Resettling Hope

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Dedication

To all refugees and immigrants, for their strength and patience.
Acknowledgement

First and foremost, I want to acknowledge the warm hospitality of the Afghan families who trusted me and allowed me into their homes. They welcomed me with open hearts and shared their feelings. I appreciate their trust.

I also wish to acknowledge the faculty members at the Corcoran School of the Arts & Design of George Washington University who helped me shape my visual and storytelling abilities: Steve Elfers, Susan Sterner, Gabriela Bulisova, Andy Grundberg, Michael Kleinfeld, Manuel Roig-Franzia and Neva Grant, along with all the other visiting artists and faculty members who critiqued my work, and inspired me to better my project.

I’d like to acknowledge my family and friends for their support and invaluable comments and feedback, especially my husband, Hamid Azizi, and my classmates at the Corcoran. I am indebted to all these people for their kindesses, straightforwardness and encouragement. I wish to make them proud with my work.
Abstract

Resettling Hope

*Resettling Hope* is a documentary film and photography project exploring the challenges and experiences of Afghan war refugees in the United States. This multimedia project focuses on five Afghan families resettled under the Special Immigration Visas (SIV) program in Alexandria, Va., and Hyattsville, Md. These families left Afghanistan because their work with U.S. contractors, the U.S. Government, or the U.S.-trained Afghan Army put them at great risk. Upon arriving in America, the families receive minimal benefits for their first 30 days. After that they are on their own to tackle the difficulties of a new and complex culture and system. These families confront unexpected hardships including unemployment, language barriers, the high cost of living, depression and loss of community and cultural identity. The primary voices in “Resettling Hope” are the Afghan men, women and children of these resettled families and an Afghan expert on the mental health effects of forced emigration.
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Preface

I decided to pursue this project because I have a deep personal connection and intimate understanding of the struggle Afghan immigrant families face upon arriving to the United States. I came to the United States, from Afghanistan in 2009 on a full scholarship to pursue my bachelor’s degree at Middlebury College in Middlebury, Vt. While I was thankful to study at a prestigious American college, I was also overwhelmed by the fast-pace and the cultural differences of life in America.

Everything was new to me. I had no close friends. I was the only international student at the college who wore a *hejab* and did not shake hands. Suddenly, I was hit by a culture that was completely different from my own. Although at Middlebury it was well-known that students routinely gained 20 pounds in the first year of college, I lost 20 pounds that year.

It was a long journey, with a much-needed support from American and Afghan friends, before I learned to navigate my way in this culture.

It was in summer of 2013, that I met the Rafiqi family who immigrated to the United States via the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program. It was then I began to learn about the program and its recipients.

The U.S. Department of State was authorized to issue SIVs to Afghan nationals under section 602 (b) of the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009. The program has been extended, and the current application deadline for SIVs for Afghans is December 31, 2016. The National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2016 allocates 3,000 additional visas for Afghan principal applicants, for a total of 7,000 since December 19, 2014.
When I started to meet with and witness the challenges of Afghan families who came to the United States on SIVs, I was immediately reminded of my first days here. It was then I decided to create this project. It is my hope that this project will benefit future Afghan immigrants who come through this program, and offer ideas to the SIV program as a means to improve some of its shortcomings.
Resettling Hope explores the lives of five Afghan families who recently came to the United States through Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs). These are families who had to leave Afghanistan and immigrate to the United States because their lives were in danger in Afghanistan; these are the people who worked with U.S. military personnel and American contractors in Afghanistan. This project studies the day-to-day challenges of these families as they learn to rebuild their lives in the United States. It also offers recommendations for improving the experiences of families with the SIV program. The challenges of immigrants in the United States are not unique to only Afghan SIV immigrants; studying the difficulties of these Afghan families brings knowledge and understanding on how we can be a support to newcomers from any country.
Methodology

The primary source research of this project is based on the interviews done with the families. At the center of the project are five Afghan families who have relocated to the United States as part of the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program set-up to aid Afghan employees formerly under the employment of U.S. agencies, contractors, or non-profits, who were threatened by violence due to their service.

Interviews with members of the five families are used to record first-hand accounts of working with Americans, the threats families faced, and the consequent impact of the decision to leave their home country. Four of the Afghan families interviewed live in the same neighborhood in Alexandria, VA; a fifth family lives in Hyattsville, Md. The following are the names of the families I interviewed. (In each case the male head-of-household was the person employed by a U.S. agency, non-profit organization, or by an American contractor.)

1. Ishaq Rafiqui and Khatera Rafiqui—have three daughters and live in Alexandria, Va;
2. Sayed Zabiullah and Nazifa—have four boys and two girls and live in Alexandria, Va;
3. Hashmat Azizi and Yalda Aizi—have one daughter and live in Alexandria, Va;
4. Mustafa Ahmadi and Arezo Ahmadi—have two girls and one boy. They live in Alexandria, Va;
5. Mirwais Amani and Beheshta Amani live in Maryland. They do not have children.
The interviews were not only conducted with the men who worked with the U.S. Government in Afghanistan, but also with their wives and children in order to gather their important stories and perspectives.

Also interviewed:

- Dr. Nahid Aziz, Associate Professor of Clinical Psychology at the American School of Professional Psychology at Agosy University in Washington, D.C. Dr. Aziz, an Afghan herself, is an expert on mental health of refugee and immigrant population.

Hoped to interview:

- A caseworker and a management personnel from Catholic Charities, a resettlement agency in Arlington, Va. This agency is responsible for providing benefits to these families. I felt it was crucial to hear their side of story to know why they aren’t better able to meet the needs of some of these Afghan families. I made several contact attempts with this organization and IRC; however, both organizations were not collaborative and refused to answer any questions.

Online and printed materials that were reviewed include:

- Afghan SIV Applicants Association page on Facebook. A page that helps to answer the applicants’ questions regarding SIV. It is also a web page that connects many SIV applicants in Afghanistan and the United States. I plan to speak with the operator of this page at a later date.

- Documents of the Afghan SIV program on the U.S. Department of State website
and the U.S. Embassy website.

- News reports on this and similar subjects from the New York Times, the Washington Post, ABC News, NPR, Huffington Post, etc.
- Printed books about previous Afghan immigrants.

The culmination of this research is a short documentary, comprised of original and archival footage, published on a website featuring additional images and supplemental resources.

This research paper focuses on five Afghan families while the documentary film is about two Afghan families specifically: the Zabiullahs and Rafquis. The first family was followed and documented since their arrival at the airport on Nov., 2015. The second family has been observed and photographed since their arrival on July 7, 2014.

Along with the documentary film, a photo project has been also created to showcase the visual story of these families in still pictures.
Literature and Visual Review

There have been important studies done on migration and refugee flow that help us understand transnationalism and globalization better. These studies have had a valuable impact on anthropology, and the human and social sciences in general. Upon emigrating, communities cease to be discrete and isolated units because when people migrate, their territory must widen; they adopt a new culture, root in a new territory and find new belongings while they try to preserve some of their past culture. People have migrated and resettled in new places for as long as human beings have existed, and each migration has had motivations and struggles behind it.

Alessandro Monsutti in his book *War and Migration: Social Networks and Economic Strategies of the Hazaras of Afghanistan* explains that migration is often related to violent conflicts, the attraction of labor markets or other factors but it is important to first distinguish between forced migration (involuntary) and voluntary migration. While the Western media and public opinion may consider political refugees as economic migrants and the voluntary migrants as refugees who come to seek employment, Monsutti explains that the reasons for migration are more complex than that, “In many cases, spatial dispersion is a survival strategy that makes it possible to use a variety of ecological and socio-economic niches.” (p. 4) This is true especially for those immigrants who come from a war-zone country.

While there is a lot of information on migration, few writers have written analytical research on Afghan’s migration and the reasons behind it. An exceptional work is the *Self-settled Refugees* done by Kerry M. Connor in 1989. Connor analyzed the
responses of 771 head of Afghan refugee families in Pakistan to determine why they left their country. The answers were: “Fear for life or livelihood in the wake of bombing and military hostiles; avoidance of conscription; anti-Communism; recent imprisonment or fear of arrest; suspect family members; harassment due to membership of a pro-Communist organization and other reasons” (p. 33)

As Monsutti says immigrants are “pure victims torn from their habitual setting” (p. 35). After decades of war, Afghanistan’s security condition is seriously compromised. Even outside the main combat zones, hostilities are frequent and happen unexpectedly. Acts of brutality occur in daylight and tension runs high between residents. Immigrants are not just “pure victims torn from their habitual setting,” but also destabilized in the new host-country’s setting, until they gradually learn their new environment and find their habitat.

No extensive research has been done on the recent wave of Afghan immigrants in the United States and attendant challenges; however, in examining the literature on former Afghan immigration trends to the United States, parallels can be discerned between the challenges from former years to the current Afghan SIV immigrants. *The Chosen Shore*¹ by Ellen Alexander Conley brings to us stories of immigrants from different countries including two Afghan immigrants and their personal histories and tales. These Afghan immigrants talk about their journey to the United States and the challenges, faced here. Their stories inform us of difficulties these families go through to survive the migration. Their stories attest to of hardship of finding a new identity in a new country; struggles to find a good and permanent job; to place a roof over their heads

¹ *The Chosen Shore: Stories of Immigrants*
these stories are similar to the challenges of the Afghan SIV families resettled here.

*Afghan Resistance: The Politics of Survival* by Grant M.Farr addresses the ways Afghans learned to cope with emigration. In this book there is a chapter allocated to “Afghan Refugee Women and Their Struggle for Survival.” It is not deniable that the role of women in migration is very sensitive and important. A role that is often minimized while in reality women have a significant position in supporting themselves, their husband and kids, keeping alive the traditions and their ties with their home country. As explained in this book, “Refugee women must cope with the trauma of enforced idleness and isolation brought about by being separated from their domestic work and crowded into refugee camps or among the host population” (p 103). In the United States, Afghan SIV women are not separated from their domestic work but they are forced into isolation from their families and homes and into smaller homes with expensive rents and lots of stress to handle. They even sometimes are forced to take on both the domestic work and outside jobs because their husbands either cannot find a job, or if they have one, the salary is not sufficient. The difficulties force Afghan women to put aside the traditional roles they held in Afghanistan and hurry to help their families in time of difficulties. The ways SIV female immigrants in the United States cope with immigration challenges is brave and inspiring, something that is evident in the documentary *Resettling Hope*.

The two documentaries which helped this research and provided information on the challenges of Afghan SIV immigrants before coming to the United States were

*Hiding in Afghanistan: The Interpreters* by Vice News and the *Is the US Abandoning*  

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2 *Afghan Resistance: The Politics of Survival* by Grant M.Farr and John G.Merriam
Afghan Interpreters to Certain Death? by Reason TV. Both documentaries are voice-narrated, accompanied by short interviews of subjects and their family pictures. The first documentary, Hiding in Afghanistan: The Interpreters follows Afghan interpreters in Afghanistan who applied for the SIVs program and are waiting for their visas. Both documentaries effectively show the dangerous situation these families live in. They live in hiding from danger and are unable to work because their projects with American NGOs or American military have finished and they can not find any other secure place to work. The documentary addresses the fact that the family members of these translators were kidnapped, tortured or even killed because the translator’s worked with Americans. The prolonged process of SIV issuance makes the life even harder for these translators and their families.

The second documentary, Is the US Abandoning Afghan Interpreters to Certain Death? talks about some of the SIV program’s problems in Afghanistan and the fact that there haven’t been enough visas issued. The visa process has been very long while interpreters’ lives are in danger in Afghanistan. In both of these documentaries women and children are not present but I plan to highlight their stories in my documentary. Also both documentaries focus on the SIV immigrants who were interpreters. The subjects for this research paper and documentary are people who were employees for the U.S. contractors in Afghanistan.

In Sep 23. 2015, NPR did an audio report and an article on SIV immigrants. This report talks about an American father who tried to bring his son’s translator to the United States. He vouched for his son’s translator so he could come to the United States. He

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3 “American Dad Fights For The Afghan Interpreter Who Aided His Fallen Son.”
realized the camaraderie and friendship between his son and this translator, the service he made to Americans, and the danger he faced. If the Taliban kidnap interpreters they can get access to sensitive information such as military tactics and locations. Thus, it is also in America’s best interest to get these Afghan employees out of Afghanistan.

*Last Week Tonight* with John Oliver did a show about the SIV program as well. He interviewed a translator who made it out of Afghanistan. This interview made it clear that there are still many Afghans who are unsafe and need to leave immediately but they are stuck and in danger because of U.S. bureaucracy. The show brings up the inefficiency of the SIV program by mentioning that according to the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009, annually as much as 1,500 visas could be issued annually to Afghans employees worked on behalf of the U.S however, in 2011 only three visas were issued. The visa issuance improved later, yet the long prolonged process of SIV still is in effect.

While all these works provide useful ideas about the SIV program and its challenging process, they don’t delve deeply into the lives of Afghan families who are actually in the United States. They cover one side of the coin – on what happens to Afghans who want to apply for SIV program and come to United States. My research and documentary will show the other side of coin and tell the story of what happens once these families reach to the United States.

Unfortunately, not enough work has been done on Afghan SIV families’ challenges in the United States. The news articles that have been written on Afghan SIV are mainly focused on the extension of the SIV program, making it more efficient and fast to get the interpreters out of Afghanistan. News titles like:

"In Afghanistan Interpreters Who Helped U.S. in War Denied Visas; U.S. Says They Face No Threat." Washington Post, 10 November 2013 by Kevin Sieff

“Visas for Iraqis, Afghans who helped U.S. in jeopardy” AirForceTimes, July 12, 2013 by Paige Sutherland

The Western media has been focused entirely on bringing Afghan interpreters to the U.S. No one is paying attention to the challenges these people face once they are resettled here.

The only article done on SIV Afghan family challenges in the United States was an article by Al Jazeera, “Resettled in the U.S., Afghan Interpreters Plead for Help.” In this article, some of the challenges the SIV families were explained: from not being able to find a job after applying to a thousands jobs, to being forced into living in unsafe neighborhoods and unclean houses infested with mice, and to not being able to have their own identity and names. The article mentions how SIV families have problem with the names U.S. Embassy assigned them. The term “FNU” - First Name Unknown became names of many Afghans who came to the United States. Since many Afghans do not have a last name and use their father's name as a last name in Afghanistan, the U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan moved their first name to their last name and assigned “FNU” as their first name. In this article the Afghan families tell about how hard their transitions have been and plea for help from the U.S. Government, the American and Afghan communities in
the United States.

In addition to these materials, I also reviewed photographic works on immigration. Again, I couldn’t find any specific photo project done on SIV families in the United States. However, I reviewed other photo projects of immigrants in the United States. Among many, I found the work of photographer David Gonzalez strong. His photo essays were published on *Lens Blog* of the New York Times. Two of his photo essays, “An Immigrant’s Dream for a Better Life” and “Garifuna Immigrants in New York” gave me perspective on how to photograph my subjects and what important details to look for when I am photographing. He captured the emotions of his subjects very well while showing their uniqueness. The exceptionality of these immigrants is evident by their traditions, clothing and expressions in the pictures. Gonzalez also focuses on showing the relationship between the Garifuna immigrants, and their contribution to the American community. His pictures depict day-to-day lives of Garifuna immigrants and the reasons they had to leave their country behind and harbor to the United States.
Research Essay

Part 1 - Challenges in Afghanistan: Why Afghans are forced to leave.

Afghanistan has been tormented by war, destruction and bloodshed for decades, but worst of all was the Taliban regime – a regime that stomped on all the basic human rights. After September 11, when the United States decided to invade Afghanistan, people were hopeful that they would get rid of the Taliban, but they were greatly disappointed. Not only was the Taliban not defeated but now Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has a foothold in Afghanistan. After spending billions of dollars on war in Afghanistan, the United States decided to pull out its troops and Afghans remained insecure, hopeless, and more in danger and chaos than before.

During the 14 years that American and international troops were in Afghanistan, many Afghans worked with U.S. and international military personnel, as well as American and International NGOs, companies and agencies. These Afghans knew the danger they were putting themselves and their families in by working with the “infidels,” however, they accepted the danger in order to secure an income, in order to be able to live and survive.

When you live in a country where the government is corrupt and incompetent; a woman is burnt midday in the center of the capital city; people are beheaded because of their religious sect and ethnicity; another woman is stoned for falling in love, and girls

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4 Taliban refer to westerners as infidels
5 Farkhunda was killed and burnt on March 19, 2015 in Kabul by a mob who thought she burnt
6 Seven Afghans of Hazara ethnic group (Shia) were kidnapped and beheaded by ISIL in Zabul, Afghanistan on November 10, 2015, among them women and children.
7 Taliban fighters stoned a 22-year-old Afghan woman to death after she was accused of adultery, on Nov 4, 2015
are poisoned for going to school\textsuperscript{8}, you become a sorrowful person who wonders if you will be the next victim. The only thing that keeps Afghans going is their family bond, their love for each other and their faith. In the midst of all difficulties, they cheer each other and try to be thankful for what they have. They are proud of their identity; they love their country and hope it was secured – that they never had to leave it.

The insecurity in Afghanistan has increased tremendously after the international community started pulling out troops. Many companies also ended projects and left thousands of Afghans without jobs. The economic problems and serious daily dangers broke apart many families and forced them to migrate. Afghans who worked with the U.S. agencies and U.S. military personnel are daily targets of the Taliban and conservative insurgent groups who would not hesitate to torture and kill. Knowing this, the United States opened up Special Immigrant Visas for Afghans to help them come to the United States.

Afghans who immigrate to the United States come with sad and happy hearts: They are sad because they have to leave their lives behind: their family, their friends, their land, and their belongings. They get to bring only 20 kilos per person, which includes a few clothes and some necessary belongings. But they come with happy hearts that at least their children will be alive and they will have a future.

\textbf{Part 2- Applying for SIV}

Not everyone who is in danger gets the chance to get out of Afghanistan, or qualifies for Special Immigrant Visas. The SIV program asks for a list of seven

\textsuperscript{8} Taliban had poisoned school girls in different provinces numerous times, the recent attack was in Herat City Aug 2015
documents to approve Afghan applicants. The list is as following:

1. **Proof of 12 Months Employment in Afghanistan**: A letter from applicant’s employer’s Human Resources (HR) department confirming that he or she was employed by, or on behalf of, the U.S. government in Afghanistan between October 7, 2001, and September 31, 2015, for at least one year.

2. **Letter of Recommendation by Direct U.S. Citizen Director**. (If the direct U.S. citizen supervisor is not available, the applicant should provide a letter of recommendation signed by your non-U.S. citizen supervisor and co-signed by the U.S. citizen who is responsible for the contract)

3. **DS-157, Supplemental Nonimmigrant Visa Application**

4. **Proof of Afghan Nationality**: (A copy of Passport or Translated Afghan Nation ID)

5. **Biographic Data**

6. **Threat letter** (A brief statement describing the threat you face or have faced as a result of your employment by or on behalf of the U.S. Government in Afghanistan)

7. **Scanned Copy of Employee Badge**

There are Afghans who worked for American NGOs whose lives are in danger but for complex reasons, they are not eligible to apply for SIVs. For example, International Relief Development is an NGO that receives funds from USAID but their employees were told they are not eligible for SIVs. While the Louis Berger Group, which is another American company that received its funding from USAID, is eligible for
the SIV program. When IRD employees applied for SIVs, their cases were rejected and they received a letter that says, “Employment with companies or organizations that have a grant or cooperative agreement with the U.S. Government does not meet the requirements of the SIV program.”

There are Afghans who would be eligible but their company already closed and they do not have a way to find their direct supervisor, or an American colleague who would give them a recommendation and thus there is no chance of them being admitted to SIV programs. The ones who actually qualify and are successful in providing all the documents necessary have to wait an extensive time for approval. On the Department of State website in the SIV section it states that the average processing time for this program is 6-13 months. However, in talking to some of the Afghan families in the United States and reading numerous reports about this I learned that it can actually take up to five years for Afghans to get SIV approval.

“I personally know some SIV applicants who have been waiting for over six years and have been continuously employed by the U.S. Government for the past 10 to 11 years,” said Ronald Payne on a report. Payne is Director of Allied Freedom Projects, a nonprofit organization established in 2007 to assist Afghan and Iraqi SIV refugees.

“The Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Processing Steps” table on page 23 shows the 13 steps each SIV applicant needs to go through. After an Afghan applicant submits an SIV application, it takes 50 days for the National Visa Center (NVC) to review the application for completeness. And that is the first step, 12 more steps remain after that before the application is approved.

9 Afghans Working For the U.S in Afghanistan Are Left Behind as Conflict Draws To A Close by
It shouldn’t be difficult to trust the people who worked shoulder to shoulder with American soldiers and employees. The translators and employes who saved Americans lives shouldn’t be put through extensive background check but they are. The waiting time of families I interviewed (from the time they submitted their application until they received their visas) are as follows:

**Ishaq Rafiqui:** 2 years

**Sayed Zabiullah:** 4 Years (He was denied once and applied again)

**Hashmat Azizi:** 3 Years (Hashmat was denied once and applied again)

**Mustafa Ahmadi:** 13 Months

**Mirwais Amani:** 15 Months
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Current average processing times for Afghan cases applying in Kabul (business days)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chief of Mission</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Applicant submits COM application package to State’s NVC.</td>
<td>Applicant-controlled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>NVC reviews documents for completeness.</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>NVC sends completed COM package to U.S. Embassy Kabul.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>U.S. Embassy Kabul reviews COM application and makes a decision to approve or deny.</td>
<td>10 (if all required documents are present)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Embassy Kabul advises NVC if COM application is approved. NVC immediately sends approval letter to applicant. (If any documents reveal that applicant does not qualify for the program, the COM application is denied.)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form I-360</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Applicant self-petitions to DHS U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) using form I-360.</td>
<td>Applicant-controlled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7*</td>
<td>USCIS adjudicates petition and sends to NVC if approved.</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NVC = National Visa Center

COM = Chief of Mission
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>NVC sends instruction packet to applicant requesting standard immigrant visa documentation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Applicant submits required documentation to NVC.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>NVC reviews documents for completeness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>NVC schedules applicant for next available interview at U.S. Embassy Kabul.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Applicant is interviewed by consular officer on the scheduled appointment date. Administrative processing is initiated following the interview.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13**</td>
<td>The applicant's case undergoes administrative processing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Upon completion of administrative processing, applicant is instructed to obtain a medical exam. The visa is issued if applicant is eligible. In some cases, the passport will have expired and require renewal by the applicant.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Based on NVC data**

**Line 13 totals include data for principal applicant cases issued during FY 2014. Processing time for cases that remain pending cannot be calculated without a completion date.**

**U.S. government processing times do not factor in applicant-controlled steps. Overall processing times are greater than USG processing times.**

**Processing steps are for SQ SIVs.**

**The majority of applicants receive SIV status by going through the process explained in this chart. Applicants who obtain SIV status in the United States apply for adjustment of status from USCIS.**
After the applicant’s documents are approved, he needs to fill out a visa application and wait up to one month to get scheduled for his visa and even then there is no guarantee that he will get his visa. There have been Afghans whose SIV documents were approved but their visas were denied.

For those who get their visas, they then have to wait again until the International Organization for Migration (IOM) contacts them to arrange their travel. They must travel on an IOM-arranged flight. If they choose not to wait and arrange their own flight, nobody would meet them at the airport upon arrival in the United States. They would need to find their own housing and do everything by themselves.

The flights IOM arranges for these families usually have two or three stops which is draining on everyone, especially on the children. Sayed Zabiullah had three stops, “My 1-year-old boy was crying on the plane because he was very tired from the long trip.” Sayed says. They traveled for three days. IOM buys the flight tickets for the immigrants on the loan. The SIV immigrants need to repay IOM after six months of resettlement in the US. The cost of the tickets for Sayed’s family (eight members) was around $8,500.

The families who do not wait for IOM travel arrangements, because they are in danger or worried something may happen, are disappointed when they get to the United States because nobody will pay attention to them; the resettlement agency gives priority to the families who come via IOM.
Part 3 – Afghans Immigration to America

Afghans have immigrated to the United States since the 1920s. From the 1930s to early 1970, they came mainly for education purposes. After 1979, when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, around five million Afghans were displaced and forced to migrate to different countries including the US. (Eigo)

The new wave of Afghan immigrants started coming to America after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. Many of them came as students, some through asylum, and others as refugees via the SIV program and the United Nations.

According to the Embassy of Afghanistan in Washington, D.C., the overall Afghan population in the United States in 2011 was about 300,000. The U.S. regions that have highest Afghan population are California, Northern Virginia, New York and Florida.

Ellen Alexandar Conley, in her book *The Chosen Shore: Stories of Immigrants* writes about the stories of two Afghan immigrants who came to United States before 9/11. One of them, Zohra Saed, talks about what she imagined America would be before arriving, “I had the idea that the United States would be a Betty Boop or Popeye cartoon.” Still the assumptions are the same; Afghans know America through the lens of the media. They imagine America as the big land of opportunities that is filled with jobs, benefits and colors. Their perception of America is from the movies and cartoons they see back home – movies with happy, wealthy families and clean, safe neighborhoods. When they get to United States and see a different reality, they become depressed.

The list of benefits they may receive is minimal. The U.S. Government policy for SIV immigrants is to provide 30 days of assistance in the first days of arrival which
includes housing, applying for a social security card, learning about employment services, enrolling kids in school, assisting families in how to use public transportation and getting access to English Language Classes.

- “The resettlement agency to which you are assigned receives $1,875 per person in U.S. Government funds, of which a minimum of $925 must be spent directly on your behalf. These funds will be used to pay for your rent and/or basic necessities. Some portion of it may be given directly to you in cash. The resettlement agency will make sure you have a small amount of money for daily needs.” The Refugee Benefit Election Form explains to SIV immigrants.

These families are also eligible to apply for food stamps and Medicaid for up to eight months. One may think these benefits are enough but they are not because they are very short-term. The aid needs to be for a longer period of time so that families can find a way to become independent.

Part 4 – Challenges for SIV immigrants in the United States

We may think when immigrants and refugees get to a free and safe country, their struggle is over, but it is not. Afghan SIV immigrants face different challenges, including:

- **Language Barriers:** For the SIV families, usually the case is that the man who worked with the U.S. contractors/Military Personnel is the only family member who knows English. Even for these men, hearing different accents is overwhelming in the beginning. The majority of SIV families’ women and children do not know English when they come to the United States. Thus, doing
even basic daily tasks like answering the phone and filling out papers is difficult. Zohra Saed in Conley’s book talks about her language barrier when she went to kindergarten in the U.S., in 1980, “Coming to America, no one understood me,” because she mixed three languages together, she spoke Dari (Persian), Arabic, and Uzbek. “I got frustrated because here I was, and everybody was my age, and it was fun, but no one could communicate with me.”

The same happens to the SIV immigrant’s kids-especially older kids because it was proved that as the person’s age higher, it takes longer for them to learn English. Children go through a rough time at school until they learn the language and find friends. In the first days of school, Ishaq Rafiqui’s second daughter, Muzhda who is in second grade wanted to ask for rice but instead said she wants “ice.”

- Employment: Securing a good job has been difficult for SIV immigrants. The men have had strong jobs back home; some of them worked for the U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan, some were IT officers, engineers and doctors. And when they get to the US, they hear that their work experience abroad doesn’t count and they become disheartened. Mirwais Amani, the SIV immigrant in Maryland says, he worked in Afghanistan for the U.S. Embassy as a contract manager. He handled millions of dollars and had people working for him, “Now when I hear my work experience does not count here, I feel discriminated against. Is it because I am Asian?” he asks.

The background check usually takes a longer time for Afghans because of their names. Many Afghans first names are “FNU” in their passports and green card.
Afghans use their father’s names on their passports as their last names but this did not work for the U.S. Embassy. So, they started a process to use the first name of each Afghan as their last name and “FNU” – First Name Unknown – as their first name in their passport. Ishaq’s wife name is Khatera but on her green card, she is listed as “FNU.” These three bureaucratic initials haunt many Afghans when they want to apply for jobs since most of their documents from Afghanistan do not match with their “FNU” names on their green cards. After much difficulty, some find jobs but they are not good jobs with good pay, usually those are clerk jobs at Wal-Mart, gas stations, pizza delivery or other jobs, which pay the minimum wage. Ibrahim Mujadadi, the other Afghan immigrant in Conley’s book talks about his hard experience of getting a job in the United States and mentions that while he was from a very well known, wealthy family in Afghanistan, he had to get a job at the Holiday Inn. “At that time it was a little bit shocking to be addressed roughly as a busboy as compared to former lives in Afghanistan.” (p.265) It is shocking to many of the Afghan SIV immigrants who work as cleaners, drivers, dishwashers and other blue-collar jobs. However, in order to live their lives in the U.S., they have to make a living. Unfortunately, sometimes these immigrants easily become victims of discrimination and exploitation in their workplaces because of not knowing the laws and regulation of employment in the United States. Also sometimes their employers take advantage of these immigrant situations when they see how immigrants are in need and desperation to keep their jobs. In her first few months of work, Khatera Rafiqui came home hungry and thirsty. She didn’t eat or drink at work and when I asked her why, she replied, “I
heard if employees leave their shifts and go to drink water regularly, they will get fired.” I explained to her that no one has the right to fire her for drinking water.

- **Housing:** Affordable housing in the big U.S. cities is expensive. Afghans thought to be placed somewhere that has high employment rates, also a place that they can be surrounded by other Afghans who can help them make this hard transition easier. Housing in the states like Virginia, NY, California and Florida—where the majority of Afghans live—is costly. What happens is that families of five get crammed into one-bedroom apartments, which makes a very stressful place to live or rest. Ishaq’s family is an example of that. They have a one-bedroom apartment with three kids. Sayed Zabiullah’s family is another example. They have a two-bedroom apartment with six kids. In Afghanistan, housing is much cheaper. With $300 or $400 one can rent a nice three-bedroom single-family house in Kabul, in other provinces, it is even cheaper. Here in the United States, Ishaq Rafiqui pays $1500 for one-bedroom apartment in Alexandria, Va. His job at Walmart pays him $9.50 an hour. He makes about $1300 every month and he still comes up $200 short for the monthly rent. He has other expenses like utilities, gas, car insurance, phone bills, clothing, etc. If his wife doesn’t work, they wouldn’t be able to afford living.

On some special cases, the resettlement agency provided housing such as for the family of Mirwais Rahmani, who was placed in cheap and unsafe apartments in Hyattsville, Md. He says when he came to his neighborhood he could not believe he was in the United States, “At night drunk people fight outside my window and I am afraid they will break into my house.” One day when he didn’t have a car, he
was even stopped by a gang who asked him for money, but he managed to escape.

“As soon as I find a good job that pays well, I will move from this place,”
Mirwais says.

- **Accessing the social services & transportation:** Not knowing the U.S. system and having language barriers makes it very hard for Afghan families to get access to social services. During their first few months they are not allowed to drive because Afghan driver’s licenses are not acceptable in the U.S. The men who have strong English usually study the driving manual, and take their driving test after a few weeks or months. But for those who do not have strong English skills (the majority of which are women) it takes a long time to pass the exam. Ishaq’s wife, Khatera Rafiqui, has been trying to get her permit for a year now but she hasn’t succeeded. She failed the permit test twice.

Even taking public transportation is a hassle; finding the routes, bus schedules and getting on the metro is scary for these families.

- **Cultural Barriers:** The Afghan and American culture is very different which makes the transition hard for SIV families. Because of the cultural differences, sometimes misunderstanding happens. For example, in Afghanistan strange men won’t walk up to a woman and say how beautiful she is but in America it happens. American men have complemented Afghan women, “Oh, your outfit is beautiful,” or “Your hair is beautiful,” which offends Afghan immigrant men. Another example of a cultural barrier is that in America, during the days of Eid, kids have to go to school and parents have to go to their jobs. It is depressing for both parents and kids to see that their festivals are not celebrated like they were in
their country. They have to adopt the new culture and celebrate the new festivals so that their kids have something to celebrate with their friends, festivals like Thanksgiving, Christmas, Halloween or the Fourth of July.

- **Raising Kids:** Raising a family in America worries Afghan parents. Children tend to learn English faster than their parents and adopt the culture more easily. Parents are concerned that their children will forget their Afghan identity and culture, and become “Americanized.” For instance, in Afghan and Persian culture, having a “unibrow” is a beautiful thing but in American culture it is not. Afghan children with a unibrow find it hard to find friends in the school. When they ask their parents to pluck their eyebrows, their parents frown upon them because in Afghan culture girls pluck their eyebrows when they get engaged and boys never pluck their eyebrows. In the U.S. there is pressure on Afghan children to change at school and there is pressure on them from the family side to not change and hold onto their Afghan heritage. Sometimes these pressures break the bonds between immigrant parents and kids, making immigration even harder on everyone.

These are only some of the challenges Afghan SIV immigrants face, there are many other challenges like not knowing the American laws and regulations well, the difference of religion, not being able to find halal foods, etc. One may argue that all immigrants and refugees face these challenges and maybe even some Americans, so why should we care about Afghans?

I think the U.S. Government should generally improve its benefits for immigrants
and refugees, especially for those who come from war zone countries like Afghanistan and Syria. Afghans come from a very dangerous, unsafe and stressful country to the United States to find peace. They are hard working people who do not want to be a burden on the U.S. government. The least they ask is that the government help them for a few months so that they can learn and stand on their own feet. The 30 days of housing is not much help. They ask for at least for six-eight months of housing, so they can find their way.

These immigrant families are under pressure from the challenges they face daily in the United States, but they are also under pressure from back home. Everyday, they hear the news from Afghanistan – a bomb exploding, kidnappings, murder – which makes them sad and worried. Sometimes they even feel guilty for leaving other members of their family behind and coming to a safe place. On the one hand there is the bad news from Afghanistan and on the other hand is the expectation of families and relatives. Afghan families in Afghanistan think their immigrant children who are in the United States receive lots of money and benefits from the government and ask their children for financial support. Many of the Afghan men who came to the United States through SIV were also their parents’ financial supporter in Afghanistan. It is hard for them to realize they can’t support their parents anymore. They also do not want to share the truth and bruise their pride by telling their problems to their families.

All the psychological pressure that is on these families, make them more depressed day by day and sometimes even make them very sick.
Humayun Shinwary, was one of the SIV immigrants died of heart attack, less than a year after he got to America. My documentary and research subject, Sayed Zabiullah was hospitalized because of extreme stress mere weeks after his arrival. When I asked him what stressed him he replied: “There are lots of stress here: missing family and leaving my parents behind. Thinking about finding a job and living in the U.S. It is hard to live here with six kids, you know.”

Part 5 -- The Shortcomings of the SIV Program

What can be changed in the SIV program: Beginning from Afghanistan, the process can be much faster and more efficient. The bureaucratic process needs to be shorter. The Afghans who apply for SIV are not potential terrorists who need to be required to go through years of background check; they are people who served and worked alongside Americans for several years. If they wanted to hurt Americans, they would have done it in Afghanistan.

- **Travel Arrangements:** After SIV applicants are approved and get their visas, they should receive an orientation in Afghanistan about what to expect coming to the US and what to bring. They should have the option to fly on their own and be welcomed at the airport. They shouldn’t wait two months after getting their visas so that IOM can arrange their flight. If IOM insists on arranging the flights, it should be more efficient.

- **Housing:** There is inconsistency between the housing benefits Afghan SIV immigrants receive. The four families that live in Alexandria, Va., didn’t get money for rent while the family who lives in Maryland, (Mirwais Amani and his wife) received six months rent. While they are thankful for the rent money, they
are not happy with the neighborhood where they live because he says it is an
unsafe neighborhood. Probably that was why the resettlement agency found that
apartment, because it was a cheap place. If the resettlement agency in Alexandria
could have given $900/month for rent to these other four families that I
interviewed, it would have been a great help but they did not.
What I assume is that from the $1,875 that the resettlement agency gets from the
government, they decide if they should give rent to families or spend it on their
behalf for other things like home furniture. Saed Zabiullah’s family has already
received furniture for their house, which cost thousands of dollars. If a family
does not have rent for their next month, they will not need furniture. The
resettlement agency should have given them the money to pay for their rent.\textsuperscript{10}

- **Finding a Job:** Helping the families to find a job and become financially
  independent is important. Having a job helps the men and women to be engaged
  and to not get depressed.

- **Help with English Courses:** Khatera Rafiqui received money from the
  resettlement agency for one semester of studying and after that she had to pay for
  her studies. It is clear that a person cannot learn English in one semester. So, these
  families, especially their wives need to be helped financially to learn English and
to be able to support their families.

\textsuperscript{10} I could not find in the documents to show why there was inconsistency between paying rent for these families. I am going to interview someone from
resettlement agency management, which I am hopeful to get answer for some of these questions.
Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important to be mentioned that this project does not conclude with showing five Afghan SIV immigrant families and their challenges in the United States. This project also invites the reader to think on a broader level about immigration and refugees’ situations in the United States. If legal immigrants face this many challenges, one may imagine how much problems illegal immigrants must face.

It is being said that Afghans should be considerate of limitations and not have high expectations; the resettlement agencies are overloaded and underfunded with the new wave of refugees and immigrants. However, there are ways to improve the SIV program, which will make the transition easier for the immigrants.

The purpose of *Resettling Hope* is not just to give suggestions on how to improve SIV program, but also reach the Afghan and American communities and invite them to help the newcomers, to be open-minded and kind towards refugees and immigrants. Afghans and many other refugees left their war-torn countries and dear ones behind; they do not come to America to look for a war. They are looking for peace and benevolence. If they receive kindness from their neighbors in the United States, they will return that kindness, a hundred times over because immigrants who grew up in war and conflict learned to appreciate small deeds.

Migration has its psychological toll on Afghan immigrant families. They need to be helped for one to two years after their arrival until they learn how to navigate the system. Once they find their way, they will take care of their families and benefit the society.
Immigrants have formed the backbone of America; so the strength of America is in its immigrants, its future people, and the uniqueness each citizen carries. Understanding immigrants’ situations helps us become better humans. After all we should not forget, as Franklin D. Roosevelt said beautifully, “Remember, remember always, that all of us, and you and I especially, are descended from immigrants and revolutionists.” So, immigrants are not different from us. They deserve to live in peace and happiness.
References


