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QI Panel:

The Unfinished Mission: Afghan SIV Partners, U.S. Veterans, and the Legacy of War

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Adam Weinstein 0:22

Okay, thanks to everyone who's joined so far, we're going to go ahead and get started, although I know some people are still coming in. Welcome to today's panel, which is the unfinished mission, Afghan SIV partners, US veterans and the legacy of war. And this is brought to you by the Quincy Institute, which is a think tank based in Washington, DC, that envisions a more restraint oriented and diplomacy, first foreign policy. And it's also part of a new initiative at the Quincy Institute, which is the veterans and foreign policy initiative. This is actually the inaugural panel, and the idea is to amplify veterans lived experiences and give them more of a voice in foreign policy debates.

So without further ado, I'm going to introduce the panelists. First, we have Shawn VanDiver, and he is the founder of Afghan evac and principal at Gaslamp consulting, where he works with government leaders to identify innovative solutions for long term sort of challenges. He's been a big part of advocating for SIVs. And he attended the National University, the National Naval Postgraduate School and the University of San Francisco. And he is a Navy veteran as you can as you can gather from his his education. Then we have Rahmat Mokhtar, who served as an interpreter from 2011 to 2014 including for US Marines in Helmand Province during the peak of the US surge in Afghanistan. And then he left Afghanistan in 2016 on SIV, and now works as a senior finance coordinator for the International Rescue Committee, Center for Economic Opportunity. And we also have Jessica Bradley Rushing, who served as the acting director and Deputy Director for communications and engagement in the office of Afghan relocation efforts in the State Department South and Central Asia Asian Affairs Bureau. And she previously worked as a veterans case worker and district representative in the office of Congressman Bill Keating and from 2021 to 2023 so this was at the height of the evacuation. She served as a congressional point of contact contact for Afghan evac. And she's also an Army veteran. And I'm the Deputy Director of the Middle East program. I'm directing this veterans and foreign policy initiative, and I'm also a veteran of Afghanistan and the Marine Corps.

So Shawn, maybe you can take everyone back just for a couple minutes to set, set the stage for how we got here, and then we can talk about the current state of things. We had this withdrawal from Afghanistan that was negotiated by the first Trump administration and implemented by the Biden administration. And I think it's fair to say, we saw some chaos unfold at h KY or the Kabul airport, and plenty of Afghans did get out, and in sheer numbers, it was an impressive airlift which the Biden administration often boasted about. The trouble is that a lot of the Afghans who

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came out with us weren't even the Afghans that were supposed to come. And many of the Afghans who were former interpreters, or perhaps other Afghans who qualified under other programs because they were maybe a woman judge or something like that, also didn't get out, and because the Taliban took over the country so rapidly, many of these folks couldn't even make it to Kabul, because they were essentially stranded. If they had gone via road, they might have faced Taliban checkpoints and so forth, and then you'd had some people who managed to get out, but they were left stranded for years in third countries. So maybe you can just briefly go through the history of all of that and also explain to the viewers what is the SIV program, and then maybe, what is the p1 p2 what are those categories?

Shawn VanDiver 4:22

Sure. First of all, thank you so much for having me here today. Adam and Quincy Institute. Yeah. August 2021. Was the culmination of all of our worst programs, right? The SIV program is poorly constructed. They we didn't really think through the right way to stand by our wartime allies. And that was all on display in August of 2021 as the Taliban was storming through the provinces and the government was found was left flat footed right, the previous Trump administration had decimated. Resettlement ecosystem, which they're doing again today, right past this Prolog here. And so there wasn't really a lot of apparent planning that had gone into this withdrawal that was happening in August of 2021 all across America, veterans, frontline civilians, other people who had a tie to Afghanistan, or even maybe didn't have a tie to Afghanistan, but saw the images of Afghans falling off of planes, desperately seeking refuge, and took action. Right? We said, We stood up and we said, Absolutely not.

I got involved because my buddy, Lucky, was stuck in eight hours outside of Kabul, and he said, Brother, I'm surrounded by the Taliban, we're running out of ammunition. I think I'm going to die. Will you grant my last wish and help get my family back to San Diego? And that phone call was repeated 10s and, you know, hundreds of 1000s of times. After August of 2021 the chaotic withdrawal had occurred. We decided that we wanted to keep going, and so we built this partnership with the State Department Afghan evac. And the State Department built the care team, and we built enduring welcome, which launched in October of 2023 as a result of the conversations that we were having with the White House and the interagency. Or October of 2022 sorry, I saw Jessica's face, and look, it was a result of the conversations that the partnership that we had built right and the National Security Council chief of staff came to me and said, Shawn, what does what does right look like? And I said, hey, you've got to make sure that we're able to keep our promises at scale. It can't be a couple 100 a month, or, you know, 10s a month. It has to be 1000s a month, leaving Kabul getting their appropriate screening and all the vetting and all, you know, everything has to get done. And then they should be getting to America. And it should happen quickly. It can't be like Vietnam. It can't be like what we did with the Kurt.

So we did it. By the end of the Biden administration, 5000 Afghans a month were leaving Kabul, flying to a third country and then making their way here. We had fundamentally reshaped the United States refugee admissions program, with security, national security, being the

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underpinning of everything, and it we took what took 18 to 24 months or longer, down to 30 to 60 to 90 days right for refugee processing. And I want to get to your question about wartime allies here in a moment. But I think the most important thing to know is that this never would have happened without Americans standing up, being civically engaged and saying, hell no, we have to keep these promises.

And what resulted was Enduring Welcome. Enduring Welcome was the safest, most secure legal immigration pathway our country's ever seen, which is why we all thought that this would continue. Um, now who are our wartime allies? Our wartime allies are broken into sort of two tracks, right, the consular track and the refugee track. The consular track has SIVs, special immigrant visa holders, immigrant visa holders. So the family of SIVs or family of American citizens and follow join from asylum cases asylee follow to join is what we call now the consular track goes through the Bureau of Consular Affairs, and the types of people that are SIVs are interpreters, drivers. There are people who worked directly for the United States government. Got their paycheck from the United States Government served for a year, were able to still keep in touch with the person that wrote a letter for them, and hopefully their company is still alive and kicking, because they have to get all those things validated and then, and I hope we can talk about vetting and validation and verification later on, on the refugee track, p1 p2 p3 p4 family reunification, and then special cases like family of US military, there are 3000 individuals who are family of 200 active duty service members, active duty US military service members who are trapped right now because they're in the refugee track, right the other types of people in the refugee track Are prosecutors and attorneys who put the Taliban away, judges who put the Taliban away for being terrorists.

These are female tactical platoon members who made sure that we had great intelligence and actual information military intelligence collectors, partner forces who served alongside our Green Berets and navy seals and other military service members they trained, bought, bled, and in many cases, died alongside our service members. These are parliamentarians, journalists, other NGOs. These are folks in both categories, the consular track and the refugee track. All of these wartime allies have a pretty equal. I. Uh, validity to their to their claim to come to the United States. We made them promises, and now we're sort of pulling the rug out from underneath them. So we're hopeful that the administration will come out with clear language soon about what their intent is, but the the indicators aren't great.

Adam Weinstein 10:18

There's a question in the chat that I'm going to take the liberty of providing a short answer to, it says, To what extent is it normal in foreign policy, especially regarding war, to not begin when exit strategy has been firmly established? Now I would say we can debate about that. Often the policy planning process is fraught. But one thing I think is important for folks to remember is that optics were put before lives by both the former Republic and and the US government. Ashraf Ghani, knew that those Forward Operating posts would be were surrounded. They were cut off by supply routes. He was advised to bring those troops back into provincial capitals, but he didn't want to give the perception that he couldn't hold territory, and so those Afghan soldiers,

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you know, were essentially surrounded and had to either surrender or be killed. And the US government, frankly, didn't want to expedite, from what I understand, didn't want to expedite the SIV process, because that would reveal a lack of confidence in the Afghan government, and it also would have implications in domestic politics, which it still does today.

If I could just ask you one follow up, Shawn, because you said the indicators aren't good. And yesterday, a journalist Andrea Mitchell asked, Will Afghan nationals be in the travel ban? And the State Department spokesperson dodged the question and claimed there wasn't any list whatsoever, but all the leaks have indicated they are on the list. So what do you what do you take away from that?

Shawn VanDiver 11:54

I was really disappointed with the with Tammy Bruce's the spokeswoman's comments, right? One, she didn't answer Andrea Mitchell's very simple question, are SIVs or wartime allies going to be impacted by this? And now, folks that are listening, you hear me talk about SIVs, with regard to this, the way that the EO is construction constructed, it's focused on the consular track. So if I'm talking about SIVs, it doesn't have any like this shouldn't have any impact on refugees, but refugees are paused anyway. Um, look, she gave this word salad response that Afghans who are clinging to every word, right, any word that's coming out of the state department of the US government about Afghanistan, folks are clinging to every word. And she gave some sort of convoluted answer that Afghans have taken as like you're going to be fine. We know that that's not true as of right now. We know that there's no assistance for any Afghans to get out of the country or resettle when they get here. We know that they've shut down refugees completely, and we haven't seen any indication that they're trying to turn it back on.

In fact, look, I'm willing to make it clear here for God and everybody that I got a call last week with State Department people freaking out because the seventh floor was trying to shut down chief of mission processing. They were told that would be contempt of court, but an attempt was made, and so bless Tammy Bruce for her attempt at calming nerves, but I just I'm really disappointed, and the White House and State Department owe it to veterans, to frontline civilians, to everybody who stood up to help and most certainly to our wartime allies, to make clear what their position is and get them out of this limbo. The Limbo has gone on for four and a half years. I'm sorry for three and a half years, and it's killing people. So we keep hearing promises made. Promises kept step up and make something and issue a clear statement. Just say, what you fucking me?

Adam Weinstein 13:55

Oh, well, you know, being a Marine, I'm all I'm pro the F word. So we can as the as the host, but feel free to use it. But, you know, I have to say, the reason I made this the inaugural panel for the veterans and foreign policy initiative, is because it's an issue that across the spectrum of veterans, veterans care about. I mean, it's one of the only issues that's really like that, in that

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most veterans, I know what they they could be. They could be the most progressive veteran you've ever met, or they could be a Trump supporter, or they could be a libertarian who who thinks we doesn't support either of the two parties or anyone else in the spectrum. Most of them, the vast majority, support fulfilling the promise to former interpreters and Afghans who helped the mission. It is a unifying issue, and that's why it's so perplexing to me that two administrations have ignored it. That really I don't understand the politics of that, or I don't even think it makes good political sense. I want to switch over, though, to a. Rahmat for a moment, and I'm going to get to your experience as an SIV later, but first, maybe you could take a couple of minutes to tell us what was it like to serve alongside US Marines. What was it like to be an interpreter?

Rahmat Mokhtar 15:14

Hey, nice to be here. Thank you. Adam. Well, the interpreters live a at the time was to, you know, join the people who was trained in uniform or ready, and they were, they know what they are signed up for. And they're, they're being deployed to Afghanistan, where the interpreters had zero trainings, no military training or education, and they are being deployed to the war zones and to the missions with the men's and women's in uniform. And they are basically beside the interpretation. They have to carry the ammunitions of themselves, the body armor, the helmet and the weapon they they need to and they are being sharing the same risks and threats every American man in the uniform were taken in Afghanistan. They have also suffered being victims of the those screen to read attacks on the uniform, when in the search of 2011 or 214 I think that the the Talibans infiltrated people in the uniform, or attacking the the mentors of the Afghan national army and and the and the interpreter was the very first target, because they were in the first line of communication there.

So being interpreter was not just a job. It was more than that. At the time, it was taking the risk standing for the same values and missions and for the same purpose that the West, the NATO, the Northern Alliance, the people of the Afghanistan majority, stood to fight al Qaeda, to fight terrorism, to fight the domestic extremism and international terrorism. It was not just a job, and it was standing aside to a very big worldwide mission, you know, eliminating terrorism. So that's, I think, how it used to be, and it was being in service at the time

Adam Weinstein 17:35

Yeah, and, of course, I, you know, I'd add one thing, you said that they were taking the same risks as US Marines and US troops, I'd say the risks were bigger, because at the end of the day, we went home, and then this was just a for many of us, a very small chapter in our lives. And there was no threat to our families or no threat to us going forward, and we were, most of us were never going to return to Afghanistan, but for the interpreters, they had to live in that society. So there were high stakes. And of course, the use of interpreters was part and parcel the COIN strategy. We couldn't, whatever you think of coin. We couldn't conduct counter insurgency without interpreters, because we were tasked with interacting with the local population and not just engaging in combat. Maybe I'm going to come back to your experience as an SIV a little bit later. But Jessica, maybe you can give us a little bit more nuance about how

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it really works at state, or how it did work, and what changes you think have occurred with the Trump two presidency.

Jessica Bradley Rushing 18:40

Sure. Happy to thank you, Adam, for having me here today. It's an honor to be on this inaugural panel. I worked for the State Department in the Office of the Coordinator for Afghan relocation efforts for about two years, the efforts to relocate and resettle Afghan allies really evolved significantly over that period of time, and have been since the withdrawal in August of 2021 what was initially sort of a non sustainable effort in the immediate aftermath of the withdrawal really became a robust program over the course of the last three and a half years, in large part because of the concerted efforts of NGOs and civil society to sort of hold the government accountable to keeping this going. At our peak, we were relocating about 5000 Afghans per month out of Afghanistan to a third country processing site where they would complete their immigration processing, undergo all the necessary security vetting, medical checks, et cetera, and then eventually fly to the United States for resettlement. We had expanded the program slowly, but we were working at a pretty. Robust and sustainable pace for about a year and a half during my tenure there, we relocated, on average that 5000 per month.

But you know, through throughout the course of the year, we would have peaks and spikes and troughs and and, you know, probably around almost 50,000 over the course of a single year at our at our best, the processing platforms were in third countries, where we were able to move SIVs and refugees. So in some cases, the processing platform was an SIV only platform, and in other cases, refugees could also process through there. So those two tracks have two different sort of requirements for processing. And we worked closely with the embassies in the US, embassies in those countries where we were able to host these platforms. We had, you know, 28 flights per month ish on average, leaving Kabul, going to a third country. Since Inauguration Day, all of the relocation flights have paused because with the signing of the executive orders.

There were two executive orders that were signed on January 20 that had an immediate impact on our operations. So the first executive order paused the US refugee admissions program, so everybody in the refugee track, all of the case processing, and all of the travel was immediately halted. We had, at that time, already refugees waiting on processing platforms in third countries for ultimate resettlement, and their cases were just stalled and and for most of those people, they're still waiting to see what's going to happen next. There was another executive order that was signed that paused foreign aid. This did not directly impact the SIV program, but it had an indirect impact, because travel from these processing platforms to the United States was paid for with foreign aid and then the resettlement benefits that SIVs receive when they arrive here in the United States. So a resettlement agency that meets them at the airport helps them with housing, helps them get their kids enrolled in school, provides them with some, you know, startup money, essentially, so that they can get their feet under them. That's also falls under the bucket of foreign aid. So SIVs could still be processed, but they could not have their travel or resettlement funded. So because we couldn't move SIVs off of the third country platforms, we couldn't move SIVs to the third country platform.

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So it created a bottleneck. SIVs were able to self fund travel in some instances, and there are organizations, including Afghan evac that are working within coalitions to try to provide that travel funding and give people some resettlement assistance when they arrive here, something to catch them when they when they get off the airplane. But for the most part, relocation, which is, you know, the movement out of Afghanistan has been completely paused. There's been a trickle of resettlement, and we don't know what's going to happen next. Frankly, you know, there's discussion as to whether care operations will ever turn back on. So we went from what was a really robust, sustainable, systematic, secure, safe operation, and in the matter of weeks, the whole thing essentially was dismantled. It's disheartening, and now we're facing a potential travel ban, so even those SIVs, whose processing could still take place, will now be barred entry to the United States. So this is, you know, a third executive order that has massive impact on those relocation efforts.

Adam Weinstein 23:52

There's a real sort of dark irony here that it's not the Taliban that are preventing these flights from taking off from Kabul. You might think they'd prevent the flights, and they would engage in reprisals, and they would want to settle scores, but actually, although they did do some of that, they were allowing these flights to take off, and it's the US government that's preventing them. Now, right?

Jessica Bradley Rushing 24:13

It is deeply ironic. Actually, we, you know, throughout the course of the last few years, while we were doing these relocation operations, we were really careful about how we talked about the operations publicly, for the operational security of the folks who were, you know, departing Kabul, and also for, you know, in order to be able to continue operations, we needed to not be too public about the fact that they were taking place. But at this point in time. You're right. The Taliban is not the limiting factor. It is our own government.

Adam Weinstein 24:45

Rahmat, I'm going to go back to you. Maybe you can describe what your experience was like being an SIV. I think some people think you just sign up to be an SIV, and then you come here. It's not. It's actually quite difficult to go through all the bureaucracy. So maybe just. A couple minutes. You don't have to go through every step, but you could give people a sense of what your SIV journey was like.

Rahmat Mokhtar 25:07

Sure, yeah. So SIV process is pretty delicate. You start with the conversation with your supervisor, or people who you work in the ground after completing at the time, it was two years of service or employment with the US government or on behalf of US government, and then

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they would write a recommendation later with couple conditions that you're not a threat to the national security of United States. Your life is in danger because as a result of the associations and working with the US troops or mission in Afghanistan. And then from there, you have to get human resource, letter or HR verification, and you will apply for the special immigration visa. So it's a multi step process. It's just not a single email or a single application to file. You'll apply, it will go for the chief of mission, or basically to the ambassador, and I think they will review in a place called NVC, and then I think that's when they National Visa Center. I think the NVC, that's where they decide that whether you're eligible or not for the SIV first, and then after that, there will be an adjudication about your case, that whether you deny or approve, right? So once you got that com approval, I mean, historically, pre SIV was another non functional program called Chief General. It was called general, I think you had to get a letter from a general or something.

That's where the history started. And then, once you have this comma approval, you will do, you know, couple forms. You will be background checked, and then you will be, finally, after a year or so, you will be called to the embassy for an interview like for me, which was no delays in the process. And then if you have a missing document on any of the documents you need, it will take longer. But overall, at the time, it took me two years to get the visa, and I was one of the lucky ones to be able to wrap up within two years. And one of the reason, probably was my solving is basically with the, you know, communication, sort of basic office work and know how to tackle and how to work through bureaucracies in there are people who don't speak very well English, but they have work in different capacities, which was very vital and crucial at the time for the US military or personnel. But they don't know how to even tackle the process. They don't know how to go through that.

So overall, this process takes two year or so, and then you have to go through medical checkup, through security vettings, through interviews and everything, even even I was being polygraphed routinely or basically randomly and being screened for security because I was in Military Base and there was a counter intelligence CIA screening every, every six months or so, so. But still, I have to go through all the process, and it took quite two years, or in a good scenario, but in a worse scenario, it took years. I know people that last time when President Trump, come to administration, halted the process, and he's still in Afghanistan, even the prior administration couldn't relocate him. COVID hit and and just to add that you said that prior the fall of the the Republic regime in Afghanistan, the US did not expedite the SIV because we didn't want to signal, or syndrome signal to the, you know, people in the ground that, hey, we're we're just seeing, this is not a stable it's not going to work.

It wasn't only that. It was the COVID that also had that halted the whole program. And then it was prior administration, before the COVID, the beginning of the last trump administration, or the prior administration, they halted the whole SIV replace relocation too. It was coming very, very slowly. Very few 100 case maybe moved during that time. Not pretty much. And there are cases still from that era that is ready to travel and approved, even having trouble and moved to the US, which I think it's a little of allies being as escape code for the political gains and plays between the two parties. And that's not healthy and not good.

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Adam Weinstein 29:57

Yeah. I mean, it's just striking to me that two years is the, you know, the ideal example here, you know, I'm gonna, I have a question for Shawn who, in a couple minutes, might be able to walk us through how the vetting process actually works in terms of the technical side of things. You shared your experience of it and what it's like to live through it. But he, I think he's going to show some flow charts so people understand. But before I do that, I'm going to ask Jessica a quick question. And this, this question doesn't necessarily, well, not necessarily. It does not reflect my personal views, but I think it is a question that some people might have, and I think it deserves an answer, which I think there's some people who might say, Okay, well, you know, interpreters got paid. They weren't doing this just out of the goodness of their hearts. They were being paid. They were being paid a salary that was high for Afghanistan. And you We don't owe them anything, or even if we do owe them anything, we have enough problems of our own, so why should we spend taxpayer money to do this? What would you answer? What would be your answer to people who think that?

Jessica Bradley Rushing 31:04

I mean, this is an interesting question, but I also get paid. I do not do my job out of the goodness of my heart, and if my company says that I will that, you know, that they will give me a retirement, or they will give me a, you know, contributions to education, then they have to keep that promise. They have to follow through on that right. So we asked people to put their lives and the lives of their families literally on the line, and we promised them that if they did so, they would earn a pathway to immigration here in the United States to be able to build a new life. We must keep that promise, because if we don't keep the promises we make to our allies, why would anyone ally with us in the future?

Adam Weinstein 31:47

Yeah, well, I agree, I agree with that, but I think you were able to put the answer more eloquently than I would have, and I there were interpreters who were killed in combat, and there's also been interpreters who have been killed since the since the withdrawal. So it is a real risk. It's not just a matter of okay, quality of life might be better in the US, and we want that quality of life. It's a matter of real risk to themselves and their family members.

Jessica Bradley Rushing 32:13

And we know that there are people who, because of their service alongside the US, mission, have been targeted. We know for a fact that that has happened, and not once or twice, but many times. So to say that, you know, a paycheck that they received was enough compensation when part of the deal, part of the agreement we made, was this pathway to immigration is simply it's a faulty premise.

Adam Weinstein 32:39

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Yeah, I hear you there. Maybe Rahmat, do you? Do you know anyone who has, I mean, I don't, either personally or through your work, who has faced security challenges since the withdrawal due to the slow processing?

Rahmat Mokhtar 32:56

Yes, there are people that who has been, you know, basically experiencing security challenges and and some may have lost their life because of not being able to relocate themselves or to just get out of Afghanistan after the withdrawal. And in, as you mentioned, I have also known people who lost their life as an interpreter during the work, just it wasn't a job, Jessica put it very thoroughly.

Adam Weinstein 33:41

I was going to say, just like being in the US Army or Marine is not nobody's doing that for the money, either. But the reason I asked that question was, I think some people do have that perception, and I think it's important to respond to it. Jessica, maybe you could tell us about what it's like for Afghans who are in third countries, especially some of them who have been there for years. And what are the politics between those third countries and the United States? And at some point, are those third countries going to throw their hands up and say, Look, well, we promised to do this for a little while, but we're not going to do this indefinitely.

Jessica Bradley Rushing 34:16

Sure. So this the, essentially, the processing platforms that we set up in third countries also underwent an evolution over the course of the three and a half years where we were, you know, regularly moving people to them. Our were our biggest platform houses at most about 5000 people. And over the course of time, we made massive improvements to the infrastructure there. We added an entire school so that children who were there could take classes. And I was lucky enough to be able to visit that school and see the children in the classes, learning the alphabet, singing songs about math problems and and those were. The little kids. But there were also classes for teenage girls and women who had, you know, not been lucky enough to have received much education in Afghanistan, and they were, you know, learning for the first time. Some of the women had not held a pencil before they came there. So the school was a huge, huge boon to the community there. As we decreased the amount of time that people were spending on the processing sites the school, while it was it was still much in demand and still really needed. People were not there for so long that they were missing out on entire, you know, an entire school year.

But even if you're there for 3040, 6090, days, you need something for your kids to do right and giving people these cultural orientation classes and financial literacy classes, and there are, you know, women's sewing circles so that the women can have conversations and, you know, share their stories and help each other, those were critical. We made a lot of improvements to the

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housing situation. There were recreational facilities to give people something to do while they were waiting for their processing to complete. And unfortunately, a lot of those services have had to be halted because those are also funded through one of the funding mechanisms that was stopped by President Trump's EO. We do also have a processing platform that is located in in like, almost a resort setting, in fact, a resort setting. So there's, you know, it's a slightly different lifestyle for the folks who are living there. They have access to a beach. There's a daycare play area for the children that is in a former nightclub and has been completely redecorated so that it's, you know, instead of, well, I mean, it still has the red leather benches, but it also has, like, paintings from all the children who come through and they, you know, they do paintings to illustrate what they're most looking forward to When they get to America.

There's a library with access to, you know, language learning classes and all sorts of resources available to try and help people transition in a way that makes them most likely to be successful when they arrive here. Um, seeing those programs having to be cut in in the last couple months here has been really difficult. And, you know, for anybody who's ever had to sit somewhere and wait like having nothing to do and nothing to occupy your time makes the wait that much harder. So I think it's really unfortunate consequence that we've, you know, put people in a position where they are relying on the US government for their sustainment and all of the programs that we were offering that was that was making that situation not just tolerable, but actually beneficial in in helping people transition more appropriately, have also been impacted by this administration's executive orders.

Adam Weinstein 37:56

And it's not as if they can go work in those third countries. They're not authorized to work, so they're completely reliant on the US and and these children and women you're talking about are the immediate family members of the interpreters for the most

Jessica Bradley Rushing 38:08

I mean, in most cases, the women are the immediate family members. But in some cases, the women are also the principal applicant, right? So in in some of the instances, the family is coming to the United States by dint of the service of the woman in the family. So most cases, particularly on the SIV side, the principal applicant is the male. But in in the refugee track, we have higher instances of female principal applicants on that side too. So yeah, I mean, these are, it's and there's a very specific definition of who can come along with a principal applicant. It's a very narrow definition, and it is law. It is part of the part of our immigration law that defines who is qualified to come along with a principal applicant. In most cases, it is a spouse and unmarried children under the age of 21 and those are the immediate family members who are eligible for be, essentially to be a derivative of the principal applicant.

Adam Weinstein 39:07

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Yeah. And, of course, many Afghans have a broader definition of what immediate family is, but I just think that speaks to, you know, the severity of what they're facing in Afghanistan that they're willing to leave their broader family network with just their immediate family members, which is a sacrifice, particularly in Afghan culture, to come here so there. It's not, it's not really a mechanism to bring everyone you know, you really are limited to your immediate family members.

But I want to transition to another concern that some folks have, both genuinely and disingenuously, which is the security factor here? I mean, there have been cases of Afghan refugees in Europe committing terrorist attacks. There is the issue of is KP, and yet there is an but in the case of SIVs and the other categories, p1 p2 there's a very, very strict vetting process that I think a lot of folks don't understand how strict it is. Rahmat gave us an idea. I mean, he's talking about being polygraph, but maybe Jessica and Shawn could walk us through at a more technical level, for those interested in how this process works, and I think we have some slides?

Shawn VanDiver 40:22

Sure. So thank you so much. I'm going to take a bit of a liberty here to make sure we level set for folks what Afghan Evac is and what we focus on, and then we'll get into that. This is just really quick. Afghan Evac is three things, an organization, a coalition and a movement. Right? The organization is the organization that I'm the president, President of we focus on making sure that everybody has we focus on reducing uncertainty, increasing throughput and and maintaining urgency, all undergirded by national security. We as a program of the organization, manage a coalition of more than 250 organizations still working to try to help our allies. And then there's a broader movement outside of us, include including us, but including lots and lots of organizations and people, individuals and groups, Americans from every part of every political ideology, every religion, every part of the American experience that that is working to help folks get here and build their new lives in the US.

Let's go to the next slide. We I already talked about this. Let's go to the next slide. Oh, there you go. So we're gonna go really quickly through how people get into the program. First, there's two main tracks right there's the top track there, SIV, that's the consular track. And then the refugee track is bounded in orange there, and you can see that for SIVs, you have to apply, submit an application. Then you go through validation and verification. Once that validation and verification happens, you get what's called chief of mission approval, and you will submit a visa application. Once you've submitted your visa application, the case will be sent over to care on the refugee side. You have to be referred in. Somebody has to invite you, so you can't just raise your hand say, I want to be a refugee. If you're accepted, you go, you get a confirmation email, a Google form to fill out. You get a phone call from IOM, you go through some pre travel vetting, security screening. Once you clear all of that, you go over to care. And then we're not going to go through the bottom stuff, but that's sort of offshoots of the consular or refugee track, similar in fashion, right? So next slide please. In Kabul. What happens is, once the case goes over to care, care looks at your case, validates a bunch of information. Actually, I'm going to ask Jessica to go through this slide. I think she will do a better job.

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Jessica Bradley Rushing 42:54

Thank you, unprepared and need glasses to be able to even read it. So, um, so this actually shows what the relocation process is prior to travel out of Afghanistan. So care receives the cases either in the consular or refugee track from the there's two different bureaus within the Department of State that manage those two different case tracks, the Bureau of Consular Affairs and the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration. So we don't, we didn't get the case in care until the case was at a certain level of readiness, essentially, pretty far down the line, people had to be interview ready for them to even come into our database. At that point, our case management team would take over and contact individuals in our pipeline to make sure that they were now travel ready. So in order to be travel ready, everyone had to have a passport in hand. They had to have travel documents. You know, your passport, your tusker, any medical documentation there were, there was a whole list of documentation that needed to be provided.

In order for us to get people ready to travel, you needed to confirm the location of the travelers, email all those scanned documents in, and then care would do, you know, some processing to ensure that folks were had checked all those boxes, right? Everybody was travel ready, everybody was willing to travel, everybody was able to be contacted, and everybody had handed in the appropriate documentation, then they would get a call from care to set up the last couple steps that needed to be done, including biometrics, a medical exam and some sort of pre travel vetting to make sure that everybody was, you know, moving along far enough in the vetting process so that when they get To our one of our processing platforms, they're ready to do sort of more rigorous security and vetting checks that are required for every single person who comes to the US, whether that's on the consular or refugee track. Then we would organize their travel. They would go to the airport in Kabul, and then they would fly via a somewhat circuitous route on. Occasion to one of the processing platforms, where they would then stay for anywhere from, you know, at a at the lowest, we probably could process people in a matter of a couple weeks, two or three weeks, and then in some cases, it might take, you know, 90 days or more. So this was all pre travel vetting that took place before we would even put someone on a plane or

Shawn VanDiver 45:23

Even on a manifest, right? So you get through this process, there was a lot of like back and forth. Sometimes people would fall off lists. All of this stuff is still happening. This is all still happening. What's not happening Step six is not happening, yes. So what's not happening is people are not getting on planes. Go ahead and go to the next slide, and we're going to get to sort of what it looks like now. They would get to the platforms. Jessica and I had the pleasure of going and visiting platforms together. They would go through intake and orientation, they go through their immigration interviews, more security vetting. Assurances are the housing component, right? You would get assured to San Diego or to Boston or to Rochester, New York, and once you were assured you knew there was somebody waiting for you on the other end to come and welcome you to the airport. And then you would prepare for departure, and you'd fly

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onto America. All of the things at the bottom there were provided at the platform, but now things have changed.

Go to the next slide before we get into how things have changed. I just wanted to present a representation of the various steps that people go through on vetting. On the left side is for the console track. On the right side is for the refugee track, you can see there are at least eight different opportunities for vetting. In green are the things that happen in Afghanistan. In blue are the things that happen on the US government facilities, except for the very last step, which is once they arrive at US shores. Go on to the next slide, please. This. I'm not going to go through all this, but this is what Ramon just described, right? There's a ton of different things that have to happen for people to get through. So there have been rumors like, oh, people are paying, they're paying bribes, to get into the enduring welcome program. That just is not possible because of all of these things, right?

Go on to the next slide. That's SIV. This is refugee. What all what you should take away from all of this is that enduring welcome is the gold standard for vetting. Refugees was already the gold standard for vetting, but they put it on steroids. So really, if you're getting rid of this program, you're making our country less secure, which seems like a bad idea. Go on to the next slide. You can go to the next slide. We don't need the numbers there. This is what it looks like now, right now. You can't even take applications for refugees. You can't process refugee cases go on to the next slide. A lot of these things have stopped at the platforms now. They're about to they're starting to restart, except for there's no assurances, right? So there's a few 100 people left on platforms in Albania and Qatar, and they're getting some of these services now, but they're not getting assurances. There is no there's as of right now, there's never going to be a resettlement system. During this administration, they canceled all, all the contracts, so there's nobody to welcome Afghans when they get here. Except if you're a part of the community sponsorship hub, and you've signed, you're one of the 160,000 Americans who have signed up to do it on your own dime, out of the goodness of your heart, and you're you're not in every city around the world, right? So you have to hope that Afghans can afford to get to a third country to do an interview. They can afford to pay for all of their own flights to get here, and they can afford housing and other expenses while they're getting on their feet.

Jessica Bradley Rushing 49:01

Can I chime in here too? I just like to extrapolate on what you just said about, you know, citizens across the country stepping in. You know, in the beginning, when we when, when Kabul first fell, and during the last few weeks of August of 2021 we saw civil society really step up to to empower and push the government to do the right thing. Over the course of the last few years, the government has stepped in and has been keeping the promise that we made to our wartime allies. And you know, over the since January, 20 of this year, that promise has been paused, but now we see civil society stepping in again. We see regular citizens and NGOs stepping back up to say, well, the government is not keeping the promise, so we will do everything we can to fill those gaps. And I think that's a really critical part of this story, right, that that the American people want to see this happen, and when. Government stops doing what they should be doing,

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the American people continue to step back in and say, Well, fine, we'll we'll fill the gaps, and we'll catch these folks, because they deserve to be here.

Shawn VanDiver 50:13

Thank you so much, Jessica. Let's move on to the next slide, the next and final slide. I just want to make it really simple for folks thinking about the SIV process. I didn't make one for refugees, because everything is stopped for refugees, the entire thing. But for SIVs, you can still apply for SIV until december 25 of this year. You can still get a chief of mission approval. In fact, the aciv, the Afghan SIV unit, is processing, is adjudicating, 1000 decisions a week right now, but only 30% are getting through. You can still apply for a visa. After you've applied for that visa, you can get yourself to another country, but the government's not going to help you get there. And during Welcome, the government helps you get there, and there's additional checks, right? You can still interview once you have that appointment, but then there's no flight loan from IOM. You can go to Afghan evac.org/self depart, self, dash depart and sign up for a 0% loan and and resettlement assistance from the private sector, but the government's not doing it anymore, right?

So no flight loans and no post arrival resettlement support. There's no rent waiting for you when you get here. And it's, you know, it's a choice that has been made. So we're hopeful that a different choice will be made soon. We can pull the slides down now. We're hopeful that a different choice will be made soon. But we've got this looming travel ban, and we've got these a looming decision about enduring welcome, and the State Department's not even allowed to talk to Congress right now. If there's reporters on this call, maybe start asking about that. Right? The State Department employees are not allowed to respond to congressional inquiries, and Congress isn't doing anything about it. That seems crazy, right? What are we doing?

Adam Weinstein 52:15

Yeah, that I actually didn't know that. And that's that's pretty outrageous. It just strikes me that even if there is a travel ban not even discussing the merits of the travel ban, but even if there was a travel ban, it shouldn't be that complicated to have a carve out for SIV, especially since the process already exists.

Shawn VanDiver 52:26

Well, I'm glad you said that, because state in their report that is supposed to go to the White House soon, we've been told that there's a recommendation that there be a carve out, but we're hearing that in the travel ban draft that's going around the White House that is not in there. So what we're hoping for, we haven't gotten any indication that this will happen, but we're hoping for is that there will be some sort of reconciliation, where that carve out makes it in there, and that they'll restart refugee processing, right? Because it's not good enough to just do one and not the other. Both us, rep and consular trek have equal, equal claim to this, to wartime ally status and equal they're equally deserving.

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Adam Weinstein 53:09

That would be like in putting it into human terms, your interpreter versus your woman prosecutor the Taliban.

Shawn VanDiver 53:16

Or your interpreter versus a woman who is helping collect information for you serving in the Afghan military, making sure that you stayed.

Adam Weinstein 53:23

Okay, I just wanted to put a human face to it. We only have about maybe six minutes left, so I want to, I want to go back to Hama one last time, but before we do that, and this topic, in and of itself, could be a whole panel, but there's been several questions in the Q and A about Pakistan. And of course, Pakistan, since the anti Soviet war in Afghanistan, has hosted a lot of Afghans so and they don't really, you know, there's not birthright citizenship, and that you have Afghans who have been in Pakistan generationally, and their status is still nimble, and they're classified in various ways. I, you know, sometimes I feel ill equipped to preach to other countries about what they should do with Afghans, when, you know, in my personal opinion, we don't, we can't even get our own act together. But what is the status of the Afghans waiting in Pakistan. I mean, Pakistan, the Pakistani state has scapegoated them in many ways, and blame them for TTP terrorism, and I think in order to distract from from that issue, they've ordered many Afghans deported. But what is the status of Afghans who would be resettled in the US, who are waiting in Pakistan?

Shawn VanDiver 54:39

Sure, so, a couple quick things on that, right? I want to frame this around the commitments that have been made for a long time. 2001 to 2023, or 2021 to 2023, there were a lot of Afghans, sort of stuck in limbo, especially in the refugee track in Pakistan, right? They were always processing SIVs. But. It was sort of hard to get diplomats in there to do the processing. And then Pakistan was sort of refusing to allow a refugee support center for processing refugees at scale there. But magic happened in 2023 we wrote a letter to the Pakistani government. The State Department did some relentless diplomacy. They dropped the whole list on paper, on a desk in Pakistan, and helped bring out, Hey, this is the size of our pipeline. We want to help these folks. And we came to an agreement that said we're going to get these folks out in two years. And they were moving on that now, assurances were a problem. Resettlement agencies and PRM weren't finding housing fast enough for folks there. For folks there. So if I'm Pakistan, I'm really frustrated that we've paused refugee arrivals. We've paused enduring welcome because that was working, and now they feel like they've been sold a bill of goods.

If I'm an Afghan there, I'm terrified, because Pakistan, in response to the executive orders has said, you're all out of here, right? We're going to get you out of here if you're not, if you don't

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figure it out by March 31 we're kicking you out. So we hope that Pakistan will find a different pathway, while the courts in Congress and the president work out what reality is going to look like. But for right now, it's really a bleak situation, and it's a situation of our making which is fucking unconscionable.

Adam Weinstein 56:28

You have anything to add, Jessica?

Jessica Bradley Rushing 56:32

I mean, I think Sean ended it, well, it is fucking unconscionable. I think, you know, the part of what we part of what the State Department has always done in enduring welcome is worked with these partner countries in a really successful way to host third country platforms to host to start refugee reset or refugee processing at scale in Pakistan, and that was a priority in the previous administration, so that enduring welcome could be successful without that relentless diplomacy, this kind of a program can't, can't keep going. And you know there, there are some kind of alarming indicators now that those, those diplomatic efforts are not being sought as determinedly under this administration, and you know, countries will respond in kind. So if we aren't, this is another example of keeping a promise, right? If we're not going to keep the promise we made to the countries who helped us, the partner countries who let us host folks there, then we're not going to get the same kind of alliances and partnerships in return.

Adam Weinstein 57:43

Rahmat, we have about two minutes left, so I'm going to give you the last word. I mean, this is your life. This is your lived experience. You were an interpreter. You did arrive, luckily, safely as an SIV, but this is your community that's being left behind. So whatever you want to say, if you have a message just to the people on this panel, or to the Trump administration, or to the American people writ large, whatever you want to say, the floor is yours to end this panel.

Rahmat Mokhtar 58:12

Thank you. Adam, well, I think we have said all need to be said and and I think the administration knows what they're doing and what's happening so but what they don't know is that the consequences of their decisions are putting people's life in danger, and people who you know, stood by the American men and women in uniform also, this is going to be a misery for America as a country in the world stage, and how in the world someone would would trust us again, right? So I am very far away from my journey being an SIV now. I'm an American citizen. I am proudly, you know, attached to this country. And I have the the everything I need to, you know, all the feelings, everything for the for a place called country, and then I'm worried my for my next generation, for my kids, like, how if they are going to be somewhere in a war or something. And then also for people who, right now, they are, you know, in a in one way or the other, representing America in a world stage, and then because of that representation or their

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presence, we are safe here. We're secure here. We're at peace here, and we're just living a stable life. So and then that would be the most concerning thing that how they will be, you know, treated with the others or the other people in the ground, how they would respect them because of the Afghans, or many other foreign policy things happening around. The world. You know people in the embassies, in intelligence community everywhere in the world, how they would trust an American individual.

So this is important to that that administration knows that, hey, if you want to make the America Great Again, or if you want make America a country or something that you think or you're someone who love America, you should care people who help America. So, and those are interpreters or local service employees of the embassy or anywhere. So this is the consequence of decisions that they are making, and this is how it's going to impact them. And people are losing their life, or people losing their faith and trust in America, so I don't think they would want that. That's not how you would, you know, love your country, I think very simple, if you fear the security and all of that. I think it's a great country. We have a great establishment, great system. We shouldn't be that weak and fearful of few junky terrorists. We always caught them on time, and we will cut in the future too.

Adam Weinstein 1:01:12

Yeah, it's, it's an issue. It's a it's a to me, at least, it's a black and white human issue that shouldn't be politicized, but for some reason, has been. But there's time to reverse that. Anyway, I want to thank you for your final words, Rahmat, and I want to thank Jessica and Shawn. If you are interested in the work that Afghan Evac does, you can just Google Afghan evac and their website as one word, and their website will come right up and responsible statecraft, the publication also has done some reporting on these issues. So thanks for the work you do. Thanks for your service, Rahmat, and we'll have more panels related to issues that veterans are interested in going forward. So to the viewers who are still on look out for that. Thanks everyone. Thanks. Adam, you guys can thanks for for everything you guys, you guys can drop off whenever you have to. But I think it was a great panel. So, you know, I appreciate you guys joining, and I hope some people who might not have understood these issues come out with a better understanding.