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SUBCOMMITTEE ON CRIME AND COUNTERTERRORISM

HEARING ON
"BIDEN'S AFGHAN PAROLEE PROGRAM – A TROJAN HORSE WITH
FLAWED VETTING AND DEADLY CONSEQUENCES"

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INTRODUCTION

Good morning, Chairmen Cornyn and Hawley, Ranking Members Padilla and Durbin, and distinguished Members of each Subcommittee. Thank you for inviting me to appear before you to discuss the U.S. Department of State (State Department) Office of Inspector General's (State OIG) oversight work related to Afghan screening, vetting, and relocation. I am pleased to be joined today by my colleagues from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Department of Defense (DoD) Office of Inspector General, with whom State OIG has a long history of collaboration and coordination.

Before I speak to State OIG's oversight work, I want first to acknowledge the tragic event that brought us together for this hearing. We remain hopeful for Staff Sergeant Wolfe's recovery and are encouraged by reports of his progress. Our deepest sympathies go out to his family and to the family of Specialist Beckstrom, whose life was suddenly and tragically taken. The Nation mourns her loss.

STATE OIG OVERSIGHT

The U.S. government has been involved in Afghanistan for decades, and as a result State OIG's work spans multiple years and touches on a range of programs and processes. Of note, we have issued 36 Afghanistan-related reports since 2021, and a total of 11 reports on the State Department's role in the screening, vetting, and relocation of Afghans from 2017 to 2024. The process of screening and vetting Afghans for entry into the United States involves multiple federal agencies and varies depending on the pathway of entry. Afghan nationals have primarily entered the United States through one of three pathways:

- 1. Humanitarian Parole** – a temporary entry mechanism administered by DHS;
- 2. Refugee Status** – through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP); and
- 3. Visa Issuance** – most commonly via the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program.

Each pathway entails distinct procedures and responsibilities across agencies, with screening and vetting tailored to the specific entry mechanism.

DHS is responsible for administering the humanitarian parole process, determining eligibility for refugee status under USRAP, and deciding whether visa holders are



ultimately admitted to the United States at a port of entry. The State Department provides support to refugees overseas, administers assistance during the initial 90 days of domestic resettlement, oversees the SIV program, and issues other categories of visas.

As outlined in greater detail in this written testimony, DHS leads the screening, vetting, and admission processes for both parolees and refugees, while the State Department administers the SIV program. Accordingly, State OIG has focused its oversight primarily on the third pathway to entry: the SIV program.

Afghan SIV Process

The Afghan SIV program has been the State Department's leading point of engagement in the Afghan screening, vetting, and relocation process over the years. In 2009, Congress established the Afghan SIV program to resettle Afghans who worked on behalf of the United States. To qualify for the program, an Afghan national must have been employed by or on behalf of the U.S. government in Afghanistan for at least 1 year¹ and have a letter of recommendation from their supervisor.²

The Afghan SIV application process has consisted of three distinct phases:

1. **Chief of Mission (COM) Approval** – administered by the State Department;
2. **Form I-360 Petition** – processed by DHS through U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS); and
3. **Visa Application** – administered by the State Department.

To be issued an Afghan SIV, applicants must successfully complete all three phases.

Chief of Mission (COM) Approval

The Afghan SIV process begins when an individual emails documents to the National Visa Center (NVC) demonstrating their eligibility. NVC reviews the package for completeness. If the package is documentarily complete, NVC submits the

¹ The *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2016* (Public Law 114-92, November 25, 2015, Section 1216) increased the service requirement from 1 to 2 years for those individuals applying after September 30, 2015. However, the *Emergency Security Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2021* (Public Law 117-31, July 30, 2021, Section 401) reduced the service requirement back to 1 year.

² 8 U.S.C. § 1101 note, "Afghan Allies Protection," Section 602(b)(2)(A)(iii).



application to the Afghan SIV (ASIV) Unit. The ASIV Unit analyzes the information submitted and is responsible for determining whether an applicant is qualified for COM approval and making a recommendation to the COM's designated approving official to either approve or deny the application at this stage.

Form I-360 Petition

Prior to July 20, 2022, after receiving COM approval, the applicant submitted a Form I-360 petition to USCIS. During this phase, the applicant could also submit documentation for their derivative spouse and child. If the I-360 was approved, USCIS would send the approval to NVC, which would notify the applicant of approval. After July 2022, instead of submitting a Form I-360 petition, applicants were required to submit a revised State Department nonimmigrant visa application during the COM approval phase. The elimination of the Form I-360 phase, which duplicated processes addressed in the COM approval process, potentially reduced SIV processing time by more than 4 months, the average time State OIG calculated for that stage from 2009–2021.³

Visa Application

After receiving COM approval and completing the Form I-360 process or the revised nonimmigrant visa application, the applicant then submits an "Application for Immigrant Visa and Alien Registration" to NVC. The State Department administers SIV screening and vetting during this phase.

Although the State Department administers the process, screening and vetting of Afghan SIV applicants is a multi-agency undertaking. In accordance with the *Immigration and Nationality Act*,⁴ State Department consular officers abroad are responsible for determining eligibility and processing visas. This includes determining whether a visa applicant is eligible to travel to the United States.⁵ There are more than 50 types of immigrant visas, including Afghan SIVs, for those coming to live permanently in the United States.⁶ The *Immigration and Nationality Act* enumerates categories of individuals who are ineligible for admission into the United States. Grounds for inadmissibility include security-related concerns and

³ State OIG, Information Report: Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program Metrics (AUD-MERO-22-38, September 2022).

⁴ See 8 United States Code (U.S.C.) § 1201, "Issuance of visas;" 8 U.S.C. § 1202, "Application for visas."

⁵ See 9 FAM 102.1, "Introduction to Visas (What Is A Visa?)."

⁶ 9 FAM 502.1-3, "[Immigrant Visa] Classification Symbols."



concerns on criminal grounds.⁷ Afghan SIV applicants are subject to the same inadmissibility grounds as any other visa applicant, except that the “public charge” grounds at 8 U.S.C. § 1182(a)(4) do not apply.^{8,9} Consular officers screen and vet Afghan SIV applicants through an interagency process that includes the State Department, DoD, DHS, and the intelligence and law enforcement communities to determine whether a visa applicant is eligible to travel to the United States.¹⁰

As part of the process the applicant is fingerprinted and submits biographic data for verification. The applicant’s biographic and biometric data, fingerprints, and photographs are run through multiple State Department and interagency databases. The applicant and derivative family members are also interviewed and undergo medical clearance. If after the screening and vetting occurs the applicant is determined eligible, the applicant is issued a visa to enter the United States.

In all cases, although the State Department may issue a visa to an applicant, DHS’ U.S. Customs and Border Protection determines admissibility into the United States and may deny admission at any port of entry.

Oversight Coordination

State OIG has provided oversight of State Department activities in Afghanistan for many years through a range of audits, inspections, evaluations, and investigative efforts, all of which have benefited from longstanding coordination with oversight counterparts. Coordination is especially important in overseas contingency operations (OCO). Since 2021, State OIG has issued 36 Afghanistan-related OCO reports with 109 recommendations.

⁷ 8 U.S.C. § 1182, “Inadmissible aliens.”

⁸ See *The Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009* (Public Law 111-8, March 11, 2009), codified at 8 U.S.C. § 1101 note, “Afghan Allies Protection,” which precludes the application of 8 U.S.C. § 1182(a)(4) to Afghan SIVs. 8 U.S.C. § 1182(a)(4) allows for the exclusion of other types of visa applicants “who, in the opinion of the consular officer at the time of application for a visa, or in the opinion of the Attorney General at the time of application for admission or adjustment of status, is likely at any time to become a public charge is excludable.”

⁹ See 9 FAM 301.1-2 “Adjudication Decisions Based on Law and Regulations.” 9 FAM 502.5-12 “Fourth Preference Special Immigrants – Certain Iraqi and Afghan Nationals Employed by or on Behalf of the U.S. Government in Iraq or Afghanistan, and Certain Afghan Nationals Employed by the International Security Assistance Force or a Successor Mission,” identifies Afghan SIVs as a class of visa.

¹⁰ The Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA) formulates and implements policy relating to immigration and the provision of consular services, among other responsibilities. CA also administers provisions of the *Immigration and Nationality Act* relating to the powers, duties, and functions of diplomatic and consular officers of the United States (1 Foreign Affairs Manual 251.1, “Responsibilities”).



In addition, shortly following the 2021 U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, DHS OIG worked with our office to establish the OIG Afghanistan Project Coordination Group to promote comprehensive oversight of issues specifically relating to the screening, vetting, and relocation of Afghan evacuees by sharing information on and deconflicting related oversight work. Since that time the nine OIGs in the Coordination Group have issued 52 related reports.¹¹

Related Oversight

Afghanistan Pre-Evacuation Findings and Observations

State OIG has conducted extensive oversight of the Afghan SIV program since 2017. Early audit work identified persistent challenges related to staffing, information technology systems, and program leadership. Between FY 2016 and FY 2020, the number of Afghan SIV applicants in process increased by 53 percent—from approximately 12,300 to 18,800. Despite this increase, staffing levels within State Department offices responsible for processing Afghan SIVs remained static or declined, leaving those offices unable to meet legislative mandates.¹²

For example, as of October 2019, 12 of the 37 positions in the Consular Section at Embassy Kabul, Afghanistan, were vacant. During that same year, the number of consular officers was reduced from five to three. Embassy officials informed State OIG that fraud rates in Afghanistan were relatively high compared to other countries and programs, and that effective fraud detection required a dedicated team. While the Embassy Consular team was interviewing as many SIV applicants as possible, the team cautioned that any surge in applications would significantly strain their capacity to manage the growing backlog.¹³

Our work also noted that the State Department lacked a centralized database to verify the identity and employment of Afghan SIV applicants, a key step in the eligibility determination process, which contributed to the Afghan SIV processing backlog. To receive COM approval, the State Department's ASIV Unit was

¹¹ Coordination Group participants have included the OIGs for DHS, State, DoD, Department of Justice, Department of Health and Human Services, Intelligence Community, Social Security Administration, U.S. Agency for International Development, and the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction.

¹² State OIG, Review of the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program (AUD-MERO-20-35, June 2020).

¹³ Ibid.

responsible for verifying the applicant's identity and employment. Without a centralized database, verifying the employment of contractors and subcontractors was a time-intensive process. As of December 29, 2019, a significant number of Afghan applicants in the SIV process, 45 percent, were waiting for a COM decision. OIG recommended that the State Department examine its information technology options, including an opportunity to leverage a DoD database, to increase employment verification efficiency.¹⁴

In addition, the Senior Coordinating Official, which was the principal position responsible for the Afghan SIV program in the State Department, was vacant from January 2017 to March 2020. The Senior Coordinating Official was responsible not only for developing, implementing, and monitoring the SIV process across State Department bureaus, but also for responding to Congress and coordinating with counterparts in DHS and DoD. As a result, State Department management of the SIV program was decentralized, and staffing was uncoordinated. The State Department appointed a Senior Coordinating Official shortly before State OIG issued its report on this matter.¹⁵

During the first part of 2021, the SIV program began making progress toward reducing the backlog and decreasing processing time. State OIG determined that the visa application phase decreased from 24.6 months in 2017 to 5.5 months in 2021.¹⁶

Afghanistan Evacuation Findings and Observations

On August 16, 2021, President Biden announced the start of a noncombatant evacuation operation from Afghanistan.¹⁷ Subsequently, Embassy Kabul suspended operations on August 31, 2021.¹⁸ In remarks delivered that same month, Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated that the U.S. government and its partners evacuated approximately 124,000 individuals from Afghanistan in the weeks leading up to the suspension of Embassy operations.¹⁹

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ State OIG, Information Report: Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program Metrics (AUD-MERO-22-38, September 2022).

¹⁷ Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan, August 16, 2021.

¹⁸ State OIG, Information Report: Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program Metrics (AUD-MERO-22-38, September 2022).

¹⁹ Secretary Antony J Blinken's Remarks on Afghanistan, Remarks to the Press, August 30, 2021.

State OIG identified several issues during the 2021 evacuation and closure of Embassy Kabul that had downstream impacts on the Afghan SIV program and complicated broader efforts related to relocation and resettlement.

Embassy Kabul was unprepared for the scale and complexity of the 2021 evacuation. The report used to estimate the number of evacuees relied on unreliable data and significantly underestimated the actual need—particularly as the criteria for identifying “Afghans at risk” remained unclear and continued to expand. At a critical juncture, key Embassy personnel rotated out or departed, leaving essential security and consular responsibilities to newly arrived staff with limited institutional knowledge.²⁰

Compounding these challenges, Embassy leadership communicated inconsistently regarding the timing and scope of the evacuation. Leaders were hesitant to take overt preparatory actions, concerned that doing so might undermine diplomatic support for the Afghan government or incite panic among Afghan officials, the broader population, and Embassy personnel. This reluctance contributed to confusion and a lack of preparedness among staff, with some learning of the evacuation only at a late stage. Collectively, these factors hindered the State Department’s ability to plan for and account for all individuals requiring evacuation assistance effectively.²¹

Information on the number and composition of evacuees had important implications for ensuing stages of the Afghan screening, vetting, and relocation process. According to a State Department official, the number of evacuated persons reported by the Secretary originated from DoD. The State Department relied on DoD to track evacuation statistics because DoD was responsible for conducting the evacuation and accounting for individuals evacuated from Afghanistan with U.S. government assistance. While the State Department is responsible for leading interagency coordination during an international crisis, State Department officials told State OIG that they never saw a list of all individuals evacuated during the August 2021 evacuation.²²

²⁰ State OIG, OIG’s Review of the Department of State’s Evacuation of Embassy Kabul (AUD-MERO-23-33, September 2023).

²¹ Ibid.

²² State OIG, Evaluation of Department of State Accounting, Screening, and Vetting of Afghan Evacuees (AUD-GEER-24-21, July 2024).



State OIG attempted to obtain documentation supporting the number of individuals evacuated from Afghanistan during the evacuation from State Department officials and coordinated with DoD OIG to seek the documentation from DoD. Despite repeated attempts to obtain the data over more than 8 months, State OIG was unable to obtain the evacuee data. Without comprehensive DoD data, State OIG was unable to confirm the reliability of the number of individuals reported by the State Department as having been evacuated from Afghanistan during the evacuation.²³

Afghanistan Post-Evacuation Findings and Observations

After the evacuation of Kabul in August 2021, the State Department experienced an influx of Afghan SIV applications that greatly increased the existing backlog for which the State Department was already inadequately staffed to process. The State Department implemented changes to streamline the Afghan SIV process to expedite the review of applicant emails and facilitate COM approval. For example, the State Department increased staffing; coordinated with DoD to verify employment; incorporated new software to help process emails; eliminated the USCIS Form I-360 from the application process; began holding Afghan SIV interviews and issuing Afghan SIVs at more U.S. embassies and consulates around the world; and established remote consular operations in Doha, Qatar. Despite the steps taken to mitigate the backlog, as of December 2022 there were 154,899 principal applications in-process.²⁴

Although the backlog remained, an evaluation conducted by State OIG found that the State Department followed established processes to screen and vet Afghan SIV applicants. State OIG reviewed a statistical sample of Afghan SIVs issued in 2021 to conduct the evaluation. We verified that consular officers responsible for processing Afghan SIV applications had the necessary training and determined that the contents of the visa file for each selected Afghan SIV complied with specified procedures. State OIG also obtained evidence that consular officers followed each required step in the screening and vetting process, including confirming applicants' identities. In addition, we did not find any human trafficking or domestic abuse concerns in the selected files reviewed. State OIG concluded that the State

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ State OIG, Evaluation of Adjustments to the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program From 2018 Through 2022 (AUD-MERO-23-23, August 2023).



Department could have reasonable assurance that the Afghan SIV screening and vetting process was functioning as designed.²⁵

Although Afghan SIV holders are not classified as refugees, they are eligible for the same resettlement assistance, entitlement programs, and benefits provided to individuals admitted through USRAP. In response to congressional requests, State OIG examined the utilization of resettlement services by Afghan SIV holders compared to other USRAP participants. State OIG found that outcomes for Afghan SIV holders were largely comparable. Specifically, 98 percent of Afghan SIV holders secured housing, compared to 99 percent of other USRAP participants. Additionally, 99 percent of school-aged children—both Afghan SIV holders and other USRAP participants—were enrolled in school within 30 days of arrival in the United States. Employment outcomes also showed similar trends, with 23 percent of Afghan SIV holders employed by the end of the 90-day Reception and Placement period, compared to 31 percent of other USRAP participants.²⁶

State OIG also examined the wider State Department effort to facilitate the resettlement of Afghan nationals in communities around the United States under the Afghan Placement and Assistance Program. Under the program, the State Department worked with nine resettlement agencies and their networks of 385 local agencies and partners across the country to resettle Afghans relocated to the United States. Relocation agencies were responsible for providing Afghans with material needs support and relocation services for 30 to 90 days after arrival.²⁷ The fast pace of arrivals, lack of available housing, difficulty obtaining necessary documentation for program participants, and minimal pre-arrival cultural orientation presented challenges for resettlement agencies. Resettlement agencies reported difficulty meeting the mental health care needs of Afghan evacuees and recommended that evacuees receive mental health screenings earlier in the process.²⁸

State OIG Findings and Observations for Future Consideration

²⁵ State OIG, Evaluation of Department of State Accounting, Screening, and Vetting of Afghan Evacuees (AUD-GEER-24-21, July 2024).

²⁶ State OIG, Relocation and Resettlement Outcomes of Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Holders (AUD-MERO-23-21, June 2023).

²⁷ The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement provides assistance for Afghan evacuees after the State Department's resettlement supports conclude.

²⁸ State OIG, Review of Challenges in the Afghan Placement and Assistance Program (ESP-23-01, March 2023).



In January 2025, the Administration suspended USRAP and has since reopened eligibility consideration to only select South Africans.²⁹ In June 2025, the President significantly restricted the issuance of visas to Afghan nationals as well as their entry to the United States. The Afghan SIV program was exempted from these restrictions at the time.³⁰ On November 27, 2025, however, the State Department expanded the pause on visa issuances to Afghan nationals to include Afghan SIVs.

As Congress and the Administration review future plans for the Afghan SIV program, it is worth noting the following continuing program challenges observed in our work.

- *Leadership.* The Afghan SIV process has lacked a clear point of leadership accountability and a strategic performance management approach over the years owing in part to extended vacancies in the Senior Coordinating Official position.
- *Information Systems.* The SIV process relies on multiple, non-interoperable IT systems, requiring manual data transfers. As a result, the program faces increased risks of processing errors and delays.
- *Interagency Coordination.* Although employment verification is a central requirement for determining the eligibility of Afghan SIV applicants, verifying employment, especially for contractor applicants, is a continuing concern due to the lack of a unified database and depth of interagency coordination.

Related Investigative Activities

In addition to identifying opportunities to improve program efficiency and effectiveness, State OIG works to prevent and detect fraud and abuse. To help address Afghan SIV fraud risks, State OIG investigates related allegations and participates in the Afghan SIV Integrity Working Group, which consists of multiple government agencies with equities in the SIV process. At present, State OIG's Office of Investigations has three open investigations involving potentially fraudulent SIV applicant documents. In these and other cases, State OIG works to ensure allegations are fully investigated and that where wrongdoing has been found, perpetrators are held accountable for their actions.

²⁹ See Executive Order 14163, "Realigning the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP)," January 20, 2025; and Executive Order 14204, "Addressing Egregious Actions of The Republic of South Africa," February 7, 2025.

³⁰ Presidential Proclamation 10949, "Restricting the Entry of Foreign Nationals to Protect the United States from Foreign Terrorists and Other National Security and Public Safety Threats," June 4, 2025.



CONCLUSION

State OIG is deeply committed to its mission of promoting integrity, efficiency, and accountability across the State Department's programs and operations. Between 2017 and 2024, State OIG issued 11 reports with 38 recommendations addressing the State Department's management, oversight, and operational challenges related to the Afghan SIV program, Afghan evacuee processing and resettlement, program metrics and outcomes, and the performance of relevant bureaus and units, most of which are discussed above. The oversight work we have conducted—before, during, and after the evacuation from Afghanistan—has revealed systemic challenges in visa processing, data coordination, and interagency accountability. These findings underscore the need for sustained attention to the program's leadership, information systems, and interagency coordination. We will continue to work with our oversight partners to ensure that lessons learned from our work translate into meaningful reforms that protect our national security and honor our commitment to those who served alongside us and the American people. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I welcome your questions.