afghanistan where they are subject to Taliban threats and intimidation.¹⁷

The Taliban’s Continuous Human Rights Abuses

Across the board, Afghans said they feared the Taliban for their continuous abuses of human rights. Some even shared pictures, videos, and anecdotes of Taliban atrocities against their loved ones. Many interviewees had family members who had been detained, or even killed since the Taliban takeover in 2021.¹⁸ Others had been detained themselves or gone into hiding to avoid arrest.¹⁹

A former ANDSF member said, “The Taliban are a foreign culture and identity that has been imposed on Afghanistan. I’m not saying it’s a specific ethnic group, but that their identity is foreign and has been imported from neighboring countries.”²⁰ Multiple interviewees shared the opinion that the Taliban had imported extremist beliefs from other countries in the region that do not represent the wishes of the majority of the Afghan people.²¹ SIGAR continues to report on the Taliban’s governance and oppression of human rights. For more details, see page 41.

Widespread Taliban Reprisal Killings

Despite the Taliban's promise of amnesty, nearly all Afghans that SIGAR interviewed said they were aware of reprisal killings of former officials and supporters of the Afghan government. A former Afghan government official told SIGAR, "Revenge killing is going on widely."²² SIGAR interviewed an Afghan who said he was tortured by the Taliban before fleeing Afghanistan. He said he was "minutes from death" before one Taliban member intervened and suggested he cooperate.²³

Every Afghan formerly associated with the government expressed fear for their families who remained in Afghanistan. An Afghan pilot said his former Air Force colleagues were all worried that the Taliban would find their small children they left behind. "If they realize my son who is two years old [is my son], they will not leave him. Taliban now are the children of older Taliban whom we killed. Eighty-seven thousand Taliban were killed. They will not give amnesty to us."²⁴ He added that the Taliban continue to target former Afghan Air Force pilots, including a former sergeant whose body the Taliban reportedly "cut into half" recently.²⁵

Another former member of the Afghan Air Force that SIGAR interviewed in Omaha said most of his family members served in the former Afghan military, including his father and his brother, and they had to evacuate immediately upon the Taliban's takeover. He said that the Taliban came looking for them at their home and at their uncle's home. He said a disagreement arose during their search and the Taliban ended up shooting and killing his aunt, and arresting his cousin. He said his cousin was eventually released from jail. Since then, his family in Afghanistan has been in hiding and unable to work. Several other interviewees offered similar accounts of the Taliban's searches, threats, and beatings of their family members.²⁶

Seized Weapons and Equipment

Afghans who fought alongside U.S. forces said the Taliban now control the weapons the Coalition had supplied to the ANDSF, including airplanes, bombs, night vision goggles, and more. "They have everything we had," aside from the aircraft flown to Uzbekistan, a former Afghan Air Force pilot who worked closely with U.S. troops said.²⁷

Another former Afghan Air Force pilot said that in the week leading up to August 15, 2021, he received orders to report to his duty station and stayed there until the day of the collapse. He told SIGAR that on August 15 around 11:30 a.m., former President Ghani flew to Uzbekistan, and the Afghan Air Force followed over the course of the day. Prior to evacuating, he told SIGAR that American advisors instructed the Afghan Air Force to transport all equipment out of the country. He said when he and other pilots arrived in Uzbekistan, the Uzbek military did not grant them permission to land. After circling the airport, the Afghan pilots were forced to land because

they were low on fuel. He recalled Uzbek forces shooting at the plane that landed before his, but said they did not shoot at his plane.²⁸

Upon arriving and deplaning, he said that Uzbek forces arrested, searched, and questioned all arriving Afghan military personnel, adding that 45 Afghan Air Force planes and 550 Afghan military officers from various branches landed in Uzbekistan on August 15, 2021. He said the Uzbeks attempted to move Afghan Air Force planes and helicopters from the runway, but were unable to because they did not know how to operate the aircraft. The Uzbeks damaged many of the planes and helicopters in the process, and eventually requested Afghan Air Force assistance in flying them to various airports across the country. He said the fleet of aircraft included PC-12s, Cessnas, A29s, Black Hawks, and Mi-17s. He told SIGAR that he does not know what happened to the aircraft after that.²⁹

A former member of the Afghan National Army said since he and his family evacuated, the Taliban have continually harassed his family members remaining in Afghanistan and have detained and beaten his brother multiple times. He said the Taliban are searching for military equipment that he had used in the Army and that they believe his family still possess.³⁰

Media Censorship

Two journalists SIGAR interviewed described how the Taliban are infiltrating the media industry in Afghanistan, widely censoring information, and using the former independent press to spread their propaganda. One journalist said, “The journalism that used to be practiced is no longer there,” as “the journalists in Afghanistan cannot say what’s actually happening.” The same journalist said editors-in-chief at media outlets are required to report weekly to the Taliban on the content of their news. Outspoken journalists and authors are “hunted” by the Taliban and as a result, “people in Afghanistan feel hopeless.”

While both journalists wanted to draw attention to this issue, they said it was difficult to accurately depict the ongoing human rights abuses since “there is no access to information in Afghanistan,” given the level of censorship.³¹ The other Afghan journalist added that YouTube propaganda videos showing Taliban “successes” have overtaken the former independent media, and anyone who speaks out about the real conditions in Afghanistan is punished.³²

Afghans Divided Over Humanitarian Assistance and U.S. Engagement

Afghans SIGAR interviewed were divided over whether the United States should continue giving humanitarian aid to Afghanistan. While they agreed that there is tremendous hunger and need in Afghanistan, some felt that U.S. assistance, however inadvertently, bolsters Taliban rule.

A former provincial council member said the Taliban give their own lists of beneficiaries to aid agencies working in Afghanistan. In particular, disabled soldiers and the families of soldiers who were killed fighting for the

Republic no longer receive aid. Instead, she said, “Taliban suicide bombers and [their] families are receiving aid.”³³ A former Afghan government official said, “the money the United States is giving isn’t going directly to the Taliban, but the Taliban have created their own organizations. So, they take the money and distribute the money amongst themselves.”³⁴ SIGAR has long reported and warned that the Taliban are benefiting from aid and interfering with its delivery.³⁵ For more information about these issues, see pages 46–47.

However, an Afghan American doctoral candidate who had recently visited Afghanistan took a different view. He argued that the United States needs to engage with the Taliban, whom he said were “exceeding expectations.” He said, “Previously, we completely disregarded what the real Afghan people wanted.”³⁶

An Afghan economic development expert saw the absence or drastic decrease in development aid as the primary reason for the challenges Afghans are facing today, including the country’s failing economy and plummeting employment rate. He saw engagement with the Taliban as the only way to moderate their policies. He said, “The current U.S. disengagement is not in the U.S. foreign policy interest [because] the U.S. is leaving Afghanistan to its competitors.” He said the United States will have to decide “whether it wants Afghanistan to be more like Iran or more like the Gulf.”³⁷

The current nature of U.S. engagement also provoked frustration and anger.³⁸ One woman implored the U.S. government to reconsider its relationship with the Taliban. “Please do not recognize the Taliban. The Taliban should be recognized as a terrorist group. They kill innocent people... The Taliban destroyed everything the U.S. built; billions have been wasted. Please stop funding them,” she pleaded.³⁹ Her frustration was deepened by her own sense of helplessness. She arranges for her family to move frequently within Afghanistan for their safety.⁴⁰

Arduous Journeys to the United States

The Afghans SIGAR spoke with traveled arduous paths in their search for safety. Those who fled in the initial evacuation at times did not know where their planes were headed or if they would ever reunite with their families. Other Afghans described waiting for months in unofficial third country processing sites, referred to as “lily pads,” or taking multi-country journeys across the globe. Most described a lack of support during their journeys, regardless of resettlement pathway or immigration status.

There are two legal pathways for entry into the United States specific to Afghan allies: **Special Immigrant Visas**, and **Priority Referral**.⁴¹ These official pathways exclude some at-risk Afghans, who are forced to pursue alternative, sometimes dangerous, routes in their pursuit of asylum in the United States. As shown in Figure E.1, Afghans have generally entered the United States through the following resettlement pathways since August 2021:⁴²

Special Immigrant Visa (SIV): SIV program established by Congress in 2009 for Afghans who worked on behalf of the United States in Afghanistan and experienced an ongoing and serious threat as a result. Limited numbers of SIVs are accepted each year.

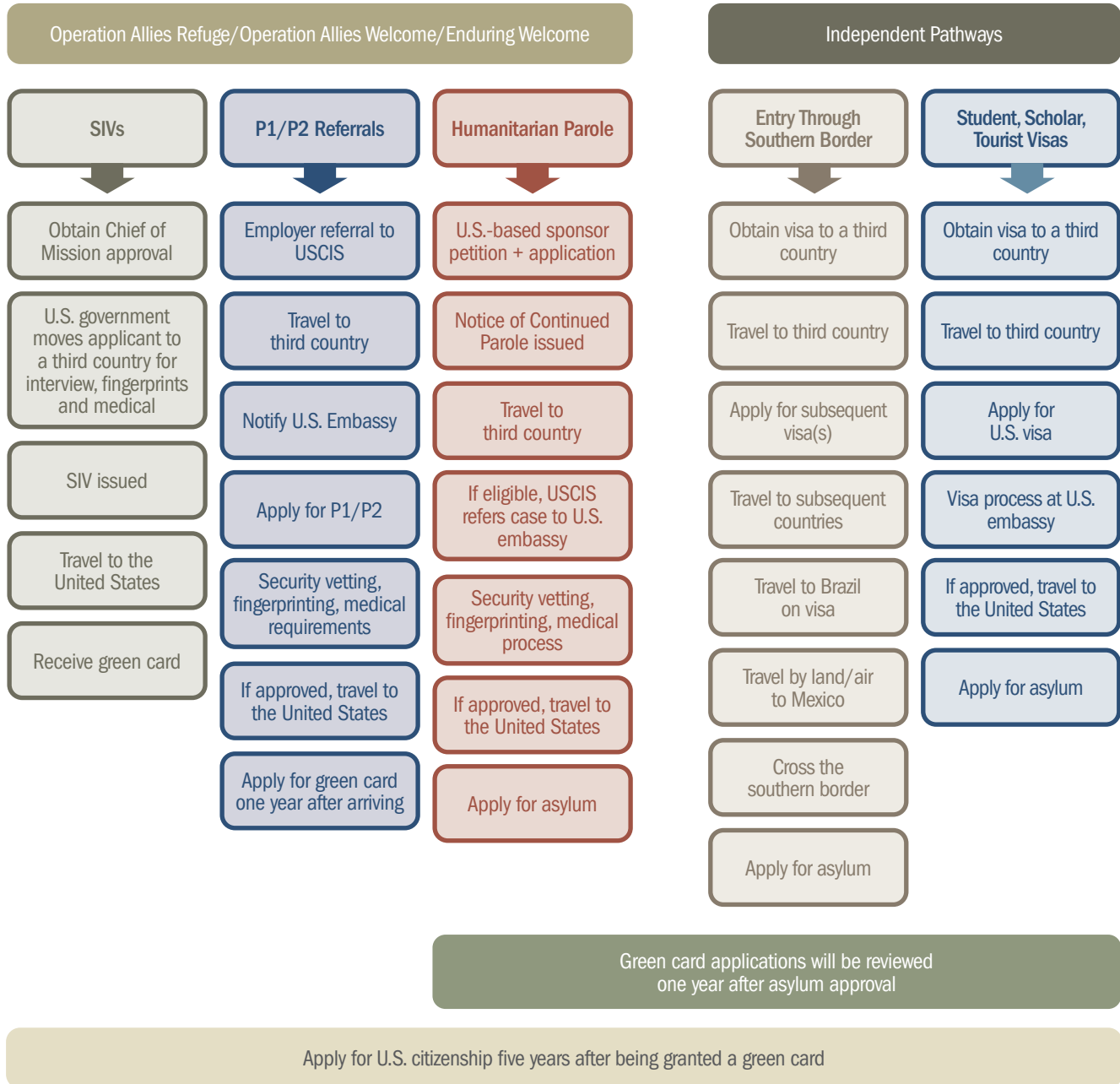
Priority 1 (P1): Eligible Afghans include those who did not meet the requirements for an SIV but were referred by designated entities such as an embassy, designated NGO, or the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

Priority 2 (P2): Eligible Afghans include those who did not meet the minimum time-in-service requirement for an SIV but worked as employees of contractors, locally employed staff, interpreters, and translators for the U.S. government; Afghans who worked for a U.S.-funded program or project; and Afghans who were employed by a U.S.-based media organization or NGO.

Source: State OIG, Information Report on Afghan Special Immigrant Visas, AUD-MERO-22-38, 9/2022; USCIS, USRAP Consultation and Worldwide Processing Priorities, accessed 3/29/2024; USCIS, Asylum Information, accessed 3/29/2024; State, USRAP Priority 2 Designation for Afghan Nationals, 8/2/2021.

FIGURE E.1

FROM AFGHANISTAN TO THE UNITED STATES: RESETTLEMENT PATHWAYS



Source: USCIS, "Green Card for an Afghan Who Was Employed by or on behalf of the U.S. Government," <https://www.uscis.gov/green-card-for-an-afghan-employed-behalf-us-government>, accessed 4/21/2024; National Immigration Forum, "Factsheet: Overview of the Special Immigrant Visa Programs," 6/22/2021, accessed 4/21/2024; USCIS, "Information for Afghan Nationals on Requests to USCIS for Parole," <https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/humanitarian-parole/information-for-afghan-nationals-on-requests-to-uscis-for-parole>, accessed 4/21/2024; USCIS, "Information for Afghan Nationals," <https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/information-for-afghan-nationals>, accessed 4/21/2024; SIGAR, interview with an immigration attorney, 4/16/2024 and 3/13/2024; SIGAR analysis of interview with an immigration attorney, 4/18/2024.

Operation Allies Refuge

In July 2021, President Joseph Biden launched Operation Allies Refuge to support relocation flights for Afghan nationals eligible for SIVs in advance of the U.S. withdrawal. On August 23, 2021, following the Taliban takeover, the U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas used his discretionary authority to permit U.S. Customs and Border Protection to grant humanitarian parole on a case-by-case basis to Afghan nationals evacuating with Operation Allies Refuge, regardless of their eligibility for SIVs or Priority Referral.⁴³

Discretionary Use of Humanitarian Parole

Under the Immigration and Nationality Act, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary can parole any foreign national into the United States for urgent humanitarian reasons. Parole is only official permission to enter the country on a temporary basis. It is not a pathway for citizenship or legal permanent residence.⁴⁴ Thousands of Afghans who arrived in the United States since August 2021 have received **humanitarian parole**. Afghan parolees are allowed to stay in the United States for two years, and, to avoid deportation, must pursue a path to formal, legal immigration, such as applying for asylum, before their parole expires.⁴⁵

Operation Allies Welcome/Enduring Welcome

Until May 2023, DHS coordinated efforts across the federal government to resettle Afghans in the United States under Operation Allies Welcome. Since then, the State Department has coordinated Enduring Welcome. These efforts are directed at SIV and the **U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP)**. USRAP referral cases of individuals who were not evacuated in the withdrawal and are vulnerable remaining in Afghanistan.⁴⁶

SIV Applicant Resettlement

Special Immigrant Visas can be granted to Afghans who were employed by or on behalf of the U.S. government, provided faithful service, and face an ongoing threat due to their U.S. employment. SIV applicants face a lengthy application process, and there are limits to the number of visas granted each year.⁴⁷ Individuals who had already completed SIV applications prior to August 2021 told SIGAR they went into hiding once the Taliban seized power. Eventually, some were able to travel to Pakistan, where their visas to the United States could be processed. However, as of November 1, 2023, Pakistan changed its immigration policy and deported some SIV applicants back to Afghanistan.⁴⁸

USRAP Priority Referral and Humanitarian Parole

Afghans who do not qualify for an SIV can still be referred for resettlement by qualified employers through USRAP's Priority 1 and Priority 2

Humanitarian Parole: Temporary admittance to the United States, granted on a case-by-case basis for humanitarian reasons. For Afghans, parole is given for two years. Parole does not include a direct pathway to lawful permanent residence.

U.S. Refugee Admissions Program

(USRAP): An interagency effort involving the State Department, the Department of Homeland Security (U.S. Customs and Border Protection; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services), the Department of Health and Human Services, and other UN and non-governmental organizations.

Source: USCIS, Information for Afghan Nationals on Requests to USCIS for Parole, accessed 3/29/2024; DHS, Operation Allies Welcome, accessed 3/29/2024; USCIS, Obtaining Asylum in the United States, accessed 3/29/2024; CRS, Permanent Immigration Options for Afghans with Immigration Parole, 6/21/2022, p. 2.

designations. Unlike an SIV, P1 and P2 referrals apply for legal permanent residence one year after their arrival to the United States. Afghans who do not meet the criteria for SIV and P1/P2 referrals have come to the United States under humanitarian parole. To obtain humanitarian parole, one must be referred by a U.S.-based sponsor. “Everyone in this route has to do something once they arrive in the United States,” said the immigration attorney SIGAR interviewed. Given that humanitarian parole is not a pathway to citizenship, Afghans entering the United States on humanitarian parole are given two years to adjust their immigration status by applying for asylum or family reunification. According to the same attorney, their need for legal help is the greatest.⁴⁹

An Afghan community leader in Omaha told SIGAR that a large number of Afghans are living in the United States on a two-year parole that is set to expire in August 2025. As a result, the Afghan parolee population is experiencing increasing anxiety that they might be deported while they await clarity regarding a possible parole extension.⁵⁰

Newly resettled Afghans had various experiences in navigating the immigration process. A former Afghan Army official recounted his lengthy journey to be able to have his and his family’s case processed. After two years of waiting, he said the family traveled from Kabul to Dubai, Kuwait, and then Doha, where they spent 35 days before receiving approval to travel to the United States. Despite the wait, he spoke highly of the State Department’s Office of the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts (CARE) team and the UN’s International Organization for Migration, saying they were responsive and took care of him and his family.⁵¹

Entry Through the Southern Border

Afghans who enter at the United States’ southern border seeking asylum turn themselves over to U.S. Customs and Border Protection upon arrival. According to an immigration attorney SIGAR interviewed, every Afghan who crosses the southern border wants to be found. “They are too eager to get to court. They are selecting jurisdictions and moving to cities where they feel their cases would be heard quicker,” the attorney said.⁵² A former Afghan National Army official SIGAR interviewed said he first traveled to Turkey following the Taliban takeover, then to Brazil, then to Mexico, and finally settled in Houston, Texas where he knew other Afghans who had recently arrived.⁵³ Those granted asylum face major economic hurdles as they are unable to work while awaiting work authorization.⁵⁴

One interviewee said that after living under Taliban rule for six months, where she “lost everything in a matter of months,” she had no choice but to leave the country. She said she legally crossed the border into Iran, and once there, applied for a three-month humanitarian visa to Brazil. She stated that she first went to Iran because it was still possible to get an Iranian visa, even after August 2021, and because she knew that in

Iran—like Pakistan and a few other select countries—it was possible for Afghans to apply for Brazil’s humanitarian visa. After receiving her humanitarian visa, she traveled to Brazil and arrived at an Afghan refugee camp, but said these camps were overcrowded and could not provide people with even the most basic needs.⁵⁵

While in Brazil, she said she learned through word of mouth of the route to Mexico, and informal networks arranged their travel. Groups of 30–40 Afghans, including adults and children, made the journey across 13 countries from Brazil to the U.S.-Mexico border, using a variety of transportation methods including planes, trains, buses, and by foot. She said Afghans who had completed the journey before provided instructions for the route. She explained that she did not travel with a lot of money, but friends wired her money along the way when she needed it. She told SIGAR that she and the other Afghans often had to pay bribes to police officers since they entered those countries illegally. She highlighted particularly dangerous routes through a Panamanian forest and Tijuana, Mexico. She said when they crossed the U.S. border in November 2022, they were greeted by a border agent who told them, “Welcome to America.”⁵⁶

Student, Scholar, and Tourist Visas

The fourth pathway is for a small number of individuals coming into the United States through additional legal means, such as Student, Scholar, and a small number of Tourist visas. These individuals enter the United States on their non-immigrant visas and later apply for asylum.⁵⁷

Navigating Life in the United States

Several interviewees described insufficient support from refugee resettlement agencies in the United States. Most initially relied on networks of family and friends to house them, help them find apartments, and connect them to local resources. Once settled, Afghans continue to face many barriers to a successful life in the United States including unemployment, differences in culture and language, poor mental health, and an unstable legal status for those awaiting final determinations.

One Afghan woman, who came to the United States in 1981, described helping 13 families find housing in Sacramento following the Taliban takeover. Another Afghan woman, who works with a resettlement agency, said large families of six or seven can only afford one- or two-bedroom apartments, usually in poor conditions.⁵⁸ A family that resettled near Washington, DC said their case manager initially tried to place the family of six in a two-bedroom apartment. They were able to find an apartment with three bedrooms to accommodate the family, but they described the conditions as extremely poor, with insect and rodent infestations.⁵⁹

SIGAR also heard claims of mismanagement, fraud, and waste of funds designated to help Afghans who recently arrived in the United States. SIGAR has not verified these claims.⁶⁰

Challenging Integration into American Communities

Some Afghans said that women who had been resettled were experiencing severe mental health issues, including suicidal thoughts. Unable to speak English, often illiterate, and stuck at home in small apartments with lots of children, they find themselves isolated in the United States.⁶¹ One interviewee told SIGAR many of the ex-Afghan military members in the United States were also seriously depressed due to the traumatic nature of their mission in Afghanistan, the events that led to their evacuation, the concern of losing loved ones left behind, and the dearth of support they have received in starting a new life in the United States. “Lots of my colleagues have depression, they have lost their minds and can’t make any decisions for small issues,” he said.⁶²

A Houston resettlement coordinator said U.S. programs addressing mental health issues do not work for Afghan refugees. She said in one such program, Afghans gathered for a few minutes to squeeze stress balls, take a photo of the event, and go back home. She emphasized that Afghans are finding navigating all aspects of life difficult, including “dental issues, health issues.” She said she felt frustrated that no agency had investigated helping new arrivals in a more beneficial way.⁶³

A financial literacy advocate told SIGAR that she sees recently arrived Afghans struggle with the transition to the American financial system, where individuals are expected to understand credit and banking without an introduction or guide. She also noted Afghan refugees’ historical distrust for banking institutions, which especially hampers access to rental housing.⁶⁴

Most Afghans interviewed by SIGAR described finding employment in the United States as challenging despite their work experience. Immigration status also hinders employment opportunities. Highly specialized pilots who underwent rigorous training by U.S. forces said they did not qualify to join the U.S. Air Force or serve in the U.S. government because they are not U.S. citizens. Given the age limit of 35 to first apply to the U.S. Air Force, the pilots were concerned that they will not be eligible by the time their immigration cases are finalized.⁶⁵

English language skills are another factor that can limit employment, and while language classes are readily available, Afghan women are less likely to attend them. One refugee caseworker, a refugee herself, told SIGAR it is common for men to forbid their wives from attending classes.⁶⁶ According to a resettlement coordinator in Omaha, employment in certain industries that do not require English proficiency, like meatpacking factories, attract Afghans who do not speak the language.⁶⁷

CONCLUSION

When SIGAR asked what messages they would want to convey to Congress and the American people, Afghans who recently arrived in the United States had two: one about the sorrow and fear they feel about the home they were forced to flee, and another about their struggle to build new lives in the United States. Almost unanimously the new arrivals stressed that the United States should not forget the plight of Afghans under the Taliban. From reprisal killings and other human rights violations to the staggering decline of access to and quality of education, Afghans in the United States fear the consequences of the Taliban's draconian restrictions of the Afghan people's rights. Adding to this sense of urgency, one former Afghan National Army official said, "This catastrophe is increasing, the most concerning issue is the emergence of fundamentalism in Afghanistan." He said tens of thousands of children are being educated in madrassas instead of public schools. "The more time we lose, the worse it will get."⁶⁸

ESSAY ENDNOTES

- 1 SIGAR, interview with a former Afghan Air Force official, 11/7/2023; SIGAR, interview with a former Afghan Air Force official, 11/7/2023; SIGAR, interview with a former Afghan Air Force official, 11/7/2023.
- 2 SIGAR, interview with a former Afghan National Army official, 11/7/2023.
- 3 SIGAR, interview with a former Afghan National Army official, 11/7/2023.
- 4 SIGAR, interview with a former human rights activist, 11/7/2023.
- 5 SIGAR, interview with a former provincial council, Houston community leader, 11/7/2023.
- 6 SIGAR, interview with a former Afghan Army official, 3/4/2024.
- 7 SIGAR, interview with a former Afghan Air Force official, 11/7/2023.
- 8 SIGAR, interview with a former Afghan Air Force official, 11/7/2023.
- 9 SIGAR, interview with Afghan attorney and former official, 1/23/2024.
- 10 SIGAR, interview with a former Afghan government official, 3/26/2024.
- 11 SIGAR, interview with a former Afghan Air Force official, 11/7/2023.
- 12 SIGAR, interview with a former Afghan Air Force official, 11/7/2023.
- 13 SIGAR, interview with a former Afghan National Army official, 11/7/2023.
- 14 SIGAR, interview with a former Afghan National Army official, 11/7/2023.
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“There remains a strong consensus on collective interests in Afghanistan. No country wants to see the emergence of [a] terrorism threat from Afghanistan.”

—*U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan*
Thomas West